Species fact sheet: Asian Elephant



Indian elephant. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

forests of Asia, less than a tenth of the number of wild African elephants. These remaining populations are mostly small, isolated, and fragmented because their ancient migratory routes and habitat have been interrupted by expanding human encroachment.



Indian Elephant Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal. © WWF-Canon / Jeff Foott

At a glance: Species: Asian elephant (Elephas maximus) Habitat:

Tropical and subtropical moist broadleaf forests, tropical and

subtropical dry broadleaf forests

Location: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia

Population: 25,600-32,750

Status: Endangered (IUCN-The World Conservation Union)





Indian elephants, Dudwa National Park, India. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

There are three sub-species of **Asian elephant:**

- 1. The Indian elephant (E. m. indicus) is the most widely distributed sub-species, found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Borneo (Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Indonesia), Cambodia, China, India, Lao PDR, peninsular Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. It also has the largest numbers, with 20,000-25,000 living in the wild. Recent investigations show that the Bornean elephant has enough genetic variation from mainland elephants to be classified a separate sub-species.
- 2. The Sumatran elephant (E. m. sumatrensis) is found only on the island of Sumatra (Indonesia) and numbers between 2,440 and 3,350.
- 3. The Sri Lankan elephant (E. m. maximus) is found in southwestern Sri Lanka and is the largest Asian elephant sub-species. There are between 3,160 and 4.400 in the wild.

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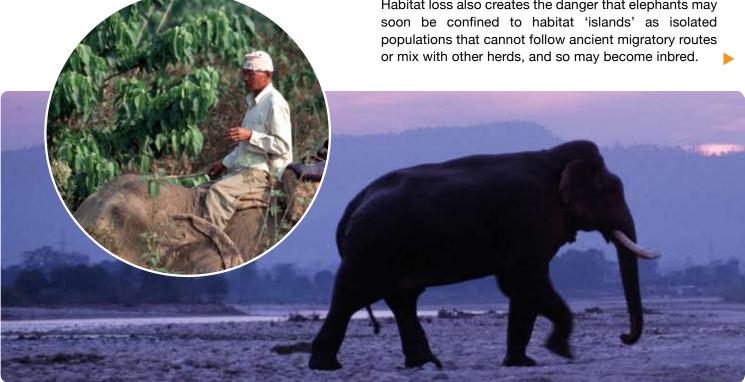
What are the problems facing Asian elephants?

Habitat loss and conflict with humans

As human populations grow and people settle in areas that were once the sole domain of elephants, human-elephant conflicts become increasingly common. At present, this is the biggest threat to the survival of Asian elephants in the wild.

Elephants need a lot of space and a lot of food: an average of 150kg per day. As forest cover becomes fragmented, elephants destroy plantations and fields in their quest for food. They uproot and scatter other plants, trees, and groundcover as they forage. This puts them in direct conflict with farmers settling into elephant habitat. A single elephant can devastate a small farmer's crop holding in one feeding raid. This makes elephants the target of retaliatory killings, especially when people are injured or killed. Each year in India, over 200 people are killed by elephants, and more than 100 elephants are killed in retaliation.

Habitat loss also creates the danger that elephants may



Indian elephant at sunset, Rajaji National Park, North India. © WWF-Canon / A. Christy Williams

Poaching

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 unmonitored domestic ivory markets in a number of Asian, and other, 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, and even preventing, monitoring and anti-poaching activities.

What is WWF doing to reduce threats to Asian elephants in the wild?

Asian elephants are 'flagship' species for their habitats — that is, charismatic representatives of the biodiversity within the complex ecosystems they inhabit. Because these large animals need a lot of space to survive, their conservation will help maintain biological diversity and ecological integrity over extensive areas and so help many other species.

WWF created the Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy (AREAS) in 1998 to conserve the remaining populations of these endangered large mammals and their habitats. Drawing on 40 years of experience in elephant and rhino conservation, the strategy recognizes that conservation success will only be possible through a wide-ranging approach that goes beyond protecting isolated areas and addresses issues of land-use practices.

The cornerstone of AREAS work is the creation of habitat landscapes. This means working outside and between protected areas to minimize threats to elephants, and to empower communities to participate in long-term conservation and management of these animals. The programme combines cutting-edge

conservation biology with trade monitoring, community development, socio-economic analysis, public awareness campaigns, dialogue with traditional medicine practitioners, capacity building, and policy advocacy.

