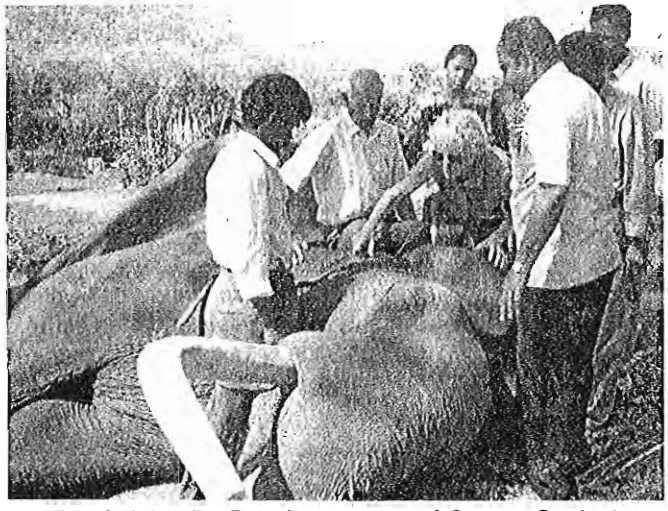
Dr. V. Krishnamurthy -- A requiem to a gentleman, conservationist and an elephant doctor

Arun Venkataraman*

There is an old Kurumba legend which says that when an elephant dies, all elephants in the vicinity trumpet loudly together as a mark of respect and sorrow for their fallen comrade. When I heard about Dr. Krishnamurthy's passing away on the morning of the 9th of December, I allowed myself to visualize for one brief moment, a scene where all elephants in the Theppakadu elephant camp in the Mudumalai Sanctuary responded in a manner befitting the demise of a dear and respected friend and benefactor. Knowing elephants well, I wouldn't be surprised if this actually happened.



Doc helping Dr. Bets Rasmussen of Oregon Graduate Institute to collect musth fluid and volatiles from a camp elephant. Theppakadu elephant camp, Mudumalai, April, 2002. Photo by Cheryl Nath.

Dr. V. Krishnamurthy was a forest veterinary officer who served the Government of Tamil Nadu for over three decades primarily concentrating on the health care of both domestic and wild elephants in the state. The passing of Dr. Krishnamurthy has left a deep void, which will be difficult to fill in the years to come. Dr. Krishnamurthy or Doc K., as he was fondly called, resurrected captive elephant health care and management to levels that have not been seen in Asia for the most of last century. It was under his guidance and attention that elephant camps in Tamil Nadu attained captive animal maintenance standards recognized internationally. Under his supervision the elephants at the Theppakadu elephant camp in the Mudumalai Sanctuary achieved longevity and fecundity levels unparalleled anywhere else. The successful raising of a large number of orphaned wild and domestic calves with regimens he specially developed was an achievement, which few captive elephant facilities have emulated.

Doc K visited all elephant camps in Tamil Nadu regularly, inspecting his charges with an eagle eye, to ensure that his rigorous feeding and medication protocols were strictly followed. Any suspected deviation causing a deterioration of the body condition of animal was effortlessly detected and resulted in a stiff reprimand of the mahout and a patient and thorough inquisition to ascertain the cause. It was very rare when his intervention did not result in the rapid improvement of the animal's body condition. Doc K. was one of few elephant veterinarians who insisted on regularly weighing his elephants. I still have vivid recollections of Doc K. triumphantly leading a procession of tuskers to the lorry weighing bridge at Thorappalli outside Mudumalai! "It's easier to weigh an elephant than you think" was his only comment when I stopped to investigate the unusual spectacle.

It is therefore not surprising that nearly all camp elephants recognized him, ambling up close and rumbling in pleasure on seeing an old friend and receiving the lump of jaggery he always seemed to have. Doc K. will also be missed by numerous people who work in the forests across India. These include foresters, conservation scientists, ecologists and of course, the forest tribes whom Doc K. loved and respected. To all of them Doc K. was a friend, confidante and a mentor with infinite patience to listen to and advise on personal and career problems, however trivial they appeared. He was a brilliant conversationalist and could wax eloquent on subjects ranging from Lord Byron's poetry to the intricacies of ancient Tamil literature. He was an excellent cook and the splendid cuisine in a number of

