

Living with Elephants in Bhutan

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Editor's and author's Note :

Our Human Elephant Coexistence workshops contain many of the same activities that we don't change much, so our reports have tended to be kinda similar. There is just so often you can tell about our workshops without being very repetitive. Hence, these feature articles, newly introduced by moi, ... hopefully will be more diverse with more about the country and the participants. If you are a new reader, please access our previous magazines for last three or four years and you will find plenty of reports of our active learning workshops.

Bhutan is a South Asian country bordering India in the North East and sharing Manas Wildlife Sanctuary. Bhutan is one of the ... if not THE ... most blessed countries in having a very high percentage of forest cover, 72+%. Bhutan is also a very forward-looking country as evidenced by their solid democracy, high percentage of educated people and their groundbreaking "happiness index" for their people.

I wanted to visit Bhutan for a long time, since 1992, at least, as I was planning a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) workshop for Asian Rhinoceros in Jaldapara WLS, India and wanted



Bhutan Airport ... amazing ... the whole country looks like this : beautiful buildings and a mountain background. I felt like kissing the tarmac. And nobody cared that that I took photos of the airport !

to invite representatives from Bhutan wildlife and forestry and also to investigate accommodation for some of our foreign visitors. However, I could not find the way to obtain a visa and so could not go. Later, while attending a planning meeting in Jaldapara and kicking around with forest staff who would be involved in the workshop, a call came from some tiny village nearby the Bhutan border. The caller requested a forester to come and collect an orphan bear cub who'd been rescued and taken (for lack of any other alternative) to the

town jail. There was only one cell in the jail and the young bear was very cranky so no criminal quite deserved that punishment. The jailer usually had to take in some drunks on the weekend, which he could not do because of the bear cub. So DFO Jaldapara and helpers had to go and they kindly took me along for the ride. While there, one of them suggested a short drive to Bhutan so against my better judgment and vociferous protests, I visited Bhutan visaless !

I had never confessed this crime before so I was happy to visit Bhutan and publically apologise for being kidnapped and entering the country illegally. This time I made sure to get a visa and visit under the official auspices of the Nature Conservation Division. I even managed to forget this lapse until Sonam introduced me and told the group it was my *first* visit to Bhutan.

Visiting Bhutan can be challenging if you plan to move around in the Southeastern part of the country or enter by road from Siliguri or Bagdogra with a ton of educational materials and/or you are on a tourist visa. In order to get from



Believe it or not, this was material for ONE workshop. The other packets had been left in Phuntsoling to await our workshop in Gedu.

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One of the several Takin which are on display at the Takin Preserve just outside Thimphu. Wait till you see the Takin colts (colts?, cubs?, heifer's?, kids?...)

some places to others in Bhutan you have to travel again from Bhutan back to India and then again back to Bhutan as the sharp winding mountainous curves and routes do not permit direct travel. As you can imagine this gets very interesting for foreigners who need multiple entry permits to India and Bhutan both, and even for Indians, who can enter without a visa as such, but who, like our office people are carrying truckfuls of cardboard boxes full of educational packets, manuals, and other educational material.

To further complicate matters, the Government of India, in its infinite wisdom and concern for the security and safety of its citizens, recently passed a directive that visitors to India on a tourist visa had to observe a two-month "cooling off" period before coming back. This directive has not been very well publicized and you hear of it first at the check in desk of any western airport, which will refuse to board you if you haven't sufficiently "cooled off"! Our elephant specialist, Dr. Heidi Riddle, who had a 10-year tourist visa, heard of this for the first time at the border of West Bengal and was told she had to go to the Indian Embassy

in Bhutan and get a special permission to be able to return to India the way she had come. The alternative would be either to stay in Bhutan (not so bad!) or buy a one-way ticket back to USA (very expensive).

Despite all these seeming irritants, we were all so happy to bring our HECx training to Bhutan and so flattered by the welcome given by our Bhutanese colleagues, that it was easy to take it all in stride. Well, it was easy for me ... I have a business visa (no cooling off for

that) and I flew directly into Paro Airport nearby Thimpu and kicked back, visiting wildlife officials, touring the Takin Preserve (yes, Takin!), shopping and waiting for my unfortunate colleagues, Daniel, Marimuthu and Heidi who came by road and spend anxious hours in government offices. Tsk!

