

Getting along with Elephants, West Bengal Educator Workshops

B.A. Daniel¹ and R. Marimuthu²

From 31 October to 09 November, three educator training workshops were held in Northern West Bengal on the topic of Human Elephant Conflict HEC interpreted as Human Elephant Coexistence HECx.



The first and third workshops took place at the Forest Interpretation Centre in Sukna (Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary) from

October 31- November 02 and 07-09 November 2008, each workshop lasting three days. The second workshop was held at the Forest Department Auditorium at Lataguri (Gorumara National Park) from 03-05 November 2008. Twenty five participants attended the first workshop in Sukna, 18 participants attended second workshop at Lataguri and 25 participants attended the third workshop at Sukna. The participants were active NGO's involved in education, forest department personnel, college students, teachers and volunteers from HEC areas of Northern West Bengal.

The workshops were sponsored by the Asian and African Elephant Conservation Fund of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior and various external partners. They were organised by Zoo Outreach Organisation ZOO and Wildlife Information Liaison Development WILD with partners World Wildlife fund, India, Calcutta (represented by Sangeeta Mitra) and NINE, Calcutta (represented by Arnab Roy), taking care of on-the-ground venue, logistics, and hospitality. The entire series was hosted by Forest Department of West Bengal. Elephant Family of UK had fully funded a

“Planning and Bonding” workshop between ZOO, WILD and the partners from four countries in March 2008. Twycross Zoological



Gardens funded surveys of each about 3 selected villages experiencing HEC in the four partner countries (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal).

Thus, preparation had taken a long time and rightly so, for HEC or HECx both are complicated issues.

The funding partners for these HECx individual country workshops along with those mentioned above were Elephant Family, UK; Columbus Zoo, Ohio; and Schombrunn Zoo, Vienna.



Trainers and Resource persons for the workshops were B.A. Daniel, Scientist and Educator, ZOO; R. Marimuthu, Education Officer, ZOO; S. Mamata, Trainer, Mysore School System DPRS and Volunteer, ZOO; Sangeeta Mitra, Trainer and Collaborator, WWF, India; Arnab Roy, Trainer and Collaborator, NINE, Calcutta; Dr. Heidi Riddle, Riddle's Elephant



Farm, Arkansas, and Sally Walker, Project Principle Investigator and Founder/ Trustee, ZOO. Dr. Jayantha Alahakoon, Vety. Surgeon and identified

translator for Sri Lankan workshops was a special guest and Intern Trainee. Dr. Riddle, in addition to being a Resource Person, also interned for conducting workshops in South East Asia.

HECx Getting along with elephants - teaching guide:

A teaching guide was developed for the West Bengal participants incorporating a new way of teaching and learning about the most burning issue existing in Asian elephant-bearing countries today. In the guide two issues such as Human-

elephant conflict HEC and Human-elephant coexistence HECx were combined in order to satisfy two major objectives: 1. To empower teachers of all kinds



¹ Scientist, ² Education Officer
Zoo Outreach Organisation



(schools, ngos, forest and wildlife personnel, natural history staff, extension of officers of all kinds) to confront and teach about the vexed topic of HEC and a partial "solution" to HECx

and 2. To demonstrate innovative teaching and learning techniques designated to change human attitudes and behavior for the better.

The guide has four parts: Tools to assess the audience, country chapters, getting along with elephants and know your elephants. As part of this a packet named 'Ele-kit', drama kit, finger puppet kits were also developed to use during the workshop.



First HECx Workshop

31 October-02 November, 2008

The first workshop was conducted at Nature Interpretation Centre, Sukna. A total of 25 participants took part in this workshop. Dr. Sangita Mitra, Senior Programme Officer, WWF West Bengal State Office welcomed the guests, organisers and participants. Ms. Sally Walker, Mr. Bhutia, Conservator of Forests and Mr. U.K. Nag, Assistant Wildlife Warden Ms. Heidi Riddle (Special Guest and Collaborator) took the dais. Ms. Sally Walker explained the objectives of this workshop with emphasis on Human Elephant Co-existence. Mr. Bhutia spoke about existing HEC problem in West Bengal and the need for the training in this region. Ms. Heidi Riddle in her talk highlighted the HEC issue which is universal in all elephant areas including



Africa and the need for suitable mitigation matures. Mr. Arnab Roy gave a gracious vote of thanks.



