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**Status and management of Asian elephant in Bangladesh**

# Abstract

The elephant is now a critically endangered species in Bangladesh. About a hundred years ago, elephants were still abundant in most of the forests of Bangladesh, even in the Madhupur forests near Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh). In that time the number of wild elephants was estimated to be 195-234, with 83-100 of them being trans-boundary elephants. In 2008-2009, Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB) and Zoo Outreach Organization (ZOO) India, reported 100-120 wild elephants in Nalitabari of Sherpur and 50-70 in Durgapur of Netrokona, and 30-35 in Rangunia of Chittagong, based on a participatory rural appraisal and questionnaire survey. Beside this, there are 93 captive elephants in Bangladesh and its distribution is throughout the country related to circus party and hilly area for timber logging. Among the 17 government-owned elephants, 13 are engaged in hauling logs. Of the 93 captive elephants, 72 are used to haul logs, 17 are circus elephants, three are zoo elephants, and one is owned by Betbunia Police Station, Rangamati. Of the captive elephants, 55 are females and 38 are males. Of the captive elephants, 57 (27 males and 30 females) are under 30 years, of which 22 (15 males and 7 females) are under 10 years. It is studied that Habitat loss and fragmentation have had a severe impact on the wild elephant population in Bangladesh. A new threat to trans-boundary elephants is permanent fencing along international borders. Such fences built by India and Myanmar will seriously disrupt the regular movement of elephants between them and Bangladesh. There should be a compulsory nationwide, central elephant registry. Information on births, deaths, and transfers (including trading) of all domesticated elephants should be properly maintained. Therewith public awareness is also necessary to conserve these large herbivores to maintain the ecology.

**Keywords*:*** Endangered, WTB, ZOO, Captive, Trans-boundary, Ecology

# Introduction

The elephant, the largest warm-blooded terrestrial animal, is also an endangered species as a result of incessant competition with humans land, food and water. Therewith over population, tremendous growth of industrialization and agriculture production, the habitats of wild animals in the world is decreasing day by day.

In the early years of the eighteenth century, wild elephants were rich in number throughout the eastern and northwestern divisions of Rangpur (northeast). In that time they were frequently raided the harvested crop fields. Some of the landholders or *zamindars* kept tame female elephants as trap for capturing these wild elephants. In that time elephants were captured annually and gave it to the government as payment for land revenue. They were then sold by the revenue collector, and sometimes brought prices averaging only about £5 each. This practice, however, was later discontinued and the revenue was then invariably paid in cash. There was a very high mortality rate among these tribute elephants. Every year the tribute captured seventy or eighty. From them only seven or eight arrived at Rangpur. Due to high mortality, later the tribute was given up the capturing elephant and required to be paid in cash. In some places elephants were occasionally caught in pits. Elephants were also sometimes hunted and killed for ivory. Thus, gradually the number of elephant are going to be endangered.

About a hundred years ago, the number of elephant were available in most of the forest of Bangladesh, even in the Madhupur forests near Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh. In that time the number of wild elephants was estimated to be 195-234, with 83-100 of them being trans-boundary elephants (Chakraborty 1996; Islam 2006). In fact, In Dhaka there is a road called Elephant Road and it was used by elephants brought from Peelkhana (Islam et al., 1992), a royal elephant stable, located to the northwest of Azimpur, in Dhaka. There is also an area in old Dhaka called Mahouttuli, a locality where the mahouts of Peelkhana lived. Elephants were brought to Peelkhana from various parts of what was known then as “Bengal” for training before being sent to different parts of British India (Islam et al., 1999) where they were used by the British army to carry guns and for its commissariat. The principal non-military function of elephants was to remove logs cut from deep inside the forests. But eventually the British transferred their regular elephant-catching operations from Dhaka to Myanmar in 1900, because of the depletion of herds in the Garo Hills as a result of excessive capture.

On the other hand, Current distribution Resident wild elephants are present in the forest of Chittagong and Cox’sbazar (Islam 2006). Trans-boundary elephants occur in the north-east and south-east, with ranges overlapping neighboring India and Myanmar. In the north-east, elephants in Kurigram, Sherpur, Netrokona and Maulvi Bazar districts, have trans-boundary ranges overlapping the Indian states of Meghalaya and Assam (IUCN 2004; Islam 2006). In the south-east, some herds in the Chitagong Hill Tracts move to and from Mizoram state of India and some in the Teknaf area in Cox’s Bazar move to and from Arakan of Myanmar. The presence of non-resident elephants in Bangladesh coincides with paddy harvesting seasons, i.e. February- May and September-December.

