

SHORT COMMUNICATION

An unpublished report from 2004, with an addendum update

The Asian elephant in Bhutan

DASHO PALJOR J. DORJI^{1*}



Mother and calf elephant at Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary, Bhutan
(Photo Credit: Sonam Wangdi)

Introduction

In Buddhist Mythology, the elephant is one of the four animals in “The Four Friends,” a fable that illustrates the inter-connectedness of all life. In this tale, an elephant, a monkey, a rabbit and a bird band together to pluck fruit (Jewel of Wisdom) from a tall tree, with the elephant forming the foundation upon which all the other animals can stand. The four friends are found on temple walls throughout Bhutan, reminding us of the interdependence of all life and the consequent need for cooperation, one of the Buddhist precepts that has kept Bhutan’s environment intact for centuries.

The Country

Bhutan begins where the Himalayan range rises up from the Indian subcontinent at 100 m above sea level and ends where the greater Himalayan peaks meet the Tibetan plateau at over 7000 m. These great variations in altitude and climate, along with high annual precipitation and the country’s strong environmental ethic, make Bhutan one of the most important places on earth for biodiversity.

Recognized as one of ten global biodiversity “hot spots”, Bhutan has forest cover over 70% of its total land area, and an extensive managed

¹ Special Advisor to National Environment Council, Royal Government of Bhutan

* Corresponding author’s email: paljordorji@hotmail.com

protected area system covering 26% of the country². Within an area of 46,500 km², a wide range of ecosystems from tropical forests to alpine meadows harbor a large number of rare and endangered species³. It is under these conditions that we find the Asian elephant (local name = “lamchey”) in Bhutan.

Elephants in Bhutan’s history

Although Bhutan is one of the least known countries to have an elephant population, it was once very well known for its elephants. The Maharajah of Gauripur, who used to train elephants for all the maharajahs of India, used to pay royalties to Bhutan to conduct “khedah” operations in the 1950’s and 70’s. During these operations, elephants would be rounded up, selected and taken to Gauripur for training, while the rest would be released. The elephant population of Gaylegphug used to be so large that the area was once known as the Hatisar, meaning “The Land of Elephants”. Today, sadly, many of the forests in this area have disappeared and continue to disappear and along with them, much of the elephant population.

Current status and distribution

The total population size of resident elephants in Bhutan is not available, but the number is thought to be somewhere between 700 and 800. Like the tiger in Bhutan, whose altitudinal range is extremely high, the elephant has been seen as high up as 2750 meters, at shau-gay-la, above Gedu. Between eight and fifteen elephants are still seen annually below Gedu, at an altitude of 2100 meters above sea level. Major habitat centres, however, are Royal Manas National Park, Phipsoo Wildlife Sanctuary and Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary (Table 1). The rapid disappearance of forests in India means that elephants are forced to seek refuge in Bhutan with plenty of forest

cover. The numerous salt licks in Bhutan also draw a large number of mammals, including elephants, across the border.

Elephants have always traditionally moved vertically from India up into the Bhutanese foothills, and west-east/east-west along this border, migrating according to the season and crop availability. Although traditional migratory routes are being slowly blocked by human settlements, there are still an estimated two to three thousand elephants within this transborder range, feeding on a diet of wild banana, bamboo and other fodder. However, as the elephant rapidly loses habitat in neighbouring India, and as its movement becomes more and more restricted by human activity, it has turned with increasing frequency to raiding crops, and is usually shot at by villagers with locally made muskets (in this author’s opinion, it would indeed be very rare to find a single elephant without a wound from a homemade musket).

Threats

Poaching and habitat loss remain the biggest threat to elephants within their range across the Indo-Bhutan border. There are large numbers of “makhna”, tuskless male elephants, in this population. The makhna have greater strength in their snout to compensate for their lack of tusks, and are most violent, especially when in musth. They tend to reproduce other makhna, and one wonders if the growing predominance of makhna is nature’s way of ensuring the survival of the elephant, since, without tusks, the elephant is no longer a target for poachers.

