

COMMENTARY: The Plight of the Elephant

It's not only poaching that is bringing pachyderm populations to their knees.

By Samantha Grasso

The International Elephant Foundation, a nonprofit corporation working to support the long-term survival of elephants, has announced a slew of new conservation initiatives. The IEF uses its resources to fund a variety of national and international research and conservation projects. Each year, through its grant program, the foundation allocates resources to 10 additional projects, chosen from a pool of proposals. This year, 15 projects will be aimed at habitat protection, anti-poaching, ecotourism, environmental education, veterinary medicine and the reduction of human-elephant conflict.

The IEF was founded in 1998 to aid troubled Asian and African Elephant populations. Under designation from the World Conservation Union, the African Elephant is listed as vulnerable and the Asian elephant as endangered, signifying high and very-high risk of extinction in the wild. While the primary focus of the foundation is “on-site conservation,” protecting wild habitats naturally occupied by elephants, the foundation also works with captive populations in managed facilities throughout North America.

“Working with these populations has a positive effect on conservation, and the information gathered is relevant to helping and understanding wild populations,” explains IEF executive director Deborah Olson. There is potential to use captive animals to study behavior as well as educate the public about the species.

While many people complain that captive animals fall prey to sickness, disease and psychological degradation, the reality is that these problems occur in the wild as well, the group says. Increasingly, many wild elephants are managed by humans in some way; often for transportation or labor. Management in zoos aims to provide a scientific understanding of the species, which can then be used to enforce positive stewardship of these animals in their native habitats.

According to Jackie Marks, program assistant for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, “Elephants in captivity are ambassadors to their counterparts in the wild.” The AZA is one of the IEF’s largest supporters, and at present 284 elephants are housed at 79 AZA accredited zoos throughout North America. In addition to research, “Allowing individuals to see these creatures first hand and connect with them provides an experience that would otherwise be out of many people’s reach,” says Marks.

Most people who have never seen them view elephants as walking cartoons, stomping through the brush while a group of tourists dressed in khaki shorts snaps pictures. Zoos, despite all their flaws, provide an opportunity for a tangible awareness of these creatures, as well as the threats they face.

According to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the African Elephant population has fallen from 1.6 million to less than 500,000 in the past 25 years, and it is estimated that only 30,000 Asian elephants are left in the wild. Poaching is most commonly blamed for this

decline. However, while Asian Elephants are 10 times more endangered than their African relatives, the majority of the trophy ivory tusks that poachers go after are found on African Elephants. This is because female Asian elephants are virtually tuskless, as are some males. On Asian males that do have tusks, they are often significantly smaller than those on African Elephants. It's not surprising, then, that most poaching takes place in Africa, while the most critical populations are found in Asia, so there must be something else going on.

"I don't know if the majority of people know how bad poaching actually is," says Olson. "They definitely do not know about the other problems which are the most dangerous threats to elephants. Olson worries that poachers take most of the heat for a problem that is actually much larger in scope.

In addition to deforestation, disease and poaching, human-elephant conflict seems to be the most widespread and difficult issue to tackle in elephant conservation. Conflict often occurs when humans move into elephant habitat. These areas still seem "wild," but due to human activity there is no longer room for elephants in the landscape.

"Humans are going into elephant habitat to build farms and to live, and often both elephants and humans end up paying the price," says Olson. Many elephants are shot or poisoned for encroaching on human areas because they pose a danger or become pests. For this reason, many IEF projects are aimed at resolving this conflict so that elephants and humans can coexist positively in areas where they will inevitably interact.

Where elephants exist in the lowest numbers is often within countries whose governments are unstable, making conservation laws difficult to enforce. These areas are of particular importance to the IEF because in many cases the governments are not capable of protecting elephants themselves. Where the sale of an ivory tusk may be worth a year's salary, or a clear-cut field can be converted to large-scale agriculture, successful conservation initiatives must be aimed at altering the way in which elephants are used as an economic resource.

Ecotourism programs are one way of doing this. In 2008, the Cambodian Elephant Conservation Group plans to terminate forest clearing in key elephant habitat, while simultaneously improving livelihood strategies, raising local awareness and developing ecotourism in the Prey Proseth Village. This will not only generate new jobs, but in treating the local natural resources as commodities they will gain value in their pristine form to local people, hopefully creating an incentive to preserve them that outweighs the benefit of exploitation.

Another way of reducing human-elephant conflict is to build physical barriers. The "Save Elephants by Helping People" project is underway in rural Sri Lanka, and aims to benefit both farmers and elephants. The construction of a nine-mile electric fence will coincide with training programs for community leaders from numerous community fence maintenance organizations, placing the sustainability of the project into the hands of local people. The project will also be used as a study of the effectiveness of biological fences.

As habitat fragmentation threatens moving populations, research efforts will focus on tracking elephant movement and migration, to assure elephant groups have access to critical migration routes.

Educating the public, not only in elephant habitat, but all over the world, is another important piece of conservation because elephant habitat is being affected by the actions of people around the globe. With the increasing demand for biofuel crops, there is a huge incentive to clear land, especially in the tropics of Africa and Asia, biodiversity hotspots and prime elephant habitat. More and more land is being devoted to growing oil palm trees to produce palm oil used to generate biofuels. Last year, palm oil surpassed soybean oil as the most widely produced vegetable oil in the world, and though the direct strain this places on agricultural land is felt by a few regions concentrated in the tropics, the demand comes from everywhere.

Understanding the interconnectedness of all the world's ecosystems is key to restoring and protecting our planet. Even such things as plastic water bottles use resources often extracted from elephant habitat. "Our actions have such a powerful effect on our entire world and we need to be more careful about our choices," Olson says. "I encourage everyone to educate themselves about the environment and be aware of the impact that we have on the planet."

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