Having been extirpated from most of the country, elephants are critically endangered in Bangladesh (IUCN Bangladesh 2000). Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and having a still growing human population, elephant conservation faces many obstacles. Lack of awareness has been identified as one of the most important challenges for natural resource conservation in Bangladesh (Chowdhury *et al.* 2011), which also effects elephant conservation. A survey of people in the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary found 49% willing to conserve elephants, l6% undecided, and 35% against their conservation (Islam 2006). In a survey of 388 people in four protected areas (Teknaf Game Reserve, Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary, and two Reserve Forests in the south-east and the northeast) almost two thirds stated that a protected area with wild elephant conservation would provide people with no value, while the remaining one-third agreed with the recreational value and the importance of elephant conservation for biodiversity and ecology (Sarker & Røskaft 2010). The distance people lived from a park (closer more negative) and the financial status (poorer more negative), were found to be the main predictors for attitudes of forest villagers towards elephant conservation (Sarker & Røskaft 2010).

 In the past, wild elephants were captured by *Kheda* (stockade) operations, which were first practiced in Bangladesh in 1868. The Forest Department started kheda operations in 1915. *Kheda* operations were stopped in Bangladesh in 1965 (Islam 2006). All wild elephants are now protected under the Bangladesh Wildlife Conservation (Amendment) Act of 1974 and cannot be hunted, killed or captured. The act has provision for the Chief Wildlife Warden to declare an elephant as a ‘rogue elephant’ and issue a special permit for destroying it. According to the Wildlife (Conservation) Act (Draft) 2011, the penalty for killing an elephant will be imprisonment for 2 - 7 years or a fine of Tk 100,000- 1,000,000 (US$ 1,420-14,200) or both, and for a repetition, imprisonment and a fine of Tk 1,200,000 (US$ 17,140) or both (MoEF 2011). The Act has been tabled at the parliament and sent to the Parliamentary Standing Committee responsible for MoEF for review.

Despite of this Act and regulation, public awareness is the crucial point for elephant conservation. Therewith, illegal business regarding elephant should be stopped. In Bangladesh such type of awareness programs and also monitoring of health has not provably seen. Although large number of elephant found in Chittagong Hill Tract and other parts of Bangladesh which are more prone to endangered due globalization and industrialization. Considering the above backgrounds the present study was under taken with the following objectives:

1. To know the current status of Asian elephant in Bangladesh
2. To know the decreasing rate of elephant in Bangladesh
3. To raise awareness among the all classes of people in Bangladesh to conserve the elephant and other wild animals

# 2. Materials and Methods

## 2.1 Study area and period

The study was conducted in some areas in Bangladesh as per convenience. As an intern student some areas of Chittagong, Bandarban, Khulna, Rangpur and Cox’s bazar were visited to collect information and photography during January 2015 to November 2015.

## 2.2 Communicating with several personnel and organization

In my study period I contacted with the Authority of Bangladesh Forest Department in several divisions to collect the valuable data regarding elephants. Therewith I also contacted with the some wild life conservation organization like Wild Team, Wildlife Trust Bangladesh to be enriched my data base about elephants. Beside this, I also contacted with the supreme authority of IUCN, Bangladesh for making a authentic data base regarding status of elephant.

## 2.3 Taking photographs

It was a very difficult task to taking photographs of wild elephant. It’s a life risky and time consuming work. Elephant normally remain in deep forest. So, there is a large chance to be affected be other carnivores. To take one snap we had to require more than 8 hours.However, some photographs were taken during study period from different spot.

## 2.4 Searching webs and printed materials

There are many web sites are available about Indian elephant. Some journals are also available with various studies or experiments on elephant. There are some books on elephant also written by some interested authors.

## 2.5 Observation

Observation was also used as a tool for studying about elephant. This facilitates to study their body characteristics, habitats, feeds and feeding, breeding, diseases etc.

# Results and Discussions

There are around 300-350 wild elephants in Bangladesh of which around 200 are resident and

100-150 have trans-boundary ranges. In 2003 the elephant number was estimated at 178 based on dung counts, and as 196-227 residents and 83-100 non-residents based on interviews and sightings (IUCN 2004). Non-resident elephants consisted of 8-10 in Rajibpur of Kurigram district, 40-45 in Nalitabari of Sherpur district, 20-25 in Durgapur of Netrokona district, and around 10 in the Sylhet forest division of the Maulvi Bazar district, (IUCN 2004; Islam 2006). In 2008-2009, Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB) and Zoo Outreach Organization (ZOO) India, reported 100-120 elephants in Nalitabari of Sherpur and 50-70 in Durgapur of Netrokona, and 30-35 in Rangunia of Chittagong, based on a participatory rural appraisal and questionnaire survey.

