

Elephants in China

By Jayantha Jayewardene

A recent visit to China prompted these thoughts on China and its elephants.

In 1758 Carl Linnaeus first described (named) the genus *Elephas* using an elephant from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) as the base of his study. The Indian elephant was first described by Georges Cuvier, in 1798, under the binomial *Elephas indicus*.

Three subspecies of the Asian or Asiatic elephant are currently recognised: the Sri Lankan elephant *E. m. maximus*, the Indian elephant *E. m. indicus* and the Sumatran elephant *E. m. sumatranus*. A more recently discovered species, *E. m. borneensis* lives in northern Borneo. This elephant is smaller than all the other subspecies. Results of genetic analysis indicate that its ancestors separated from the mainland population about 300,000 years ago.

The Chinese elephant is sometimes separated as *E. m. rubridens*. It has been a pink-tusked elephant and has disappeared after the 14th century BC.

The existence of elephants in ancient China is attested both by archaeological evidence and by depictions in Chinese artwork. Long thought to belong to an extinct subspecies of Asian elephants, named *Elephas maximus rubridens*, they lived in Central and Southern China before the 14th century BC. They once occurred as far north as Anyang, Henan in northern China.

Elephants still survive in the southwestern provinces of China after the extinction of the Chinese elephant, but they are of a different subspecies, the Indian elephant, *Elephas maximus indicus*. A native population of these remains in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province.

Since 1986, the Asian elephant has been listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List as the population has declined by at least 50 percent over the last three generations, estimated to be 60–75 years. The Asian elephant is primarily threatened by loss of habitat, habitat degradation, fragmentation and poaching. In 2003, the wild Asian elephant population was estimated at between 41,410 and 52,345 individuals.

The genus *Elephas* originated in Sub-Saharan Africa during the Pliocene, and spread throughout Africa before emigrating into southern Asia. The earliest indications of captive use of Asian elephants are engravings on seals of the Indus Valley a civilization which dated back to the third millennium BC.

Ironically while the population of their African cousins are plummeting at an alarming rate, driven largely by China's demand for ivory, the wild elephants in China are seeing a strong increase in numbers since they are afforded high levels of protection.

In China, deep in the forests bordering Burma and Laos, live a few hundred wild Asian elephants. Over the last two decades, in the 'Wild Elephant Valley' of the Yunnan province, their numbers have almost doubled. This is largely due to effective feeding, protection and education programs. China also applies the death penalty to anyone caught poaching an elephant.

Li Zhang says, in a report on a research study carried out by him and others, that the total Asian elephant population size in China is between 221 and 245. These elephants are in five distinct populations though genetic diversity among the five populations was low, possibly due to limited gene flow because of habitat fragmentation. The five populations are Mengla, Shangyong, Mengyang, Pu'Er and Nangunhe.

The report goes on to say that the expansion of rubber plantations, crop cultivation, and villages along rivers and roads has caused extensive degradation of natural forests in these areas. The report goes on to say that this fragmentation had formed artificial barriers preventing elephant movement.

At the Xishuangbanna and Nangunhe nature reserves in the country's south-west, the elephants roam free in a terrain filled with picturesque hills, valleys, and rainforest. Some herds come in from the Laos border, and they thrive in the forest that has served well in protecting them.

China has taken certain action to assist their conservation efforts

- a) They have built three National Level Nature Reserves and eight Local Nature Reserves since 1960s. A total area of 4,253km².
- b) They have implemented national ecological projects: Natural Forest Protection Project, Return farmland to Forest Project, Conservation of Wild Flora and Fauna and Management of Nature Reserves Project.

Although they've seen conservation successes, their integrity has been questioned due to the circus' that are directly tied to the centre, where elephants are forced to perform tricks for tourists, including kicking footballs, dancing to 'disco music' and forming elephant pyramids.

Animal welfare practices aren't the only threat to this seemingly thriving population of elephant. Rubber plantations have also caused significant habitat loss, pushing elephants out from their territories. In recent times, elephants have been found wandering out into villages in search of food. These, however, are probably relatively more manageable issues compared to the graver poaching crisis that affects these elephants' cousins in Africa.

As China moves forward after the ivory trade ban that came into full effect on December 31st, 2017, we see a change in the tides and increasingly more people aware that ivory means the death of an elephant.

Hopefully China will view the way their elephants are protected vis-a-vis the poaching of African elephants caused by their desire for ivory, so that the message revealed will be clear: that any elephant, no matter where they're from, should be treated with respect, protected, and never, ever killed for its tusks.

The restoration of ecological corridors to facilitate gene exchange among isolated elephant populations and the establishment of cross-boundary protected areas between China and Laos to secure their natural habitats are critical for the survival of Asian elephants in this region. It is also reported that urban settlements had increased dramatically in the last 40 years.

(The author, who is the Managing Trustee of the Biodiversity & Elephant Conservation Trust could be contacted at romalijj@gmail.com)