The first workshop was conducted in a village called Lobesa about two hours (**if you don't stop**) from Thimpu at the Forest Training centre, located a short distance from the town. This is a first class Training Centre and was a perfect venue. The second workshop was held at Gedu, another small mountain town about four hours distant from Thimpu, (again, if you don't stop) also over very narrow two lane roads, some newly paved and widened and some not. Despite the extreme curves, the beauty of the mountains and thick vegetation, rock faces and grandeur overwhelmed or at least balanced any attacks of vertigo. It is a rare opportunity to spend four hours surrounded by lush hills and mountains without even a few feet of straight road!

Coming back to "**if you don't stop**", we did stop several times en route to Lobesa (necessitating a 5 hour journey instead of two hours) once, ostensibly to buy cheese -- dried yak cheese, which I thought would be very good for my high protein diet! However, this cheese is so dry and so hard that you have



Dolcha, a spiritual stopover, en route up the mountains



Dried yak cheese (the little white squares on strings hung up on posts) is a good idea for travel. It is definitely an acquired taste however.

to hold it in your mouth for a very long time in order to chew it. That wouldn't be so burdensome but for the fact that it doesn't taste very good. We all tried it and decided it was not for us while our hostess Sonam laughed at our discomfort. Heidi and I admired the appearance of the small squares of cheese with red rind. I thought it might be profitable to buy in bulk, drill holes in their centres and string them into "survival" necklaces which people trekking in remote areas or otherwise submitting themselves to danger of starvation might appreciate. Alas, we didn't follow through ... the technical problems of removing the squares one at a time to eat was challenging and we weren't sure people would eat it even to save their lives! We also stopped at Dochuca, a dramatic spiritual centre which has 108 stupa's, the small room-like structures which are for worship, perhaps hundreds of the many coloured small flags worshippers string between trees, and hundreds of small offerings in the form of statues crowding the narrow ledges on the walls. This is a popular rest and worship spot about half way between Thimpu and Lobyesa. We also appreciated the small roadside stupas constructed so that fresh

running water ran through them.

Another stop to viewing a "work in progress" Botanical Park was also a real treat. This unique park has been developed and recently opened by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest. There is an excellent interpretation



Bhutan has 46 species of Rhododendrans which are native to the country and have inspired author's and poets to wax eloquent about their dramatic beauty.

centre and many plantings but it will be some time before the park is truly completed. Some of the appreciable features include the "art" of the stone decoration ... this is not carving but a combination of different sizes and colours of rocks and huge stones to form impressive ornamentation or naturalistic barriers in the park.

Another is the 46 species of rhododendrons native to Bhutan have been planted there. Unfortunately we missed "rhododendron season" by a short time but we got a hint of what was to come by seeing the earlier blooming red and white rhododendrons. Several large man-made ponds were a study in dramatic beauty as they reflected the surrounding trees in their mirror surface. It was hard to pull ourselves away but the sun was going down and no one of us visitors wanted to whiz around those mountain curves in the dark for too long.

When we planned the HECx workshops a couple of years ago, we didn't know that Bhutan had problems with elephants and had not originally included them. In fact, although they don't have nearly as many elephants as



Sonam Choudan, Senior Forester, speaks to Sangay, Taxonomist at HQs for the Department who took me to the Takin Preserve and to his taxonomic exhibits.

India or Sri Lanka, in fact, they have many migrating elephants FROM India (mostly Assam and W. Bengal). Nonetheless, any death or injury from elephant conflict and any crop spoiled is serious. Bhutan is a small country so any human animal conflict makes an impact. A number of species have caused distress, such as leopard or panther coming after livestock and sometimes injuring human beings, black bears, leaf and grain eating ungulates, etc. It is a major policy of the Bhutan government to address these issues effectively. When we learned of this some months ago, we offered the Nature Conservation Division the workshops and they enthusiastically agreed.

Mrs. Sonam Choden, Senior Forest Officer in the Nature Conservation Division of the Dept of Forest and Park Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests was one of our teaching team as well as our host and coordinator. She was kind to write the concise yet

thorough Bhutan chapter in our HECx manual and also prepare a detailed Power Point presentation on conservation and HEC in Bhutan specifically for the workshops. She relates that there is an estimated 2000 sq. km of elephant habitat with a resident population of 60-100 elephants. Elephant is a legally protected species occurring now in Royal Manas NP, Phipsoo WLS, Khaling WLS and their several corridors. There are also seasonal migrants, which periodically trek between Bhutan and India. It has been estimated that there is habitat to hold 100-300 elephants in Bhutan; the total population (including migrants) has been estimated from 250-500. Systematic counts have not been done but this is on the ele-conservation agenda of the NCD. Human elephant conflict is a



Participants draw a History of elephants, learning much about the dynamics between humans and pachyderms in the process



A drama about villagers and elephants

relatively recent phenomenon with significant cropland destroyed by elephants in 2005 and 2007. Most of the damage is caused by migrating elephants from W. Bengal and Assam, India. In Bhutan itself the cause of conflict is development, expansion of agriculture, resettlement, habitat fragmentation, competition with livestock grazing and/or because the traditional migratory path of elephants between Bhutan and India has been impacted.