The workshop began with an introductory remark by Ms. Sally Walker and Dr. B.A.

Daniel. In order to help participants to get to know one another, a game called "Sound-off" was played which participants enjoyed very much. Other introductory games were explained to them for use with their own groups.

Two evaluation exercises, called "pre-attitude assessment" and "brain mapping" help assess what participants' learned in workshop or class were taught to the group. Also an energizer activity related to how elephants browse, graze and forage and another which involved writing one's own name in the air using different body parts were conducted.



As the continuation of this an overview of forests in West Bengal, in India, and important elephant habitats explaining the country chapter were delivered. In this country-specific

conservation initiative, e.g., "Project Elephant", about the elephant population and elephant reserves in India were covered. The last activity of Day one was concerned about the past and present distribution of Asian elephants; it was done with maps. Participants were divided into groups and each group given a set of past and current elephant distribution maps. They had to study the maps and compare the both maps to find out where Asian elephants were found 100 years ago and in the present. Thereby they could understand the dramatic decrease in Asian elephants in its home range countries.

The second day began with a recap of first-day activities. After that the major differences between African and Asian elephants were





explained by comparing their head, ear, trunk, skin, foot, tusks, height etc. After this session an activity involving mini dramas was conducted. Participants were divided into three

groups and each group supplied with a drama script and some rules to follow. The drama themes were: human elephant conflict, poaching/hunting, trade of elephant body parts and why does my village attract elephants. Forty five minutes were given to the groups to discuss, make props and rehearse. Five minutes were given for performance. All the groups had to conduct their drama by miming. When one group performed, other groups became the audience.

They were asked to watch keenly and summarise the sequence of the story line. All the three groups conducted their drama very nicely and all groups enjoyed the activity.



A guest speaker Mr. Subrata Pal Chowdhury, Technical Assistant (Wildlife), Forest Department of West Bengal gave a presentation on "Control of elephant depredation in West Bengal-Application of different technologies in the last two decades". In his presentation he explained about problems of the elephants, as well as elephant death for the past 20 years, compensation paid by the government for death or injury, property and crop damage, traditional methods to drive away elephants such as using *kunki* elephants, *mela shikar*- capturing the elephant, fire torches. He also discussed modern technologies to drive away elephants such as



electric fence, olfactory deterrents, red chill pepper smoke, and sound deterrents. He also talked about chemical capture of wild elephants, translocation, radio collaring and monitoring.

The next activity was "History of human-elephant relationship in Asia". In this, each participant was given a date card which starts from 2000 B.C to 2050 A.D. and contains information related to historical events of Asian elephants. Then they were asked to visualise the information as a drawing on paper. After stipulated time, the drawings were put up on a wall as an exhibition according to the chronological order. From this illustrated history of Asian elephants the participants came to understand the long history of human and elephant relationship.

To understand people's tolerance or intolerance level towards problem elephants, another human pest, the rodent was described, comparing various socioeconomic



and ecological factors that affect human tolerance. The last activity of second day was "Asian Elephants in Asian culture". The elephant has been used as a popular symbol in most cultures around the world. Elephants influenced human culture in many ways. It is hard to live without elephants. To explore these, participants were divided into groups, and each group was asked to look for examples in different categories of how elephants are used as a powerful symbol in human culture around the world. The categories were: advertisement, sports, stories & movies, literature, proverb, plant/animal/place name and miscellaneous. This activity was made into a competition and the participants were informed in the beginning that the group which came up with more examples would get a prize.



There was a big competition among the groups and they all came up with many examples.

On the third day, a recap of the second day's activity was done. Then a debate on "Human-elephant conflict and community participation" was conducted. In order to coordinate this, the participants were divided into groups and given roles of village-review committee, villagers, forest department personnel, tourism department officials, livestock department officials, NGO's and elephant researchers. This is a mock exercise to understand how a decision is taken to mitigate the human-elephant conflict which people have been experiencing for more than 20 years. In taking different roles, participants came up with their own solutions and presented to the village review committee. The next activity was "protect resources and save elephants". This activity dramatizes the crucial link between human population and species decline.

