

SHORT COMMUNICATION

An update on the status of the Asian elephant in Bhutan, to complement the 2004 (previously unpublished) report contributed by Dasho Paljor J. Dorji

Addendum Update: The Asian elephant in Bhutan

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Current status and distribution

In 2010 an attempt to census Bhutan's elephant population, by dung transect survey, was made in the areas of Sarpang, Samtse and Phipsoo Wildlife Sanctuary by the Wildlife Conservation Division of the Department of Forests and Park Services. Grids of 5x5 were laid in the areas known to have elephants, and 30% of grid cells were selected by random sampling for 4-km line transect surveys of dung presence. Accordingly, elephant density was estimated at 0.641 elephants/km² with a 95% CI of 0.038–2.246 elephants/km². This gives an estimated total of 513 elephants with the equivalent 95% CI for the surveyed area of 800 km² (Jigme & Williams 2011)².

Threats

Of late, retaliatory killing by erecting crude electric fences around villages and crop fields has become rampant in the bordering villages of India and to a very low level in Bhutanese villages. Human-elephant conflict and the resulting negative impact, besides habitat destruction and poaching, has the potential of becoming the greatest threat to Asian elephant conservation in its range. Specific to the geography of Bhutan, elephants also face the threat of occasionally falling off the rugged steep cliffs once on the hills of Bhutan.

Conservation

Recent efforts on conservation of Asian elephants in Bhutan includes a chapter dedicated to outlining strategies for its

conservation and human-elephant conflict management in the Bhutan National Human-Wildlife Conflict Management Strategy of 2008 and its on-the-ground implementation. Some of the effective strategies implemented by the Royal Government of Bhutan are the erection of internationally safety certified solar powered electric fences, habitat enrichment, community trainings on co-existence methods and a migration study using the latest GPS telemetry techniques. In the protected areas of southern Bhutan, a management plan has been written and is being implemented in Phipsoo Wildlife Sanctuary, while biological surveys are being carried out in Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary for the development of a management plan that accords conservation priority to the elephant and other flagship species.

About the author



Sonam Wangdi is Chief Forest Officer of Samtse Forest Division, where the human-elephant conflict rate is among the highest in Bhutan. Prior to his posting there, he worked as the National Coordinator

of the Human-Wildlife Conflict Management Section in the Wildlife Conservation Division in Thimphu for the last 5 years. He is currently leading the first-ever study in Bhutan of elephant home range, habitat selection and conflict management.

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² Jigme, K. and C. Williams. 2011. Current status of Asian elephants in Bhutan. *Gajah* 35 (2011):25–28