We were lucky to meet many of the senior officers of the Nature Conservation Division during our stay and



Mapping exercise at Lobesa. Participants get to “see” shrinking habitat

also to have Sonam Choden accompany us and help with the training. Sonam had taken our Teachers for Tigers training and also participated in a ecosystems and habitats teaching workshop as well. She also hosted and facilitated a ZOO organized Small Mammal Field Techniques Training workshop a few

months ago. Some NCD officers attended the HECx workshops from a few hours to the entire three day event.

The Human Elephant Coexistence workshops we have been conducting are based on a set of teaching tools in a Manual called “Teachers for Tigers” which was originally developed by a team of educators at Wildlife Conservation Society WCS, Bronx, New York, led by Dr. Tom Naiman. As we have developed other Manuals ourselves with different themes, (hoolock gibbon, dancing bears [completed] and climate change and amphibian crisis [pending]) we have added our own ideas and innovations. Generally we try and present a range of activities so that every participant has a chance of learning techniques with which he or she can reach their most likely audience, regardless of their age or level of literacy.

Every workshop begins with the first part of a lesson or technique to evaluate or assess what the participants have learned. This is very important of course, as there is no point conduct a workshop just for fun. Every activity in the workshop carries a lesson relevant to the theme. At various points in the workshop when participants seem to be getting dull, such as after lunch, we conduct theme related “energizers” which overcome lassitude and also teach a lesson. Only a few sessions are didactic, such as taxonomy or morphology of Asian and African elephants. For that one we are thinking to make learning cards on the different characteristics from which games and different activities can be made.

We rely a great deal on drama, which carries a powerful emotional impact, despite the humorous manner in which it is carried out. Sometimes the dramas are created solely by participants on a theme



Group photo at Lobesa



Decorative stone work ... not carved or anything ... just arranged to show its natural beauty at the Botanical Park



Interview with Community leaders, discussing how to balance love of God/Buddha when his representative, the Elephant behaves so unloveably

given them and sometimes we assign stories about elephant conflict which have actually taken place and reported in the press. These are very popular, as are the Role Playing exercises mimicking a community meeting, a citizens debate or the like.

I'd like to describe two activities which carry a lesson about elephants that helps to change the

attitudes of people towards them. One is called an "Illustrated History of Elephant" in which participants are each given a slip of paper with a date and an event pertaining to elephants on it. They are asked to illustrate the event on a sheet of paper and explain their drawing to the class before putting it up on the wall in order of date. After everyone has put up his drawing it is clear that elephants have been

around a long time (longer than us) and that human beings have created much crowded conditions which cause problems with elephants.

Another activity is Mapping, in which participants work with illustrations of continental areas over history and can see how much habitat elephants have lost over the centuries. After a few such activities, participants who came full of anger and resentment towards elephants start to see a different side of the issue.

At the Gedu workshop, during a discussion it emerged that village people, although they live near the forest, did not necessarily have certain kinds of knowledge of animals. I thought villagers and farmers would have these skills but this is not so, as we learned at Gedu. They need to know how to avoid an elephant by making themselves invisible and inaudible and how to sense the animal's presence by listening for its obvious moving and body sounds. They need to learn, if they do not know, techniques on how to stay "downwind" of an elephant so he doesn't sense their presence, or how to recognize fresh tracks and dung and judge which way they are going, etc. There are many such things people need to know about wild elephants and their habits and can learn from the field biologists who study them. Even kids could benefit by earning such techniques.

In our initial stages of planning the workshop approach and process, we looked for conflict literature for youngsters and found no genuine educational literature on how to avoid conflict or even about conflict. There were only attractively illustrated books on how wonderful elephants are which didn't help at all. We needed an approach which did not hesitate to confront the issue but also held some solutions. There seemed to be no solutions really ... the elephants were so smart they could figure out what people were up to and get around it. Our education team members, Daniel and Marimuthu interviewed some villagers from three different areas and they reported different



Group photo at Gedu ... Getting Along with Elephants

versions of how both humans elephants react and behave. It began to look as if there was less consistency that one would imagine, that they behaved more in a random fashion.