## 3.1 Threats

Habitat loss and fragmentation have had a severe impact on the wild elephant population in Bangladesh (Islam 2006). It is estimated that the national forest cover has been reduced by

more than 50% since the 1920s. Forests have undergone drastic reduction due to fuel wood and timber extraction and conversion to cropland (Gain 1998; Geisen 2001; Islam 2006). An estimate in 1990 revealed that Bangladesh had less than 0.02 ha per capita forest land, one of the lowest forests-to-population ratios in the world. Throughout the 1980s, introduction of advanced technologies, such as high yield varieties of rice, made it possible to expand crop yields without utilizing more land. This vertical expansion (more crop yield on the same area of land) has almost reached its limit. Consequently horizontal expansion into forests and wetlands is on the increase (Islam 2006). Crop depredations by elephants are on the increase in Bangladesh, during which people also get injured and killed. In 1997, 21 human and 2 elephant deaths were recorded and the economic loss caused by elephants through feeding and trampling of crops amounted to about US $ 102,000 in 30 incidents (Islam *et al.* 1999). In 2000, 17 people were killed and 15 injured by elephants. Three elephants were killed by local people in September and November 2001. Newspapers recorded the death of 7 elephants and 47 people from 2006 to 2011 and the Bangladesh Forest Department recorded the death of 37 elephants from 2003-2011 and 73 people from 2008 to 2010. The main threat to elephants in the northeast is disruption of their migration routes due to development (IUCN 2004). A new threat to trans-boundary elephants is permanent fencing along international borders. Such fences built by India and Myanmar will seriously disrupt the regular movement of elephants between them and Bangladesh. Another threat is monoculture (rubber and acacia) plantations in and around elephant habitats in the Bandarban district by the Forest Department and others. ‘Rohinga’ (refugees from Myanmar) encroachment of elephant habitats is another long lasting threat in the south-east. Demand for elephant meat and tusks in the south-east also pose a serious threat to elephants.

## 3.2 Management and HEC mitigation

About 2% of the country’s total area has been brought under protection through government

initiatives. Teknaf Game Reserve and Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary in the southeast were set up specifically to protect elephants. However, human-elephant conflict (HEC) still occurs within and around protected areas. Protected area management is inadequate due to lack of funds

and capacity. IUCN-Bangladesh has been working in elephant conservation since 2001, establishing baselines, conducting pilot interventions, mapping elephant distribution, HEC areas, elephant corridors and paths, and improving understanding on HEC issues at community and decision-maker levels. WTB in collaboration with ZOO, worked on human-elephant conflict resolution by conducting research and awareness programmes from 2008 to 2009 at Sherpur, Netrokona and Chittagong, and provided training and awareness workshops on human-elephant coexistence (HECx) and translated HECx manual to the local language (Bangla). In May 2004, WTB along with the Bangladesh Forest Department helped Indian foresters to successfully translocate three elephants from Gopalganj district of Bangladesh to India. These elephants came all the way from Jharkhand of India. In 2010, the Government of Bangladesh approved a compensation scheme for loses caused by elephants with US$ 1400 for loss of life, US$ 700 for physical injury and US$ 350 for loss of livestock, property, plants, trees, crops etc. (MoEF 2010). However, no one has yet got this money due to official formalities.

## 3.3 Captive elephants

The number of captive elephants in Bangladesh in 2002-2006 was 94 (Islam 2002, 2006; IUCN 2004). They were mostly used in the timber industry and circuses. Most were found in Maulvi Bazar district. Of the 94 elephants, 74 were log haulers (of 17 government owned elephants, 13 were log haulers), 17 circus elephants, 3 zoo elephants, and one was owned by Betbunia Police Station, Rangamati. There were 56 females and 38 males, with 57 (27 males and 30 females) under 30 years and 22 (15 males and 7 females) less than 10 years old. All circus parties are registered with the district commissioner’s office. The mahouts and the owners are largely ignorant of the legal status of their elephants and even the necessary diet for a captive elephant. Proper veterinary care is also absent with only the government-owned elephants receiving veterinary care. Some elephants are registered with the local administration although the registration of captive elephants is the jurisdiction of the Bangladesh Forest Department (Islam 2006).



 Fig: Distribution of elephant in Bangladesh

## 3.4 Registration, care and management

All the circus parties are registered with the district commissioner’s office. According to the circus parties, no separate registration is needed to employ wild animals in circuses. The mahouts and the owners are ignorant of the legal status of their elephants; they are even ignorant of the necessary daily diet for a captive elephant; proper veterinary care is also absent. Only the government-owned elephants receive good veterinary care. Some elephant owners claim that their elephants are registered with the local administration, but are reluctant to show the papers.

