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CITES 2004

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WWF FACTSHEET

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ASIAN ELEPHANT *Elephas Maximus*

I. Species Facts

Natural History and Distribution

Sacred but exploited, the Asian elephant has been worshipped for centuries. Now, it could be facing extinction in the wild. Not only revered for its role within Asian culture and religion, it is also a key biological species in the tropical forests of Asia. Today, the species generally occurs as scattered isolated populations extending from south India and Sri Lanka eastward through Assam and extreme South Yunnan to Vietnam, and south to the islands of Sumatra and Borneo.

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 (and no females) carry tusks. 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 hunting of elephants for ivory), from only about 5% 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 females or with each other. Males reach sexual maturity between ten and 17 years, females between nine and 12 years. Usually, a female produces a single calf 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. 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

For further information contact: Global Species Programme, WWF-International, Avenue du Mont-Blanc, 1196 Gland, Switzerland

Email: species@wwfint.org

Website: www.panda.org/species/CITES



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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 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.

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 elephant's habitat is shrinking fast, and wild elephant populations are mostly small, isolated, and unable to mingle with others 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.



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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 reports by TRAFFIC (the wildlife trade network, a joint programme of WWF and IUCN) have revealed a persistent demand for ivory products within Asia, as well as ongoing illegal trade and 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. The ivory carving industry is now believed to be run mainly by private, and illegal, family operations. The increasing power of Chinese consumers and the weak enforcement of ivory trade regulation is further concern for the future development of China as a major ivory consumer. That's despite efforts to recently enhance enforcement efforts. 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 others parts of Asia. Most of these markets remain poorly regulated and, to a large extent, rely upon illegal sources of ivory. In Myanmar and Thailand, 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 I of CITES, banning all international commercial trade.

III. WWF Asian elephant projects

Under WWF's Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy (AREAS), nine major landscape units of importance to Asian elephants have been identified: four landscapes across India, Nepal and Bhutan; and five landscapes across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. AREAS projects involve conservation of elephant habitats in key parts of their 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.



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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 protected area patrols 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 of Thailand 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 Government of Indonesia recently declared a new National Park, covering 38,576 hectares in Riau Province, Sumatra. Although the new park (Tesso Nilo) covers just a fourth of the 155,000 hectares originally proposed by the local government, it is a big first step towards securing the future of Sumatran tigers and elephants in Indonesia. Tesso Nilo is one of the last havens of Sumatran tigers and elephants. It is home to three per cent of the world's mammal species. With over 4,000 plant species recorded so far, the forest of Tesso Nilo has one of the highest levels of lowland forest plant biodiversity known to science. It is also one of the largest remaining lowland forest blocks on the island of Sumatra. 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. WWF is currently running a pilot project using mahouts and domestic elephants to keep wild elephants away from farms.

Malaysia-Indonesia (Northern Borneo): WWF AREAS programme 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 land use 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.

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