Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)

IUCN Red List status: Endangered

**Overview**

Asian elephants were historically found throughout the continent, from West Asia along the Iranian coast into the Indian subcontinent, eastward into Southeast Asia and China at least as far as the Yangtze River. This giant mammal, formerly occurring over a range of over nine million square kilometers, is now extinct in West Asia, Java, and most of China, and survives in isolated pockets scattered across grasslands and tropical forests in 13 Asian countries. The greatest threats to Asian elephants are habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation; illegal killing (e.g. for ivory and other products or in retaliation for human–elephant conflict); and a loss of genetic viability resulting from small population size and isolation.

While the international commercial trade in Asian elephant products including ivory has been banned since 1975 under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), illegal killing is a problem and domestic ivory markets still persist. Additionally, illegal trade in live elephants appears to be a growing problem in some range States.[i]

The Asian elephant is an important ‘flagship species’ for conservation in Asia and as such, efforts to protect elephants and their habitats help countless other species. Elephants are also of great cultural significance in some countries within their range. Like African elephants, Asian elephants also play a critical role as ecosystem engineers, dispersing seeds and shaping the forest, although their ecological role is less well understood than it is for their African relatives.

Photo credit: © Simon Hedges
The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) works on elephants in 9 countries in Asia. Our programs cover approximately 40% of the Asian elephant population. WCS works to ensure a future where people and ecologically functioning populations of wild elephants can co-exist and thrive across the elephants’ range.

To help realize this vision, we employ six major strategies:

- Stop illegal killing.
- Protect elephant habitat.
- Reduce human–elephant conflict.
- Monitor elephant numbers, poaching rates, and threats to elephant habitat at key sites.
- Combat trafficking in ivory.
- Reduce the demand for ivory.
Habitat Range and Population Status

Almost 90% of the species’ historical range has been lost.[ii] Nevertheless, Asian elephants still occur in small, isolated populations in 13 range States in South and Southeast Asia[iii]. Unfortunately, due to a combination of factors including the difficulty of counting elephants in forests, comprehensive, robust population estimates are not available. However, rough estimates place the total wild population at 35,000–50,000 individuals. Of the remaining Asian elephants, approximately half are found in India.

Threats

The most significant threats to Asian elephants are habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation. The combination of a growing human population and declining elephant habitat has also resulted in an escalation in human–elephant conflict. Every year, hundreds of humans and elephants are killed as a result of these conflicts. Asian elephants are also threatened by poaching for their ivory and other parts. Additionally, Asian elephant populations are threatened by the illegal trade in wild-caught elephants, primarily for the tourist industry. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of information regarding the extent of poaching and live-trade of Asian elephants, which has hampered conservation efforts. Fortunately, to help address part of the problem, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)/Species Survival Commission (SSC) Asian Elephant Specialist Group provided funds to the CITES Secretariat so that it could retain two consultants to better assess the extent of illegal trade in wild elephants and to make recommendations to combat that illegal trade.

Asian elephants are listed under CITES Appendix I, meaning international trade in the animals and their products is banned. Additionally, the species is protected by national legislation in all 13 range States. More action is needed to ensure proper implementation of these essential laws and regulations.

WCS Programs - Working Towards Solutions

WCS has developed a comprehensive conservation program to ensure a sustainable future for wild Asian elephant populations focusing on the following six strategies:

● **Stop illegal killing.**

To address illegal killing of Asian elephants, trafficking in ivory and the demand for illegal ivory must be tackled and human–elephant conflict must be reduced. But these are long-term actions so it is also critical to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement at key elephant sites. WCS works with its government partners across Asia to help improve law enforcement at key sites, in part through the roll-out of the SMART approach[iv] to managing rangers and patrol-based data.

● **Protect elephant habitat.**

WCS works with its government partners across Asia to help create and manage protected areas including areas of importance to elephants. For example, in India, WCS staff played a key supporting role in the expansion of four protected areas by a total of 1,250 square kilometers in the Western Ghats region.
With over 5,000 elephants, this region of India is home to the largest population of Asian elephants in the world. Through the use of remote sensing methods, WCS also helps monitor encroachment into protected areas. In addition, WCS works on carefully-monitored, voluntary resettlement schemes, helping governments to relocate people outside protected areas so that they can have better access to schools, and clinics, and to reduce negative human–wildlife interactions in the protected areas. WCS scientists and policy experts also advise on sustainable funding options for protected areas.

- **Reduce human–elephant conflict.**

To reduce human–elephant conflict and thus help promote human–elephant coexistence, WCS deploys and evaluates a range of methods for keeping humans (especially farmers) and elephants apart including electric fencing, early warning systems, rapid response units, and low-tech, community-based, crop-guarding methods. In some areas, these approaches have successfully repelled more than 90% of attempted elephant raids.

