

# Getting along with Elephants in *Sumatra, Indonesia*

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## Sick and Tired !

ZOOS' PRINT readers are probably sick and tired of reading reports of these active learning educator workshops! Even I, P.I. of the projects, must confess that I can't even bear to proofread these reports now. My attention spans about one paragraph, if that, and then wanders to thinking about something to eat perhaps, or another career choice definitely, or what to wear today. If I feel like that, how are our readers managing? Although the theme and taxon groups change, the basic material of the games and activities sound exactly the same.

So for this report I decided to take over and see if I can make the document a little more interesting or, at least, different. Our poor Marimuthu spent the New Year's day in the office writing up this report. Even he has changed the format a bit, but it is not enough for me. The same old tension, impatience and finally rage torment me as I read of the agenda and introductions and various games and dramas.

If you are on site, running the workshops, it is not so bad, no matter how many times you do it because your parental instincts take over and you see each workshop as a brand new creation. And it is new, because it is in a new place with new trainees involved with different responses. Still when I have to go and monitor these workshops as is the duty of the P.I., I have many bad moments (hours, days), exacerbated by the fact that we never now conduct anything in English.

Or maybe it is just me, an old curmudgeon who never liked innocence over black humour. But when teaching about Human Elephant Coexistence, everybody has to have a certain tolerance of black humour or they would never make it through a workshop. There is really nothing at all entertaining or funny about HEC and even HECx, yet within no time at all, our participants are creating dramas and mock town meetings, stories, debates which are just hilarious. Some of the dialogue is so funny that it cannot be properly delivered, as participants are falling all over one another with laughter ... at themselves and the totally unfunny situation. This is therapeutic I think !

Talent scouts for film would do well to attend our workshops as observers. Some of the actors in the dramas, just ordinary folks -- teachers, ngos, forest rangers, local people (potential and actual victims) give such amazing performances in these short skits I am sure they would be snapped up as potential cinema and t.v. stars!

So what am I complaining about having to visit exotic countries rural areas and sit around laughing a lot? Well I will maybe get to that, or maybe I should just appreciate my opportunity to be there as P.I. without having to do any of the dog work and with the ability

to sneak off my room and hide out with my computer or a book during the tedious parts.

## Background:

Let me remind readers who just started reading these reports that these "active learning" teacher-training workshops were introduced to us in 2003 by Dr. Tom Naiman, lead author of the first iteration of this genre of workshop, Teachers for Tigers. Tom and his team spent eight years at Wildlife Conservation Society WCS, International Programmes (off and on) developing the Manual of activities which was centered around Tigers. Tom had contacted me from time to time with some questions about tigers in India and people working to save them and I gave some information. Tom popped up one day (via email) stating that the Manual was complete, funds had been raised and they were looking for a partner to help them deliver the teacher training workshops. There was a strong hint that the partner should be Zoo Outreach Organisation. Despite my adventurous spirit, I can be deadly conservative sometimes and I almost refused this great offer to work with one of the most active and prestigious zoo/wildlife society ngo's in the world, at their expense and with us calling a lot of the shots and adding our own ideas.

So we conducted two workshops, one in Coimbatore and one in Chennai with Tom and his assistant Nalini Mohan. We learned to introduce and conduct the exercises and to bring our own teaching elements into the mix. Then for the next workshops, with the help of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we took over. We still asked Tom and Nalini to come and run the workshops for some time but we did everything else. Soon it occurred to me that the model could easily be adapted to other species and themes which required education of this nature -- effective and fun -- and we adopted and adapted from then on.

So began our immersion in active learning, targeting species that we were working on in some way, such as Hoolock Gibbon, Sloth Bears, and, now, not just Elephant Conservation or Human Elephant Conflict as a theme but Human Elephant Coexistence ... not a straightforward theme ... often a controversial theme.

Never a time do we go for a workshop when I don't think "THIS TIME, we are going to be attacked. THIS TIME, it is not going to work. THIS TIME, participants are going to say "HOW DARE you tell us to coexist like our ancestors did, and to take personal responsibility for our survival, and to be careful, to give right of way to elephants, to avoid confrontation". Yet every time, so far, we are heroes, and there is humor, good will, hilarity and total acceptance of our methodology. **Go figure!**