

A project to save elephant

Vinod Rishi
Chief Conservator of Forest
(West Bengal)

THE SURVIVAL OF THE ELEPHANT population in India is perceived to be facing the following **threats and shortcomings** :

- a) Decimation and fragmentation of elephant habitat and population units into isolated and genetically unviable small units,
- b) Increasing human antagonism towards free ranging elephants as a result of growing confrontations between people and elephants at forest interfaces and consequential loss of human life, crop and property therein,
- c) Declining sentimental value of elephant in Indian people's psyche,
- d) Increasing elephant mortality due to anthropogenic causes,
- e) Lack of standard management infrastructure and procedures for conservation of elephant in free living conditions,
- f) Financial inadequacy in field management.

The main objective of Project Elephant is to ensure long-term conservation of viable populations of Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and its natural habitats in India.

Against this overall prime objective, the immediate objectives of the Project Elephant scheme are to:

- 1) Protect, restore and improve ecologically the existing habitats and linkage corridors used by elephants for their movement between forests;
- 2) Protect wild elephant populations from poaching and unnatural deaths;
- 3) Mitigate man-elephant conflict;
- 4) Help forest departments build capacity in the proper and scientific management of wild elephants;
- 5) Seek and encourage humane treatment in the management of captive elephants; and
- 6) Provide technical and administrative assistance to states in fulfilment of the above.

The author is
Former Director, Project Elephant
Min. of Environment & Forest,
Govt of India.

While the Central Ministry of Environment, Forest and Wildlife oversees and guides the Project, it is the concerned state governments which implement the programmes thereunder. -

The **strategy** being adopted for this is twofold :

- 1) A Steering Committee for Project Elephant has been constituted which includes representatives of the government as well as non-government wildlife experts and scientists. Besides, the Chief Wildlife Wardens of the respective 12 elephant range states, and Heads of four premier institutions, namely the Wildlife Institute of India, Zoological Survey of India, Botanical Survey of India and Indian Veterinary Research Institute are permanent invitees to the meetings of the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee advises the Government of India on Project related issues; and
- 2) The Government of India, through a centrally sponsored scheme, arranges for and provides financial, technical and scientific assistance to the states having free ranging populations of wild elephants, on approved items of work that directly or indirectly contribute to ensuring the long-term survival of identified viable populations of elephants in their natural habitats.

During the VIII Five-Year Development Plan period (April 1992 - March 1997), including the first year (1991-92), the financial assistance provided under the centrally sponsored scheme to the various states covered under the Project has been as follows :-

Year	Amount released (in Rs)
1991-92	24,300,000
1992-93	20,200,000
1993-94	55,900,000
1994-95	48,000,000
1995-96	30,200,000
1996-97	45,000,000

It may be mentioned that this entire support has been provided by the Government of India and there have not been any inputs from non-government/foreign donors till date.

The broad items covered by the financial assistance given to the states has been as follows :-

Habitat restoration

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Plantation of indigenous species of plants for providing food and cover for the enrichment of degraded habitats | 2086 ha |
| 2. Development of pasture lands for wild elephants | 704 ha |
| 3. Land acquisition for extension of elephant habitat | 151.283 km ² |

Protection and anti-poaching measures

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 4. Restoration of fire-lines and tracks for patrolling | 445 km |
| 5. Establishment of patrolling camps | 18 nos |

Project commencement
February 1992

Estimated elephant range
12,000 km²
(Administrative Districts)

Forest area under Project
Approx. 60,000 km²

States covered

Uttar Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu

Elephant population (wild)
25,571 (in 1993)
(Estimated mid-value of the population range)

Project administration
Project Director, Govt of India
and
Chief Wildlife Wardens of the elephant range states.

6. Establishment of watch-towers	10 nos
7. Strengthening communication system wireless sets	204 nos
8. Vehicular support (25 cycles, 25 motorcycles, 2 jeeps and 2 out board power boats)	54 nos
9. Restoration of forest roads	852 km
10. Firearms (18 DBBLs and 40 rifles with the required ammunition)	58 nos

Conflict mitigation

(i) Anti-depredation measures

11. Energised fencing	569 km
12. Elephant proof trench	151 km
13. Elephant drive lacs	Rs 42.66
14. Capture of displaced problem elephants (Sarguja, MP)	11 nos
15. Capture of elephants for control of depredations	26 nos

(ii) Other measures and support

16. Ex-gratia relief	Rs 181.80 lacs
17. Eco-development activities	Rs 66.25 lacs
18. Publicity and awareness campaigns	Rs 65.02 lacs

In the last half decade since the Project Elephant started, the measures and programmes taken up for the conservation of the elephant have shown some encouraging signs, which indicate the positive impact the Project is having on elephant populations and their habitats. Some of these positive effects are :-

- 1) The Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (West Bengal) today retains elephants all the year round as against about one month annually at the beginning of the Project;
- 2) The elephants displaced from Tamil Nadu in 1985-86 have been accommodated in the forests of Andhra Pradesh. Population increase over the years is incidental indicator.
- 3) There has been a mitigation of man-elephant conflict in Madhya Pradesh caused by displacement of elephants from Bihar in 1985-86.
- 4) Elephants straying towards Calcutta in south West Bengal have been controlled.
- 5) There is downward trend in loss of human life from man-elephant conflict in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal since 1991-92.

Project Elephant is the only wildlife conservation project in India that covers forest habitats in elephant range states irrespective of their legal status as National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary, Reserve Forest or Protected Forest.

However, since Project Elephant is a species oriented effort instead of an area specific activity, the tasks therein are more complex. The problems are immense and there are major **areas of concern** yet to be addressed and solutions sought for, such as -

- a) Elephants do not remain confined to protected areas. Herds often cross inter-state and, at places, even international boundaries. Inter-state co-ordination is a major challenge for successful implementation of the Project. Sheer numbers are not a reliable indicator of the viability of the species as the elephant is a social animal and breeding units are of greater significance than absolute numbers.
- b) As man's interaction with elephant is intense, possibly more than with any other wild animal, elephant conservation involves management of human attitudes in addition to the management of the species and its habitat. However, in the face of generally growing confrontations between man and elephant at forest interfaces which often result in serious loss of life, property or standing crops, the aims of encouraging a better understanding of the elephant conservation problem among the people are not easy to achieve. While the situation of conflict is real, there is often a politicizing of this conflict at local levels which directly or indirectly arise from the diverse and often conflicting views of NGOs regarding the use of forest habitats by the local people.
- c) The international trade incentives for poaching of elephants, particularly for their tusks, are very lucrative. The human habitations within elephant habitats are a limiting factor in controlling poaching as detecting and apprehending poachers among the other residents of the area is a difficult task for the enforcement agencies. Moreover, the local people often actively or tacitly support the activity of the poachers either out of fear or because of pecuniary gains otherwise.
- d) Other problems include, a less than desired inter-state dialogue and collaboration resolving the problems of elephant management and conservation; unprotected habitats and corridors which lie on public lands, the large size and resource requirements of the elephant; and lack of adequate infrastructure.