- **Monitor elephant numbers, poaching rates, and threats to elephant habitat at key sites.**

There is an urgent need for better estimates of population size as well as data on illegal killing rates for Asian elephants. WCS is conducting (or has conducted) elephant population surveys using robust peer-reviewed methods in Cambodia, India, Indonesia (Sumatra), the Lao PDR, Peninsular Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

The information gathered helps conservationists set appropriate goals as well as monitor the effectiveness of management interventions and policymakers’ decisions. Monitoring also helps in assessing the impact of habitat loss and habitat degradation.

- **Reduce ivory trafficking.**

The significance of the large amounts of African elephant ivory entering the illegal trade chain is well-known, but unfortunately much less is known about the amounts of Asian elephant ivory in the illegal trade. More information on the international trafficking of ivory from Asian elephants is urgently needed, as are efforts to combat the trafficking of all ivory – Asian and African – in Asia. WCS advocates for a combination of effective law enforcement, nationally and internationally, aimed at combating trafficking in ivory. The measures needed include deterrent penalties for poaching and trafficking in ivory, more international cooperation including profiling of traffickers and controlled deliveries, and the building of capacity in national agencies such as the police, Customs, and the judiciary. WCS also supports the investigation and prosecution of ivory trafficking and other wildlife crime through its Wildlife Crimes Units, and other assistance to national governments and enforcement officials. A key issue that must also be tackled is the presence of legal domestic markets for ivory. These markets, found in many countries, facilitate trafficking in ivory by allowing illegal ivory to enter the trade chain under the cover of a legal trade (a process known as ‘laundrying’). Domestic markets also help stimulate consumer demand. For these reasons, WCS actively promotes the closure of domestic ivory markets wherever they are found.
Two key international opportunities to close domestic ivory markets through the upcoming CITES meeting of the Conference of the Parties and IUCN World Conservation Congress are described in more detail below.

- **Reduce the demand for ivory.**

Reducing the demand for ivory, particularly in China the main market for ivory, is paramount. Supply side measures are essential but insufficient; elephants will never be safe until demand for ivory falls. In China, WCS works to engage with existing or potential ivory consumers, aiming not only to raise awareness, but also to measurably change behavior. Additionally we are working with Chinese academics, economists, government agencies, and other policymakers on the driving factors behind the ivory trade, with the aim of providing both an evidence base and suggestions to help inform ivory trade policy improvement in the country.

### Key International Opportunities for Action

WCS also strives to improve conservation policy for elephants at the international level. Two critical opportunities to achieve enhanced international conservation measures will take place this year, in September 2016: the IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Honolulu, Hawai‘i and the Seventeenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP17) in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The IUCN WCC, held every four years, is the world’s largest conservation-focused global forum, and it has the potential to influence the direction of conservation and global sustainable development for the next four years.

A key element of the Congress is its Members’ Assembly, where IUCN members vote on motions supporting various conservation issues and initiatives. A motion has been submitted that calls on all countries to close their domestic ivory markets. It is critical that IUCN Members, consisting of governments, non-governmental organizations, scientific institutions and business associations, give their support to this motion both leading up to and at the Congress.

CITES meetings of the Conference of the Parties (CoP), held every 2–3 years, are the world’s largest fora for addressing the international trade in animals, plants, and their parts and products. CITES has played an important role in the conservation of Asian elephants since the enactment of an international trade ban in 1975.

In anticipation of this year’s CITES CoP, a Resolution (CoP17 Doc. 57.2)[v] has been submitted by 10 African countries[vi] calling for the closure of domestic markets for ivory. Adoption of this important Resolution would play a substantial role in curbing the poaching and the illegal trade in elephant ivory.

The IUCN motion and CITES Resolution, if adopted, will show the will of the global community to declare, once and for all, that the ivory trade is over—and these policy declarations will help stimulate governments that still have open ivory markets to take urgent action to close those markets.

For more information on WCS’s engagement in this year’s IUCN WCC and CITES CoP or additional reference materials please contact slieberman@wcs.org.
Footnotes


[iii] Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; China; India; Indonesia (Kalimantan, Sumatera); Lao People’s Democratic Republic; Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah); Myanmar; Nepal; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Viet Nam

[iv] Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) SMART is a system of patrol methods and technologies aimed at incorporating science into enforcement efforts tackling wildlife poaching and other illegal activities. The program was developed in partnership with global conservation organizations and protected area authorities. SMART has played a critical role in assisting conservationists and management authorities to identify priorities to enhance enforcement efforts. For additional information see: http://smartconservationtools.org
