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Ravi Corea

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Fighting to Survive in Sri Lanka

The elephants of Sri Lanka, once 20,000 strong, face an uncertain future. Their habitat is being destroyed, and local villagers and ivory poachers threaten their very existence. Today, fewer than 4,000 wild elephants live in this agricultural island country. With an annual birthrate of four percent and a death rate of six percent, that's not good news. And since 70 percent of the elephant population lives outside of the country's national parks and sanctuaries, the death toll will likely only grow. In fact, some regional elephant populations already border on extinction.

For six decades now, the Sri Lankan government has been clearing vast expanses of jungle to make room for human settlements. Most of the land has been cleared without consideration for ecological issues, such as how the wild animals would be affected. Not surprisingly, the elephants have reacted by invading nearby villages.

Push Comes to Shove

Although elephants in Sri Lanka have been raiding farmers' crops since time immemorial, these were rare intrusions and most Sri Lankans maintained a certain reverence for elephants. In recent times, however, the conflict has intensified. Unprecedented human encroachment on the elephants' habitat has isolated many elephant populations, leaving the animals with no choice but to raid farmers' crops in order to survive. As a result, an estimated 100 to 150 elephants are harassed, shot, poisoned and electrocuted each year as farmers retaliate. Socio-economic surveys conducted in villages with intense conflict show that the average village incurs about \$28,500 worth of property and crop damage annually from these elephant raids.

But crops and wallets aren't the only casualties. Each year, elephants kill approximately 60 villagers. Thanks to years of harassment by humans, the elephants are very aggressive and will kill a person on sight. No villager will venture out of his home or hut after six o'clock in the evening, and on some days children cannot go to school because elephants are obstructing the roads. There's also an emotional cost to this human–elephant conflict. The elephant's royal status is deeply ingrained in the local culture, religion and folklore. So Sri Lankans are faced with a difficult moral dilemma: They revere the elephant, but at the same time they persecute it. This internal conflict takes a toll on the community. When an elephant is killed or dies of injuries caused by people, the whole village gathers to pay solemn respect to the dead animal.

Killing an elephant in Sri Lanka is not just a cultural taboo, it's also illegal. In fact, the killing of all wildlife is prohibited, yet poaching incidences in the country are on the rise. The Sri Lanka Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC) does its best to catch the murderers, but it's a difficult task.

Don't Fence Me In

To combat these problems, the DWLC developed a program to fence the elephants into the country's national parks, thereby creating sanctuaries for them. But the attempts to contain the

elephants have met with varying degrees of success. Because they're built along human-made boundaries, the fences mean nothing to the elephants, who have their own cultural and ecological boundaries. The fences are also costly to build and require a great deal of expensive manpower to maintain. More important, they have done little to protect the majority of elephants, who roam outside the boundaries of the national parks. Without the safety of these parks, the roaming elephants are more prone to violent poacher attacks.

In 1997, the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society proposed a more effective solution. The idea was to fence off elephant-restricted areas, such as villages and large agricultural fields, with solar-powered electric fences, leaving vast expanses of land outside the fenced areas for the elephants to range. Launched in 1998, the pilot project, called Saving Elephants by Helping People (SEHP), is managed and operated by the society. The village of Gamburu-Oya/Pussellayaya, situated in the central province of Sri Lanka, was completely encircled by a 10-kilometer fence using funds provided by the Wildlife Trust (www.wildlifetrust.org), the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund (www.disney.com) and Computer Associates International (www.cai.com). The SEHP project provided all of the equipment needed to build the fence, while the Gamburu-Oya/Pussellayaya villagers provided the labor. Any items or materials that could be bought from the village were contracted locally, thereby channeling some of the project money into the village's economy.

From the start, the fencing was very effective in deterring the elephants. In 1997, 12 elephants were killed in Gamburu-Oya/Pussellayaya, compared with eight elephants in 1998 and only one in 1999. According to the regional office of the DWLC, there have been no reports of crop raiding, property damage, or human or elephant deaths since then.

With the threat of the elephants removed, the villagers were able to turn their attention to helping the government catch local poachers. Now that they support elephant conservation, they're more willing to give information about known poachers to help the DWLC apprehend them.

Closer to the Goal

The Saving Elephants by Helping People project proved that it is possible to resolve the human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. In fact, plans are now being made to extend the project into other villages in the hope of one day resolving the conflict entirely. The DWLC has also begun to emulate the project's concept, and since 2001, has established fences around three Sri Lankan villages. Today, the society is focused on developing economic incentives and additional land management practices that will help stop the consumptive use of the forest by the villagers and help them realize the economic and environmental benefits of wildlife conservation.

The conservation society also hopes to help the villagers understand that because of their wide-ranging behavior over diverse habitats, the Sri Lankan elephant is considered to be a keystone species and is crucial to the ecology of their country. By protecting and conserving them, the people of Sri Lanka can automatically ensure the protection of the land and the thousands of plant and animal species that call it home.

Ravi Corea is the president of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Sri Lanka (http://benthic.com/sri_lanka/index.htm).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you'd like to help fund future SEHP projects, you can donate money to the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society, a Nutley, New Jersey-based organization that implements, administers, manages and operates the SEHP project. The Wildlife Conservation Society is a fully incorporated, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization based in the United States.

You can also send petitions to Sri Lankan government officials, asking them to implement a plan to protect and manage the country's elephant populations. Write to: The Honorable Minister for the Environment, Rukman Senanayake, Ministry for Forestry & Environment, 86

Rajamal-watte Road, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka, and Mr.
Dayananda Kariyawasam, Director, Department of
Wildlife Conservation, 18 Gregory's Road, Colombo 07, Sri
Lanka.

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ASPCA Animal Watch - Summer 2002

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