

Asian Elephants



BORNEO PYGMY



SRI LANKAN



SUMATRAN



INDIAN

Elephants are an important cultural icon in Asia. According to Hindu mythology, the gods (deva) and the demons (asura) churned the oceans in a search for the elixir of life so that they would become immortal. As they did so, nine jewels surfaced, one of which was the elephant. In Hinduism, the powerful deity honored before all sacred rituals is the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, who is also called the Remover of Obstacles.

Asian elephants are extremely sociable, forming groups of six to seven related females that are led by the oldest female, the matriarch. Like African elephants, these groups occasionally join others to form herds, although these associations are relatively transient.

More than two thirds of an elephant's day may be spent feeding on grasses, but large amounts of tree bark, roots, leaves and small stems are also eaten. Cultivated crops such as bananas, rice and sugarcane are favorite foods. Elephants are always close to a source of fresh water because they need to drink at least once a day.

Why we care about elephants on World Wildlife Day—and every day

Elephants number among the smartest and most empathetic creatures on the planet. This World Wildlife Day, we're celebrating these magnificent animals—and emphasizing their need for our help.

WHY THEY MATTER



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Indian elephants may spend up to 19 hours a day feeding, and they can produce about 220 pounds of dung per day while wandering around an area that can cover up to 125 square miles. This helps to disperse germinating seeds.



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A future for Asian elephants ensures a future for other species and wild spaces.



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Elephants are not only a cultural icon throughout Asia, they also help to maintain the integrity of forest and grassland habitats.



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Captured elephant in Sumatra. The capture of wild elephants for domestic use has become a threat to some wild populations, seriously reducing some numbers.

HABITAT LOSS

The main threat facing Indian elephants, like all Asian elephants is loss of habitat, which then results in human-elephant conflict. In South Asia, an ever-increasing human population has led to many illegal encroachments in elephant habitat. Many infrastructure developments like roads and railway tracks also fragment habitat. Elephants become confined to “islands” as their ancient migratory routes are cut off. Unable to mix with other herds, they run the risk of inbreeding.

Habitat loss also forces elephants into close quarters with humans. In their quest for food, a single elephant can devastate a small farmer’s crop holding in a single feeding raid. This leaves elephants vulnerable to retaliatory killings, especially when people are injured or killed.

ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE

Even where suitable habitat exists, poaching remains a threat to elephants in many areas. In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned the international trade in ivory. However, there are still some thriving but unregulated domestic ivory markets in a number of countries which fuel an illegal international trade. Although most of this ivory comes from poaching of African elephants, Asian elephants are also illegally hunted for their ivory, as well as for their skin. In some countries, political unrest is disrupting antipoaching activities.

GENETIC THREAT

Conservationists are concerned that a loss of male big tuskers due to poaching could lead to inbreeding and eventually to high juvenile mortality and overall low breeding success. The loss of tuskers also reduces the probability that these longer-living lone males will mate and exchange genes with females of different sub-populations.

CAPTURE OF WILD ELEPHANTS

The capture of wild elephants for domestic use has become a threat to some wild populations, seriously reducing some numbers. India, Vietnam and Myanmar have banned capture in order to conserve their wild herds, but in Myanmar elephants are still caught each year for the timber and tourist industries or illegal wildlife trade. Crude capture methods often result in elephant deaths. Efforts are being made not only to improve safety, but also to encourage captive breeding rather than taking from the wild. With nearly 30 percent of the remaining Asian elephants in captivity, attention needs to be paid to improve care and targeted breeding programs.

WHAT WWF IS DOING



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WWF's elephant work in South Asia focuses on creating a future for elephants in a landscape dominated by humans. WWF invests in antipoaching operations, reducing impacts on elephant populations, preventing further habitat loss and, most importantly, lowering local animosity against elephants.

HALTING POACHING AND STOPPING TRADE

In response to high incidents of elephant and tiger poaching in central Sumatra, WWF and its local partners have coordinated wildlife patrol units that conduct antipoaching patrols, confiscate snares and other means of trapping animals, educate local people on the laws in place concerning poaching, and help authorities apprehend criminals. The evidence collected by wildlife patrol units has helped bring known poachers to court. In many Asian countries, WWF works with TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, to reduce the threat that illegal and illicit domestic ivory markets pose to wild elephants.

REDUCING HUMAN-ELEPHANT CONFLICT

WWF supports human-elephant conflict mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and awareness-building among local communities in two elephant habitats in the Eastern Himalayas, the North Bank Landscape and the Kaziranga Karbi-Anglong Landscape, and in the Nilgiris Eastern Ghats Landscape in South India. In Cambodia, WWF trains, equips, and supports local staff to patrol protected areas and assess elephant distribution and numbers. Similar approaches are underway in other landscapes.

In Vietnam, WWF supports an average of 20 forest guards that have been deployed by Vietnamese government authorities. WWF has been supporting these teams with equipment and allowances so that they can better execute their duties and spend more time out on patrol.

In Sumatra, WWF coordinates Elephant Flying Squads. When wild elephants are seen close to villages or farms, local people can call an Elephant Flying Squad, which is made up of trained elephants that scare off the wild elephants. The squads help bring short-term relief to the intense conflict between people and elephants and create support for elephant conservation among struggling communities.

PROTECTING ELEPHANT HABITAT

In the Terai Arc Landscape, which encompasses parts of western Nepal and eastern India, WWF and its partners restore degraded biological corridors so that elephants can access their migratory routes without disturbing human habitations. The long-term goal is to reconnect 12 protected areas and encourage community-based action to mitigate human-elephant conflict. Such approaches are being facilitated by WWF across the range of the Indian elephant.

SECURING HEALTHY FORESTS

A major breakthrough was achieved in Sumatra with the 2004 declaration of Tesso Nilo National Park, a protected area, which represents a significant step towards the protection of the elephant's habitat. The Tesso Nilo forest is one of the last forest blocks large enough to support a viable population of critically endangered Sumatran elephants and is also home to the critically endangered Sumatran tiger.

WWF calls on the government of Indonesia, palm oil companies, members of the pulp and paper industry and conservation organizations, to work together to conserve Sumatran elephants, and their unique habitat. Because Sumatra's trees are rooted in carbon-rich deep peat soil, the high rate of deforestation is also causing high amounts of carbon to be released into the atmosphere, which contributes to climate change.

