

Human Elephant Coexistence teaching and educator skills training workshop: Nilgiri report

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This workshop at Ooty is the second programme of the USFWS funded education project series for the year 2012 which was organized in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department and Government Arts College, Ooty, from 26-28th September 2012. The workshop targeted the educators from the HEC areas such as Bempatty, Ithalar, Thalaikundha, Cherambadi, Gudalur, Maniyapuram, Konnachal, Thaiyakuni, Aruvankadu, Devala, Coonoor, Kayyuni, Nilgiri district. The above places are some of the important Human elephant conflict areas covered in this workshop. The aim of the programme was that after the training the trainees carry and spread the message of coexistence to the people at local level in HEC areas.

The Nilgiris district is located at the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu, South India. The Nilgiris is bounded on North by Karnataka State on the West by Coimbatore District, Erode District, and South by Coimbatore District and Kerala State and as the East by Kerala State. The fringe areas of this district of Western Ghats have many villages and hamlets that experience severe human-elephant conflict HEC. Reports about loss of life of both human and elephant apart from materialistic loss due to conflict are not uncommon as reported in the local news papers. The influx of elephant populations in to the forest division occurs mainly during the post monsoon and dry season periods. Elephant population from Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Mudumalai Wildlife



Inaugural address by B. Sugirtharaj Koilpillai, IFS, DFO

Sanctuary, Nilgiri North and South Wildlife division intensifies for a period of 3-4 months at a density of 1.5 elephants per sq km.

Many people are working on Human Elephant Conflict HEC and have failed to find a "solution". People involved in HEC appeared to be surprised when some action that worked like a charm when first attempted, failed miserably in a few days or weeks. This happens because elephants are very smart, they learn the tricks easily and react. Also it seemed that people involved in ground level HEC emphasized reactive and/or mechanistic methods, e.g., tools, devices, strategies, constructions, compensation, etc. These methods do not solve much and also don't provide long term protection to the humans and elephants, which get killed and injured on an almost daily basis as a result of conflict. In the process, the attitudes and behaviour of the local people who

suffer most from elephant conflict did not change in any way that brought about improvement, but only in ways such as becoming vindictive and reactive, that brought about more death and injury, in particular to the elephants but also even to themselves.

The workshop emphasis off mechanistic solutions for conflict and put it on coexistence. In so doing, we accepted that there was no permanent or all-encompassing solution to HEC due to its complexity and variety but that our approach would be through an age-old and imperfect method, coexistence. Coexistence is not a new method of living with elephants. People have been doing so for centuries. As all rural persons know, however, even government agencies cannot do everything at all times and be everywhere when crucially required. It is impossible. Yet, over the centuries and decades of the growth and evolution of democratic government, perhaps people have come to rely too much on government to come to their rescue. Government can definitely chase some elephants away, shoot psychotic rogues, proper advice and pay compensation but they can't bring a human breadwinner back to life, or restore a permanently damaged body or mind. Therefore, the workshop approach is "first and foremost" that individuals and families take responsibility for themselves, learn ways to avoid confrontation and promote self protection, become willing to exchange some old habits and beliefs for survival and thus reduce the incidence of injury and death due to HEC.



Conflict demonstration and solution: a drama scene

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At the same time they may also learn other techniques which may help them both "Get Along with Elephants" and salvage property, crops, etc., but our primary purpose is mitigation and reduction of incidence of death and injury, both to humans and animals. This for the simple reason that death is immutable and injury can affect life unbearably. A pre-workshop survey of residents of the Nilgiri district was carried out to document the state of mind of the people towards HEC and the attitude of the people towards elephants.

The three day workshop combined two themes: Human-Elephant Conflict and Human-Elephant Coexistence in order to satisfy our major objectives, e.g. 1. To empower educators to confront the issue of HEC and a partial "solution" HECx (Human-Elephant Co-existence) and 2. to demonstrate innovative teaching and learning techniques designed to change human attitudes and behaviour for the better.

The programme started with an inaugural where in Mr. B Sugirtharaj Koilpillai IFS, TN Forest Department during the inaugural spoke the need to address the issue of HEC and ways to change the attitude of the people so that both the animal and human can coexist.



Participants filling pledge card and commit to do programmes

The participants, during the workshop, received a copy of the Elephant teaching guide, "Getting along with elephant" packets and a drama kit along with guidelines. The teaching guide, both in Tamil and English were made available for the participants. It has chapters and components for training with the theme of the Asian elephants and HEC. The packet in local language contain items constructed of paper and string which help teach younger children the basic concept of HECx at their level. These packets were given to the training participants in numbers sufficient for use in their own workshops after the training. Drama kit contain a range of masks and props for use by trainers with their target groups.

These materials helped the trainers to thoroughly familiarize with the themes of Asian elephants as such and with Human-elephant conflict. They also learned effective "ele-do's and ele-don't's" relative to elephant presence to convey to villagers for protecting themselves and family from elephants. They practiced a new way of teaching about elephants, while giving practical advice for people who are actually in danger. They learned to use drama, games, academic activities, maps, history, politics, personalities, stories, debates, demonstrations, arts, mock conferences and evaluations to convey pertinent information which



Learning elephant History through illustration

helped to change their attitudes and in the long run their behaviour. During and after the workshop the trainees are encouraged to think about these teaching tools, not just for HEC/HECx and elephants, but for other species and issues as well.

At the end of the workshop the participants committed to practice what they learned. The workshop also had an evaluation and the feedbacks of some of the participants are given below:

The aims of the workshop on HECx completely reached us; the techniques are enjoyable and can be used deliver the learned methodology; I am sure that the workshop on HECx will definitely help to safeguard the Asian elephants; The three-day workshop was successful, well planned; Created interest about getting along with elephants; I have not heard of similar programmes before. Now I am motivated to do many programmes about HECx; I learned more and I developed myself with positive skills; I myself had awareness about the elephants, conflict and coexistence; A new experience in my lifetime. Total session was conducted with positive approach and participants involvements; I overcome my inferiority complex through this workshop; I was really lucky to attend this programme. Next time I will teach about HECx in my school and to my friends; The 3 days workshop was very well planned. Contents and delivery executed properly to the audience. Materials are very useful, informative and simple; In this workshop we were trained well and the contents of the manual was fully taught. We all felt each other like brothers and sisters, as family members though out the workshop. Personally we introduced each other and also gathered other details.

A follow up workshop has been planned in early 2013 so as to understand the impact of this training that will help coexistence of human and elephants. We would like to thank Dr. B. Ramakrishnan, Dr. J. Ebanasar and the Principal of Govt. Arts College Dr. Gopi for their cooperation and assistance extended during the planning and execution of the project.



Dr. Gopi, Principal, distributing certificates