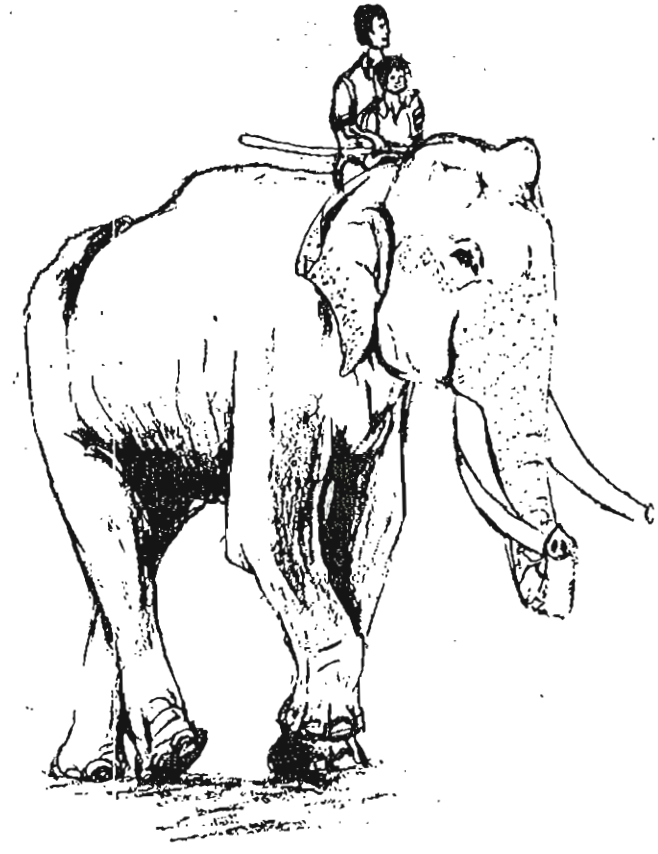
Another view of Dr. K. helping Dr. Rasmussen at Mudumalai, April, 2002. Photo by Cheryl Nath.

* Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre
Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science
Bangalore 560012, Karnataka

forest rest houses in Tamil Nadu and field research stations bear testimony to his frequent interactions with the resident cooks. Doc K. was a connoisseur of raw mangos and had his own selection of favourite trees in Mudumalai whose mangos made the best pickle in South India!

I always eagerly anticipated the arrival of Doc K. in Mudumalai during my field work there and within a few hours of his arrival, I'd be comfortably ensconced in a forest rest house with a cup of hot filter coffee (the brewing personally supervised by him), while listening to his heady cocktail of the latest bawdy jokes, his assessment of the political scenario in Tamil Nadu, the country and the world, his vivid descriptions of his last tiger sighting and his opinion of the *idlis* served up for tea at the rest house. Very often my frustrations caused by a long stint of seemingly unproductive field work were quickly and brusquely brushed aside with a long lecture on what being a man really means! Apart from providing a very pleasant and necessary interlude, Doc K. was a highly erudite scholar. Extremely well read and traveled, Doc K.'s grasp of wildlife conservation issues, wildlife diseases, health and anatomy and natural history was formidable. Despite scorning the idea that the culmination of scientific research is publications, Doc K. himself was an author of several scientific papers, his last, in the British journal *Nature*. A paper here is thought by many to be the pinnacle of scientific achievement. His work brought him many laurels and distinctions. He has been a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AESG) since its inception for the last 20 years. He was a reputed consultant for many western zoos on their programmes for captive breeding and management of Asian Elephants. He was awarded the prestigious Venu Menon Allies Award for Animal Welfare in 2000 and prior to his death, was actively involved in producing a seminal treatise on captive elephant management.

Doc K probably holds the world record for carrying out the maximum post-mortems on elephants. Each post-mortem, often carried out in the presence of veterinary students and scientists, was conducted with extreme clinical precision and accompanied by an excellent lecture on clinical anatomy delivered from the insides of dismembered carcasses. Incidentally Doc K. was a staunch vegetarian!

For all his achievements in the veterinary field Doc K. will remain in our hearts as an ardent conservationist. Since 1989, after pragmatically recognizing that elephant-human conflict is a serious problem in the country and problematic animals have to be removed to placate an increasingly antagonized forest dwelling communities, Doc K. intensely studied the various methods of capturing elephants from the wild. Along with other colleagues he pioneered the use of chemical immobilization of elephants for research and problem animal control. Since then Doc K has been repeatedly involved with the capture of problem elephants in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Despite his failing health in the last few years Doc K continued to accept requests from state governments for his assistance in capturing problem animals and subjected himself to extreme physical hardship to alleviate the misery of people affected by elephant-human conflict. As a possible result of this toil, Doc K was diagnosed with a serious cardiac ailment in 2000 and underwent a complicated surgery. Then followed a brief recovery when Doc K actively returned to his beloved forest haunts. It was only in April 2002 that we realized something was wrong again. Doc K., most unusually, cut short an assignment and returned home to Chennai never to leave again. The last few months must have been difficult for a man whose life dwelt around the forests and his giant subjects.

As the trumpets fade away, I honestly hope that Doc K.'s credo—dedication, sincerity and discipline in the field of conservation will be etched in our memories forever.