Human Elephant Conflict

Human-elephant conflict (HEC) is dramatically on the rise and has become one of the major issues in the fight to save Asia's endangered elephants. In fact in most countries across the Asian elephant's range it has replace poaching as the major human cause of elephant mortality.

The rise in HEC has been the a result of the relentless rise of the human population in Asia and the resulting loss and fragmentation of elephant habitat. Under pressure from higher population densities and lack fodder elephant populations are increasingly turning to crop raiding for sustenance.

The predations of wild elephants can destroy a farmer's livelihood and a year of hard work in just a few short hours. These farmers are normally poor smallholders and the damage caused by elephants can be financially ruinous for them and their families. The fight to protect their fields can lead to the mobilisation of entire communities particularly when harvest time approaches. Many techniques are used; lighting fires, banging drums and making noise, setting off firearms and fire crackers, digging trenches, putting up electric fences. Unfortunately often these methods are to no avail - hungry elephants are difficult to frighten off and they become acclimatised to the techniques.

Another factor in attacks by elephants is not the search for food but for alcohol. Elephants are attracted to and enjoy drinking alcohol. They have been known to attack and destroy villages when they can smell alcohol brewing in small village stills. A group of elephants can destroy a whole village in a matter of minutes and often threaten human life.

Manslaughter by Elephants

Each year Asian elephants directly cause hundreds of human deaths through HEC. Compare this to the human death toll from shark attacks which is usually under 12 a year and you get some idea of the scale of the problem. In India alone, recorded deaths from elephants number between 150 and 200 a year, in Sri Lanka the number is reportedly 40-50 and rising every year. Not all these deaths can be attributed to crop or village raiding. About half are caused by chance encounters in the forest when the humans are not aware of the presence of elephants until it is too late.

However crop and village raiding deaths are on the increase barely a week goes by without reports of elephants killing people. It has even been reported in some areas where there is extreme population pressure and habitat shrinkage that elephant herds are becoming noticeably more aggressive towards man.

Elephant Death by Humans

HEC elephant deaths are on the rise. Irate farmers, terrified villages and the even the military and police are reacting to crop depredation and damage to people and settlements by fighting back and killing elephants. Even though the elephant is protected by legislation across Asia they are increasingly being killed in anger or self defence. Studies by Raman Sukumar in three locations in India suggested that up to 20% of elephant deaths were caused directly by crop defence. These studies took place in 1982 and the situation is thought to have worsened since. In Sri Lanka it is reported that up to 150 wild elephants are shot or poisoned by farmers every year.