Examples of current work to conserve Asian elephants include:

- 1. In the Terai Arc Landscape, which encompasses parts of western Nepal and eastern India, WWF and its partners are restoring degraded biological corridors so that large animals like 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.
- **2. Also in India**, WWF supports human-elephant conflict mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and awareness-building among local communities in two other elephant habitats in the eastern Himalayas, the North Bank Landscape (see Focus Project box) and the Kaziranga Karbi-Anglong Landscape, and in the Nilgiris Eastern Ghats Landscape in south India.
- 3. At the borders of Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam, WWF is training, equipping, and supporting local staff to patrol protected areas and assess elephant distribution and numbers. The focus for WWF in Lao PDR is to conserve the largest elephant populations in Indochina. In Vietnam, WWF worked with Fauna and Flora International to develop a national elephant action plan, which was adopted by the Vietnamese government in 1996.
- 4. In Thailand, WWF is supporting the management and monitoring of elephants in the Western Forest Complex, which is the largest remaining area of protected forest in Southeast Asia and home to more than 33 per cent of Thailand's wild elephants. WWF is also working with the Karen people in western Thailand to study the distribution, abundance, and ecology of elephants in Thung Yai Wildlife Sanctuary.



- 5. In Indonesia, WWF recently celebrated the Indonesian government's creation of Tesso Nilo National Park, which covers 385.76km² of Riau Province, Sumatra. It is one of the largest-remaining lowland forest blocks on the island and home to tremendous biodiversity. WWF will develop a comprehensive strategy in Tesso Nilo for managing human-elephant conflict and re-establishing corridors to other protected areas.
 - **6.** In northern Borneo, Malaysia, WWF has been collaborating with the Sabah Wildlife Department to create a GIS (Geographical Information Systems) database to help in planning the conservation of elephant habitats in an area of over 24,300km². In addition, WWF is actively working with the owners of logging companies to convince them to adopt sustainable land-use practices that will minimize conflict with elephants.
 - 7. In many Asian countries, WWF is working with TRAFFIC the international wildlife trade monitoring network organized and operated as a joint programme by and between WWF and IUCN-The World Conservation Union to reduce the threat that illegal and illicit domestic ivory markets pose to wild elephants. TRAFFIC also manages a global record of ivory seizures, called ETIS (Elephant Trade Information System) for CITES, that helps to identify trade routes and countries of particular importance in the illegal trade.
 - 8. WWF also works with a number of protected areas that support populations of wild elephants, such as Royal Manas National Park (Bhutan), Xishuangbanna Reserve (China), and Kerinci-Seblat National Park (Indonesia).

Throughout the Asian elephant's range, WWF and its partners have had measured successes in reducing conflict through education and changing land use practices in and near elephant habitats, but there is still much more to be done in order to ensure a brighter future for elephants in the wild.

Focus Project: North Bank Landscape, India and Bhutan

Bordered by India's mighty Brahmaputra River in the south and the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in the north, the North Bank Landscape encompasses about 18,000km² and includes parts of Bhutan and the northeastern Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and north Bengal. This strategic conservation zone has as many as 3,000 Asian elephants — up to 10 per cent of the species' total population. It is also home to significant populations of greater one-horned rhinos, tigers, and clouded leopard.

Originally a continuous belt of rich forest cover, relatively recent and largely uncontrolled human migration has greatly impacted this biodiversity-rich 'hotspot'. Since 1972, nearly 14 per cent of the area's natural forest has been lost, predominantly in the state of Assam. Human encroachment has not only significantly reduced elephant habitat, but has also disrupted important migratory corridors.

This loss of habitat and migration routes compels the elephants to stay longer wherever they find suitable habitats, including small village bamboo groves and tea gardens. This puts the animals in direct conflict with local communities. The people are generally very poor and depend mainly on agriculture, usually raising only a single crop in a year. Elephants frequently raid crops and often, houses are destroyed and people killed. This fuels great hostility in the communities with deadly results like revenge killings.

WWF's work in the North Bank Landscape has focused on using non-destructive methods to reduce contact and conflict between humans and elephants in this fragile area. WWF has collected data on elephant numbers and distribution, and identified the primary areas of human-elephant conflict.

WWF developed a two-pronged strategy in consultation with the Assam and Arunachal Forest Departments. The main aims are to reduce elephant deaths through a conflict-mitigation strategy, and to restore critical habitats and corridors by working together with forest departments and local communities. On the ground, WWF has also led initiatives such as carefully planned elephant drives where trained domesticated elephants, koonkies, push wild elephants out of cropland and into designated wildlife corridors.

WWF is also leading the way to secure the area as a conservation zone for elephants and other species. WWF continues to work with local governmental and non-governmental organizations to preserve important habitats for elephants and other endangered species in the North Bank Landscape and assist local residents to understand the value of the biodiversity in their region.

The North Bank Landscape is part of the Eastern Himalayan Broadleaf & Conifer Forests Ecoregion — one of WWF's Global 200 Ecoregions, biologically outstanding habitats where WWF concentrates its efforts.

Find out more...

This fact sheet is designed to give a broad overview of some of the threats faced by Asian elephants, and to give examples of WWF and TRAFFIC's work and solutions on the ground. For more detailed information on species, WWF, TRAFFIC, and the work we do, please visit **www.panda.org/species** and **www.traffic.org**

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