Conservation

Bhutan’s conservation policy and efforts are aimed at whole ecosystems, rather than individual species, as it is necessary to conserve whole habitats and the entire

² At the time of writing of this historical report (2004), protected areas covered 26% of the country. They now cover 51.44% of Bhutan.

³ Data from 2004—currently, the country area is 38,394 square kilometers.

TABLE 1 Report of elephants spotted: 1982–2004.

S/No	Dzongkhag	Place	Nos.	Remarks
1	Samtse	Sibsoo (border)	50	5 tuskers
2	Chukha	Todung forest border Pasakha Jumja	30 40 8	2 tuskers, small 1 tusker
3	Dagana	Lhamoizingkha, Lamchey, Khuru Chakambari Nichula, Dangrila Getana	50 13 5	40 tuskers, small
4	Sarpang	Phipsoo Above Jigmeling Police camp Above Taklai & Umling Between Taklai and Kanamakura Edhi Between Gobarkunda and Manas Manas Gakhati, Rabang Between Rabang and Nganglam Nganglam, tilong Alanchi Bagan	40-50 40-50 2 20 9	Footprints of 2 elephants seen Report of footprint seen Footprints seen 1 big male, 1 small male No males spotted No tuskers seen No tuskers seen 1 tusker
5	Samdrup Jongkhar	Jagartala Dongderma Tshokigu Between Deothang and Samdrup Jongkhar Samdrupchoeling, Deorali Samrang Kala Nadi	20 9 7 30 30 12	4 tuskers 1 tusker 1 small male 1 male (short tusk) Many seen, but no tuskers

spectrum of life in order to save any particular species. As such, there is no specific project aimed at the conservation of the elephant in Bhutan. But hunting has long been banned by legislation and even longer by the Buddhist ethic that holds all life sacred. Under current legislation, the elephant, along with several other vulnerable and endangered species, is given “total protection” being listed in the first schedule of the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of Bhutan, 1995. Fines and prison sentences for killing a totally protected animal are higher than those given for killing other animals. Moreover, the Royal Government has committed itself to maintaining a minimum forest cover of 60%, and its extensive system of protected areas ensures that the elephant in Bhutan has a safe habitat. Three reserves in the southern foothills, Royal Manas National Park, Phipsoo Wildlife Sanctuary and Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary, offer over 1600 km² of protected habitat. A management plan that includes conservation activities for the elephant has been written and is being implemented in Royal Manas National Park.

For centuries, religious precepts ensured that all sentient creatures were automatically protected. With Bhutan’s gradual opening to the outside world, however, and the emergence of an extremely lucrative international market in wildlife parts and products, poaching has increased both in the country and along its borders. Huge economic gains appear to be overriding traditional religious beliefs. Recently, the Royal Government of Bhutan, in conjunction with WWF-Bhutan Program, initiated an anti-poaching project, fielding anti-poaching squads and strengthening patrol systems. Poaching in Royal Manas National Park, Phipsoo and Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary has not yet become a serious problem, and so, conservation of the elephant in Bhutan stands an excellent chance of success.

Conclusion

There are a number of strong environmental initiatives and laws already in place in Bhutan. In 1995, Bhutan ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity and Climate Change in order to demonstrate its commitment to conservation. Its recent Customs Rules and Regulations list will prohibit the trade of all animal products listed in IUCN policy and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), as does the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995. Furthermore, to ensure that all conservation initiatives are sustainable, Bhutan established the first fully-functioning trust fund for nature conservation in 1991, with a target of US \$20 million. This target was reached in the middle of 1996, and the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation now aims to further increase its capital as a long-term guarantee of funding for environmental conservation. With these measures already in place, Bhutan is well-placed to conserve its diverse ecosystems and species, including the Asian elephant.

About the author



Dasho Paljor J. Dorji is Deputy Minister and Special Advisor to the National Environment Commission, and is also the Founding President of the Bhutan Ecological Society. Dasho has served in various

environmental and other capacities in the Royal Government of Bhutan since 1966.