

Asian Elephant Cruelty and Habitat Loss Leads to Huge Decline

By Cooper Year 3

1:35pm

Habitat loss, human-elephant conflict and the ivory trade continue to threaten the long-term survival of Asian Elephants.



Three female Asian Elephants in their enclosure at Taronga Zoo. Photograph: Mrs Mussone.

Over the years, Asian Elephant populations have dropped drastically. “They’ll be extinct in the wild in less than 20 years time, so we need to do everything we can to help them,” said Steve Westnedge, a Taronga Zoo Elephant Keeper. Since the 1700s, the number of Asian Elephants has declined globally by 50 - 90%. There are 35,000 left in the world, “which is perhaps ten times fewer than the number of African elephants,” said Shermin De Silva, President and Founder of Trunks and Leaves Inc. Unfortunately the breeding rate of Asian Elephants isn’t helping their situation as they breed very slowly in the wild and even slower in captivity.

The main issues affecting Asian Elephants are habitat loss, the human / elephant conflict, tourism and the ongoing ivory trade. Of most notable concern is the growing habitat loss in their ecosystem. At present, around 1/5 of the world's human population resides on or close to the habitat of Asian elephants. People who live in and around Asian Elephant habitats are clearing the land to make space for farming and industries. "They are getting pushed into smaller and smaller pockets of land where they are struggling to survive." This loss of land is reducing the availability of food for Asian Elephants and "in many cases it also creates conflict with people - either on the small scale, with subsistence farmers, or large-scale with industrial plantations," said De Silva. Due to the loss of food in their small pockets of land, Asian Elephants must search for food and often end up on local farmers' land. "Elephants try to move into those farmlands and try to eat some of their pineapples or eat other plants that are in there and they often get killed," Steve.



Elephant calf playing super soccer. Photograph by: Bobby Jo Clow

Logging has also destroyed vital Asian Elephant habitat over the years.

"Elephant populations are severely threatened by the expansion of logging and large-scale plantations," said De Silva. Numerous plantations have been set up to produce global products including timber, palm oil, coffee and tea. Much like the land lost to farms, logging deprives Asian Elephants of feeding grounds. Moreover, it reduces movement routes which affect their ability to breed and survive in the wild.

After the logging ban, logging elephants and their keepers were out of a job. Since they couldn't use the elephants for logging anymore they decided entertainment would be the new

industry, "so tourism became one of the main trades for Asian Elephants.

There has been a lot of stress put on the Asian Elephants as the number of tourists in places good for viewing the elephants who are already struggling to find vital habitat are increased. "Riding them might pay for their up keep, but can take a severe toll on their health," said De Silva. Another concern is that Asian Elephant calves are being taken away from the wild and brought to elephant camps or the tourist industry because people want to interact with them such as bottle feeding, and playing. "This of course is very disruptive both for the well-being of the calf as well as the breeding success of its mother who may or may not be killed in the process," said De Silva. They have saddles strapped to their backs so they can carry tourists around. However, as the calves grow they develop deformed backs as a result. The calves are taken out on to the streets of Malaysia and Thailand to be pat and hassled. For many of the young they will eventually die from starvation, dehydration or stress in the horrible conditions that they subjected to as a way for poorer locals to make an income.



A male Asian Elephant in the Uda Walawe National park. Photograph: Udawalawe Elephant Research Project

The ivory trade was globally banned 26 years ago in 1989 by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Since then, there have been limited, "one-off" sales. "In 1999 and 2008...certain countries were allowed to sell stockpiles of ivory that they had confiscated," said De Silva.

Sadly in some countries, the ivory trade is still thriving. This is because the money generated by, "the ivory trade fuels serious criminal activity and rebel armies," said De Silva. Moreover, some people use the hunting of elephants as an investment because the rarer the animal becomes, the more the ivory will be worth. In the four years between 2010 and 2014, the

ivory price in China has increased by a factor of three, fuelling illegal poaching. "Perversely, if elephants became extinct, these pieces would be priceless," said De Silva.

Unfortunately, it is necessary to kill Asian Elephants in order to obtain their ivory. Now, the number of wild Asian Elephants has been reduced to less than a 10% of the world's remaining elephant population. The illegal poachers kill the elephants in excruciating ways such as poisoned food, water and darts or machine guns.

