



CITES 2002

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WWF FACTSHEET

12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES Santiago, 3-15 November 2002

Asian elephant

Elephas maximus

I. Species Facts

History and distribution

Sacred but exploited, the Asian elephant has been worshipped from India to Japan for centuries, but is facing extinction in the wild. The Asian elephant has been an integral part of the culture, religion and economy of the Asian peoples for at least 4000 years. It is a keystone biological species in the tropical forests of Asia. The successful conservation of the Asian elephant in the wild and in captivity will need to build on the promotion of harmony between human development and the long-term maintenance of the rich biodiversity of the South, Southeast Asian, and Indochinese bioregions.

The largest terrestrial mammal in Asia, this species of elephant has a shoulder height of 250 – 300 cm and males can weigh up to 5000kg. It is slightly smaller than its African cousin (*Loxodonta africana*), with relatively smaller ears, and its head (not the shoulder) is the highest part of the body. Asian elephants have a single “finger” on the upper lip of the trunk, while African elephants have a second on the lower. Only some male Asian elephants carry tusks; females have small tushes, which seldom show. But a significant number of adult males are tuskless, and the percentage of males carrying ivory varies by region (possibly reflecting the intensity of past and/or present ivory hunting), from only about 5per cent in Sri Lanka to a much higher percentage in some populations in south India.

Asian elephants live in herds based on breeding groups of 3 to 40 females and young. Herds form part of larger related groupings called clans. Mature males live alone or in small groups and have no permanent ties with the females or with each other. Sexual maturity is reached at about 10 years of age, although males become sexually active much later. Usually, a single calf is born every four to five years after a gestation period of 22 months. Females can remain fertile until they are 55 - 60 years old.

Elephants inhabit some of the most biodiverse habitats in Asia. The Asian elephants are primarily forest animals, preferring a shady environment. However, their habitat ranges from dry tropical thorn forest, through deciduous forest and floodplains of rivers, to tropical rain forest. Their distribution is limited by both the need for daily access to water and availability of food. They eat around 300kg of fodder per day. Asian elephants occur in their highest densities in deciduous forests with open canopies while large areas of closed-canopy forests tend to support much lower densities. More than two thirds of the day may be spent feeding on grasses, tree bark, roots, twigs, leaves and small stems. Cultivated crops such as bananas, rice and sugarcane are favoured foods.



Domesticated elephants are found throughout south and southeast Asia, and are trained as working animals or used for ceremonial and religious purposes. Their ability to work in rugged country makes them valuable in forestry operations, while in India most Forest department owned elephants are now used for patrolling and anti-poaching work, especially in the monsoons.

Threats to the Asian elephant

More than 100,000 Asian elephants may have existed at the start of the 20th century, but only some 35,000 to 50,000 now remain in the wild. India has by far the largest remaining populations of Asian elephant (estimated at around 57% of the total).

Population estimates for the Asian elephant – 2000

Country	Minimum	Maximum
Bangladesh	195	239
Bhutan*	60	100
Borneo (Malaysia and Indonesia)	1,000	2,500
Cambodia	200	500 - (?2000)
China	250	300
India: Northern	750	1,000
Northeastern	7,200	11,300
Central	1,500	2,000
Southern	9,640	15,150
Indonesia (Sumatra)	2,800	4,800
Laos	950	1,300
Myanmar (formerly Burma)	4,639	5,000
Peninsular Malaysia	800	1,200
Nepal	41	60
Sri Lanka	3,160	4,405
Thailand	1,300	2,000
Vietnam	109	144
Total	34,594	50,998

Source: IUCN's Species Survival Commission's Asian Elephant Specialist Group. Warning! All figures are very approximate.

* Bhutan also has a seasonal population of migrant elephants from India.

In the face of rapidly growing human populations, the Asian elephants' habitat is shrinking fast, and wild elephant populations are mostly small, isolated, and unable to mingle as ancient migratory routes are cut off by human settlements. A substantial proportion of the world's population live in or near the present range of the Asian elephant, which leads to elephant-human conflict. Incidents of elephants raiding crops and villages are on the rise. This causes losses to human property and, sometimes, human lives. Retaliation by villagers often results in killings of these elephants. Experts already consider such confrontations to be the leading cause of elephant deaths in Asia.

Poaching of Asian elephants for ivory and meat remains a serious problem in many countries. Selective removal of tuskers for their ivory may lead to an increase in the proportion of tuskless males in the population.