Ms. Sally Walker gave a presentation comparing the similarities and differences in human/monkey conflict and HEC, entitled Monkey Manners and elephant etiquette after the educational packets of the same name. In her presentation, first she described how to deal with monkey menace-how to behave with problem monkeys and likewise she related some "do's and don'ts" for the people living in elephant



areas and also getting along with elephants. She stressed over and over again, the differences between every single situation and the folly of giving explicit advice about this complex problem, as elephant behave differently in different situations, depending on many factors. Her main message was "don't put yourself in harm's way for a crop or hut...if you are alive and fit you can plant and build again. Avoid risks to life and

limb at any cost. Competing with an elephant is not smart."

Later a mock "conference" on protection and management of HEC affected areas in West Bengal activity was conducted. Participants were divided into different groups each representing different HEC areas of West Bengal. Some of the recommendations for the management and protection of HEC affected areas were given and also each group was given 100 marks. The group had to go through the recommendations and give marks to one recommendation or more. Last activities included helpful advice or "tips" for participants planning their own education programme. As in all workshops they were given materials to use in their education work so they could test their training with an audience in their own locality. It was also demonstrated how to use the Ele-Kit packet, drama kit and finger puppet kit. All the participants took two pledges, using the pledge card, relating what they would do in the next six months.



A post brain-mapping activity was conducted to know and compare with pre brain-mapping described earlier. This clearly showed how much knowledge they had acquired on elephants. They were asked to compare both pre- and post- brain maps. A workshop evaluation was also done and during the valedictory a few of the participants were asked to comment about the workshop and the experience that they gained. All of them told that this was the first time in West Bengal such kind of workshop was held. They showed confidence to carry this message to their localities and educate them. Ms. Sally Walker, Ms. Heidi Riddle and Mr. Nag distributed the certificates and 50-100 Ele-Kit packets to the participants.

Second Workshop 3-5 November, 2008

The second workshop was conducted at the Forest Department Auditorium, Lataguri. A total of 18 participants took part in this workshop. In the informal inaugural Ms. Sally Walker introduced the concept of active learning and shared her



experience of the first workshop at Sukhna. Ms. Heidi Riddle also spoke on this occasion. The agenda for the second workshop was the same as that of the first workshop, but in

addition some activities such as "Elephant characteristics" and "Asian elephants and Asian perspectives" were included. "Elephant characteristics" is an activity to understand the behavior of elephants. The participants were divided into three groups. Each group was given one activity to understand its behaviour. The activities were how many of us together equal an elephants' body weight?; Run as fast as an elephant and; trunk. Each group was assisted by a trainer and explained their activity to other groups.

To understand how people view elephants an activity named "Asian elephants and Asian perspectives" was conducted. People took different characters such as farmers, weight lifters, advertising executives, temple priests and devotees, film story writers, artists, politicians, song writer and elephant researchers and expressed their perceptions and views about elephants. During the valedictory Ms. Sally Walker & Ms. Heidi Riddle



distributed the certificates and 50-100 Ele-Kit education packets to the participants.

Third Workshop 07-09 November, 2008

The third workshop of this series was conducted at Nature Interpretation Centre, Sukna. About 25 participants attended this. The Agenda for third workshop was the same as the previous workshops and the participants were even more energetic than the previous two batches. During the inaugural, Mr. Arnab Roy welcomed all. Dr. B.A. Daniel spoke on this occasion and Mr. R. Marimuthu thanked all. The activities were conducted with the same zeal and received with much enthusiasm as well.

At the valedictory Mr. Nag, Assistant Wildlife Warden presented the certificates and 50-100 Ele-Kit

packets to the participants. Daniel thanked the West Bengal Forest Department for hosting the workshop and thanked all the staff who helped to conduct the workshop. He thanked all the institutional heads of the trainers and interns for permitting them to take part in the workshop, all the



sponsors particularly US Fish and Wildlife Service for the funding support.

The workshop series was concluded with a commitment from ZOO to return in about six months time and conduct a Refresher course for selected participants and maybe a few fresh persons who did not get an opportunity to attend this workshop.

that in about six months time, ZOO trainers will come back to West Bengal and conduct one or two Refresher Courses for selected participants and possibly a few fresh people who did not get a chance to attend this workshop. This series was the first of four, to be held in four countries, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh.