Nevertheless, some countries are beginning to recognise the importance of the Asian Elephant's survival as a result of growing pressure from conservation groups. "They do a lot more than just be beautiful animals in the forest," said Steve. The elephants have a similar role in their ecosystem to bees. They help spread seeds around their habitat because they can travel long distances, which means they can transport these seeds far from their original location. "Elephants are known as ecosystem "engineers" because they have such an impact on their environment. They disperse seeds from the plants they eat, which range from grasses to fruits and their dung provides fertilizer for the seeds when they germinate," said De Silva. They also create little pond ecosystems from their foot prints which provides homes for other smaller animals. "They knock down pathways for other animals to use," Steve said. Their daily activities also can create mud wallows, mineral deposits and act as a natural excavator of the soil.

The Asian Elephant is unique being the last Mega Herbivores on the planet (other than the African Elephant) and are also the last members of the Proboscidean family which was vaster in history. The Elephants are crucial creatures for maintaining a strong and healthy ecosystem so the loss of the Asian Elephant will affect many other species. "Ultimately I think the elephants present us with a test: can humans continue to live with these magnificent animals, balancing our needs with theirs? If we pass this test, there is great hope that we can make progress in ensuring a biodiverse world, teeming with wildlife," said De Silva.

Shermin De Silva, President and Found of Trunks and Leaves have long been an advocate for the conservation of Asian Elephants. Most of Trunks & Leaves' research is based on trying to

understand the elephant's behaviour and how their minds work. This information is passed on to others involved in the conservation of Asian Elephants.

In 2005, De Silva created the Uda Walawe National Park Research project. In the 10 years the project has been running, they have discovered that although the Asian Elephants produce very few offspring, the Uda Walawe National Park population was twice as high as previously thought. "At least half the females we studied only produced 1 calf in four to six years and rest took even longer!" said De Silva. "In the long term I hope our work contributes to the persistence of healthy, wild populations of Asian elephants in their natural environment, living in relatively peaceful coexistence with people in which neither is responsible for inflicting harm on the other," said De Silva.



Two Asian Elephant siblings play together. Photograph by: Bobby Jo Clow

Taronga zoo is doing their part to save the Asian Elephants through captive breeding programs. This has proven a successful way to ensure the long-term survival of this species. Taronga zoo is behind a driving force of an Asian Elephant program that assists a number of Asian Governmental and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to combat the problems associated with the decline of Asian Elephants. They provided direct support for field conservation initiatives and expertise on environmental education, wildlife health,

facility design and management of elephant populations in Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

A conservation breeding program for the Australasian region, driven by Taronga's experts and partner zoos, is proving beneficial with a number of live births recently at Taronga Zoo. This regional conservation breeding program is designed to build a self-sustaining population of Asian Elephants in Australia, so they can learn more about caring for elephants, ensure a genetically strong and healthy herd and generate much needed funds for conservation in the wild. This requires the commitment and hard work of the major zoos in not only Australia but New Zealand.



An Asian Elephant infant being taken care of by her nanny. Photograph: Cooper

As the efforts of conservation organisations continue to make headway in the fight to secure the long-term survival of Asian Elephants, there is still more that can be done. De Silva hopes visitors to the countries which are home to Asian Elephants try and become 'ethical tourists'. "Tourists have to be conscious that their presence may disturb animals and insist that their safari guides respect their space by remaining at least 20 meters away and

refraining from blocking their movements,” said De Silva. Being an ethical tourist is just one way that everyday Australians can support the conservation of Asian Elephants.

On the home front, shoppers should take a closer look at the products they consume every day. “Many of the products people consume every day (foods, paper) may be derived from these threatened environments,” said De Silva. Shoppers are encouraged to look for certification labels from conservation groups. These labels help consumers to feel confident that their products are meeting strict environmental standards in areas inhabited by both plantations and endangered native animals. “It is especially important for individuals who own businesses, such as restaurants, coffee shops, etc. to source ethically,” said De Silva.



An adult elephant going for a swim at Taronga Zoo. Photograph by: Cooper

During the past few decades Asian Elephant numbers have continued to plummet from habitat loss, the human to elephant conflict and the ongoing ivory trade. However, with all the support coming from Taronga Zoo, Trunks and Leaves and other conservation organisations around the world, the Elephants numbers should slowly but surely begin rising. Nevertheless, more can still be done if everyday Australians purchase products that are ethically sourced and learn how to become ‘ethical tourists’. If we can achieve this then the future for Asian Elephants will be a bright one!