## Table 1. Partial record of elephants captured in Bnagldesh during the 19th and 20th Century

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Place** | **Number of elephant** **captured** | **Period of capture** |
| Dhaka hill (Madhupur) | 413 | 1868-76 |
| Chittagong | 85 | 1875-76 |
| Dhaka hill` | 503 | 1876-80 |
| Jayalla (Chunati, Chittagong) | 36 | 1938 |
| Sylhet | 3 | 1947-1962 |
| Chittagong  | 151 | 1947-1962 |
| Chittagong hill tracts | 320 | 1947-1962 |
| Ukhia (Cox’sbazar) | 10 | 1965 |
| Ramgar (Chittagong) | 2 | 1984 |
| Matiranga (Khagrachari, CHT) | 3 | 1985 |
| Kaptai (Chittagong Hill Tracts) | 3 | 1985 |
| Ramgar (Chittagong Hill Tracts) | 3 | 1985 |
| Edgaho (Cox’sBazar) | 1 | 1985 |
| Kaptai (Chittagong Hill Tracts) | 1 | 1985 |
| Total | 1534 |  |

### Table 2. Age and sex groups of the captive elephants of Bangladesh.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **Male`** | **Female** |
| 1-10 | 15 | 7 |
| 11-20 | 7 | 12 |
| 21-30 | 3 | 10 |
| 31-40 | 3 | 8 |
| 41-50 | 1 | 3 |
| 51-60 | 0 | 6 |
| 61-70 | 0 | 1 |
| 71-80 | 1 | 0 |
| Unknown | 6 | 8 |
| Total | 38 | 55 |

**Table 3. Captive elephants of Bangladesh**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Owner of elephant (age),** | **No. of** | **Name of elephant(s),** |  | **Source of procurement:** | **Type of** |  |
| **elephant(s),** | **Age** | **bought (price)/ bred/hired** |  |
| **profession and address** | **and sex** | **work** |  |
| **and sex** |  | **(cost)** |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Niranjan Sarker (48), circus | 4 (2 M, 2 F) | • Gopal (M) | 30 | Bought for Taka 475 000 in | Circus |  |
| business; The Lion Circus, |  |  |  | early 90’s from Kaptai, | work |  |
| Bardhan Para, Keraniganj, |  | • Chand (M) | 8 (born | Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) |  |  |
| Dhaka |  |  | 10.1.1992) | (when 1 US $ = c.Tk. 42) |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | Offspring of Gopal & |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | Chandrika |  |  |
|  |  | • Chandrika (F) | 25 | bought for Taka 475 000 in |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | early 90’s from Kaptai, CHT |  |  |
|  |  | • Rashmoni (F) | 2 (born Nov. | (1 US $ = Tk. c. 42) |  |  |
|  |  |  | 1998) | Offspring of 1 & 3 |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Basanta Babu (44), circus | 1 (M) |  |  | Bought from Maulvi Bazar for | Circus |  |
| business; The Sonar Bangla |  |  |  | c. Tk 400 000 | work |  |
| Circus, Keraniganj, Dhaka |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Kamal Ratan Sarker (45), | 1 (F) | Raj Laxmi (F) | 18 | Bought when young from | Circus |  |
| circus business; The Laxmi |  |  |  | Maulvi Bazar for Tk 500 000 | work |  |
| Narayan Circus, Bardhan Para, |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Keraniganj, Dhaka |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4.Bangladesh Forest Industries | 13 (4 M, 9 F) | • Raikhang Bahadur (M) | 28 |  | Logging |  |
| Development Corporation |  | • Sher Bahadur (M) | 15 |  | and lumber |  |
| (BFIDC) |  | • Sheth Bahadur (M) | 12 |  | operations |  |
|  |  | • Saikat Bahadur (M) | 8 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Lutchi Rani (F) | 26 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Bano Rani (F) | 39 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Mukti Rani (F) | 28 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Raj Rani (F) | 17 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Bijoy Rani (F) | 4 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Banosri Rani (F) | 3 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Santi Rani (F) | 2 |  |  |  |
|  |  | • Sova Rani (F) | Born on |  |  |  |
|  |  | • A female | 22.2.2000 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Police station, Betbunia, | 1 (M) | Sher Bahadur (M) | 75 | Caught from Teknaf forests | No specific |  |
| Rangamati, CHT |  |  |  |  | work |  |

# Conclusion

Elephant is the largest herbivores among the wild animal. In Bangladesh now it is listed as critically endangered animal. Habitat destruction and over growth of population is the main cause of decreasing elephant population in Bangladesh. Lack of awareness among people about the importance of elephant in nature is also a crucial fact to be decreased in their number.

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# Biography

This is Kazi Muhammad Fakhrul Islam Gundu from Moheshkhali Island at Cox’sbazar. He completed his Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination in 2006 with GPA-4.38 from Kalarmar Chara High School, Moheshkhali, Cox’sbazar and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination in 2008 with GPA 4.60 from Hathazari University College, Chittagong. Currently he has been doing his internship programme which is the compulsory of DVM degree under the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Chittagong Veterinary and Animal Sciences University. His favorite hobby is playing football and explores the unexplored. He feels massive interest in the research of wildlife medicine and conservation.