Recent TRAFFIC (the wildlife trade network, a joint programme of WWF and IUCN) reports on ivory markets in a number of Asian countries have revealed a persistent demand for ivory products, continuing illegal trade, as well as weaknesses in legislation and enforcement. In China, despite the decline of the state-run ivory carving industry since the international ban, illicit ivory remains much in demand, with the ivory carving industry now believed to be run mainly by private, and illegal, family operations. The increasing power of Chinese consumers and weak enforcement of ivory trade regulation add further concerns to the future development of China as a major ivory consumer. In Taiwan, domestic sale of ivory is permitted under strict regulations but smuggling and illegal trade activities still persist. In Vietnam, open markets for elephant products, mostly curios, continue to serve both the domestic market as well as tourists from other parts of Asia. Most of these markets remain poorly regulated and, to a large extent, rely upon illegal sources of ivory. In Myanmar, legislation allows trade of products derived from domesticated elephants, creating a large potential loophole through which wild-caught elephants and elephant parts from other countries can be 'laundered'.

II. Asian elephants and CITES

The Asian elephant has been listed since 1973 in Appendix 1 of CITES, banning all commercial trade.

III. WWF Asian elephant projects

- Under WWF's Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy (AREAS), 9 major landscape units of importance to Asian elephants have been identified in India, Nepal and Bhutan (four landscapes); and five landscapes across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. AREAS projects involve elephant habitats and distribution, landscape planning, habitat restoration, strengthening of anti-poaching efforts, human/wildlife conflict mitigation, monitoring of illegal trade (in collaboration with TRAFFIC), communications and outreach, and technical support.
- **India and Nepal:** the Terai Arc WWF and its partners have launched several projects to reconnect and restore fragmented Asian elephant habitat, with the long term objective of reconnecting 11 protected areas across India and Nepal and strengthening management.
- WWF-India's Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Programme in the eastern Himalayas and western Ghats is aimed at conserving biodiversity in these two important elephant habitats. WWF-India has assisted in environmental awareness programmes aimed at reducing conflict between wildlife and people. In addition, WWF-India under the AREAS programme is collaborating with projects that reduce local people's dependency on wildlife habitats, mitigating elephant-human conflict and creating awareness among the various stakeholders in this landscape.
- **Tri-Border (Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam):** WWF-Cambodia has been working with WCS and government partners to assess elephant distribution and status in eastern Cambodia. WWF is training, equipping, and supporting patrols of Protected Area and provincial conservation staff for protection of the isolated few remaining herds, especially around Phnom Prich Wildlife Sanctuary. WWF-Lao is building its program to conserve the largest elephant populations in Indochina, and to manage human-elephant conflict throughout the country. In Vietnam, WWF and Fauna and Flora International supported the development of an elephant action plan for Vietnam, adopted by the government in 1996. WWF is also active in Vu Quang and Cat Tien National Parks, aiming to integrate conservation with sustainable development in and around the protected areas.

- **Thailand:** The Western Forest Complex is the largest remaining area of protected forest in Southeast Asia and home to more than a third of Thailand's wild elephants. WWF is supporting management and monitoring in the Hui Kha Khaeng/Thung Yai Wildlife Sanctuaries. In western Thailand, WWF is working with the Karen people to study the distribution, abundance, and ecology of elephants in Thung Yai Wildlife Sanctuary. WWF is also working to conserve elephants in protected areas in the Isan forests of northeastern Thailand.
- **Indonesia (Sumatra):** The forest of Tesso Nilo is one of the last remaining lowland forests in Sumatra, the world's richest forest in terms of vascular plant diversity, and home to several herds of Sumatran elephant. It is steadily disappearing as it is logged and converted to oil palm plantations. WWF is actively promoting the establishment of Tesso Nilo as a national park to protect this crucial area for conservation of Asian elephant and many other species. WWF's AREAS work will include development of a comprehensive strategy for mitigation of human-elephant conflict and reestablishment of corridors to other protected areas.
- **Malaysia-Indonesia (Northern Borneo):** WWF AREAS programme here has been collaborating with the Sabah Wildlife Department to survey and create a GIS database that is now being used to develop an Elephant Action plan to help in planning the conservation of elephant habitats from the Kinabatangan watershed area all the way to Sebuku-Sembakung (6 million acres). WWF is actively working with the companies owning the logging concessions in this area to convince them to adopt a sustainable landuse policy that would minimise the conflict between elephants and humans.
- **Other WWF Projects:** WWF is active in a number of protected areas that support populations of wild elephants. Among these are: Royal Manas National Park, Bhutan; Xishuangbanna Reserve, China; and Kerinci-Seblat National Park, Indonesia.

September 2002

For more information: www.panda.org/species



WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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