Elephant conservation : A question of numbers

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THE CONSERVATION OF THE ASIAN ELEPHANT has its paradoxical features. A species that has been protected in India from the late 19th century, it is today, unfortunately, one of the highly endangered species of the subcontinent. This is so through circumstances that have down the centuries constricted its habitat. The canopy forests region where it flourished once are now arid deserts. The elephant in the present situation requires intensive management if it is to survive as a wild species.

The problem facing the elephant is seemingly simple - inadequate habitat for an expanding population. The question is how many elephants can survive in any given habitat without eating themselves out a habitat in which they can survive!

To find an answer to this problem one has to determine what is the projected annual increase in the population. The elephant has a gestation period of approximately 22 months and every female is a potential breeder from about 13 years to 55 years of age. Moreover, females are rarely killed and the young are carefully protected by the mother, an additional caretaker or "aunty" and generally by the herd. The only possible predator, the tiger is in its present population status, an unlikely threat. As such, in each wild population of elephants it is possible to more or less accurately predict the probable annual increase. The major causes for decline are conflict with man and habitat degradation.

The question that requires urgent and immediate attention is what is to be done with excess population as admittedly there is no chance of increasing the available habitat. This is a question that needs a long term solution. But before we think of a solution we have to get hard data on the population status of elephants, namely the projected and actual numbers in the wild.

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