Thus in our planning workshop we concluded that there was, actually, no "solution" as such except to stay out of the elephants' way to the extent possible and keep him out of your area. We decided that coexistence would be our approach since people seemed to be so careless and took such risks with elephants. It seemed the best way to survive ... to give the elephant the right of way. It turned out that no one else working in HEC was taking that approach so we adopted it. Later we came to understand that some of the people had become careless and irresponsible due to their dependence on the forest or wildlife department for compensation, rescue, translocating the elephants, etc. They had forgotten their old traditional ways. Also we found that villagers had their own techniques learned from their ancestors, before there was anyone to compensate or rescue. We learned that the villagers had many techniques for avoiding conflict, but many of them could only be described as "mystical" rather than mechanistic. These methods relied on the elephant's good will if you held less aggressive attitudes and behaviour. We included these tips in our manual and hoped for the best.

In our workshops we have met people who reinforced this approach. In Bhutan there were several community leaders or village headmen who do farming themselves and also guide the other farmers and villagers. One afternoon we caught hold of Sonam

to translate and gathered these community leaders on the lawn. First I asked how long they had lived in their present site, because in other places it was the people who had lived in the same place for many decades and even centuries who had the most



ZOO Crew in Bhutan dress

tolerance for elephants. None of the three had lived very long in their current location ... two had been resettled from elsewhere. What I really wanted to know, however, was how they, as traditional Buddhists, balanced their love of the animal which represents Lord Buddha with the fact that the same animal commits very cruel acts. They were all willing to talk about this, and admitted distress at times over this contradiction. But they told us that in coping with elephant visitations, they had tried the more retaliatory methods of repelling elephants, e.g. using methods which frightened and/or hurt the elephant. All said those methods didn't work well in the long term because the elephants could remember who hurt them and responded in kind. They had all decided that coexistence, including doing kind acts and embracing compassion, was a better way to go. They were very happy to find a training which had been to many countries that reinforced their same conclusions.

Mr. Ugyen Norbu from Umling Block, Sarpang District told of trying all the mechanistic methods earlier, but now actively courts the elephants by appealing to its higher nature. They are planting paddy and other items on the border of their habitat, the place where the elephants reach first. He has urged his village people not to cause injury or pain or to upset the visiting elephants, calling upon villagers' compassion for these behemoth animals who "had nowhere else to go". The villagers are not adverse to this approach; on the contrary, they seem to relish it. They are happy to allocate some food especially for the elephants and try to supply something for them often, Mr. Ugyen said.

B.B.Gurung of Langchenphu Block, Samdrupjongkhar District (South east) also related that he had come to the same conclusion after trying hurtful methods to discourage elephants. His block has begun a community forest with facilities both for human beings and elephants. He has also discussed with his constituency and it is

agreed among them that retaliating against the elephants is a "no win" situation whereas treating them with compassion seems to prevent violence.

Gomchen Wangchuk of Dekiling Block, Sarpang District of South central Bhutan has also spoken to his constituency about this problem, advising them to be compassionate. He related that all agreed, in the end, that discouraging elephants through harsh methods resulted in more visits and more destructive acts. His group is also following a method of co-existence and report that the problem, while it has not disappeared entirely, has diminished.

These participants told us that our workshop, with its overreaching theme of avoiding injury or death through coexistence is very much in line with what they do and feel, and is very reinforcing of their current methods. They will share this message with other communities to co-exist with elephants and also use schools to further educate the people about it.

For the Gedu workshop we picked up two "interns" (Tshering and Sonam) from the previous one, who assisted with teaching some of the exercises to prepare them better for teaching others.

They are from "Happy Valley", an incipient NGO trying to get registered. Their specialty is teaching about conservation issues using drama, puppetry and similar activities. We felt this was a match made in heaven for us so we gave all facilities for them to learn as much as possible. They will be helping the Nature Conservation Division carry out conservation education throughout Bhutan. Each participant got 100 copies of the Ele-kit packet to use in starting their own programmes.

I left the workshops early so that I could reach my office in time to finish my projects. Meenakshi Nagendran, the USFWS staff in charge of the Elephant Conservation programme visited our workshops for the first time seemed pleased with the result. She also gave a presentation on the second evening to appraise people about the opportunities available in USFWS, explaining who and how to apply for grants, etc.

All of us felt sad to leave Bhutan and look forward to return at the earliest possible opportunity. It is truly one country, which has prospered in the right ways by following a right way of life and of thinking characterized by good values and simplicity.

