

Asian Elephant Conservationists go to Africa

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In an unprecedented move a group of Asian elephant conservationists were taken on a tour of the conservation and research sites in Kenya. The group consisted of thirteen individuals from eight Asian countries. The writer, Sri Lankan elephant conservationist and Managing Trustee of the Biodiversity & Elephant Conservation Trust in Sri Lanka, organised the tour which lasted two nearly weeks.

The tour started with a visit to the Amboseli Game Reserve where Cynthia Moss has been conducting long-term research on elephant identification, movement, behaviour etc. The Group was briefed on the data collection and recording methods. They were also briefed on the work done with the Masai community who owned the lands on the boundaries of Amboseli and whose livestock entered the reserve regularly and sometimes were killed by the elephants. In other instances the elephants went out of the reserve and killed livestock that got in their way.

The Group then moved to Laikipia where a tracking programme for elephants and some other wild animals was being conducted by Max Graham and Nick Georgiadis at the Mpala Research Center.

The elephant radio-tracking in Laikipia is a Save the Elephants project conducted by Max Graham. It is supported by Safaricom, the local family member of the Vodafone Group and is part of a wider ecosystem tracking project that takes in the whole of the Samburu / Laikipia MIKE site. It is intended to contribute to an elephant management strategy for the District and for the Region under the auspices of the Kenya Wildlife Service. This will seek to safeguard vital dispersal areas and corridors for elephants. The strategy will build on a draft submitted by Nick Georgiadis of the Mpala Research Centre for containing "conflict". More than 90% of the elephants' range is outside officially "protected areas", but with the positive moves towards more conservation on private land, group ranches and trust lands, and the proliferation of small ecotourism lodges, there is hope that the elephants future can be safeguarded in this vast region of highly complex land uses. Close collaboration with many other like minded stakeholders, including the Laikipia Wildlife Forum (an umbrella body that includes all sorts of land owners from small holders to large ranches), will hopefully help bring this about.

The Group also visited the field sites where various elephant repellent trials were being tried out. The Laikipia district consists of small farms and large ranches and is a corridor, which is used by elephants and other animals.

From Laikipia the Group moved to Samburu where they spent three days at the Save the Elephants Research Centre. This center carries out a number of research projects and is headed by Iain Douglas Hamilton.

In Samburu the group was introduced to the positive relationship between elephants and people engendered both by tourism and by the Samburu Culture which is a good example in Africa. They were not only shown "conflict" but also shown models of "coexistence".

Onesmas Kahindi gave a detailed briefing on the work that he is doing under the Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) program. Kenya has four MIKE sites and the data that is being gathered gives information on elephant deaths, births, population trends, instances of poaching and ivory trade routes.

Daniel Lentipo took the Group to the field and demonstrated the manner in which elephants are tracked from the radio collars that have been put on some. The project uses a variety of collars – GPS, GIS and GSM. Daniel also showed the Group how the data that is gathered is stored and converted to information.

Emmanuel Hema, who is from Bukina Faso and a researcher at the Save the Elephants Research center, gave a briefing on his work, which is to try and identify individual elephants in Mali, from hundreds of photographs of the 400 elephants in that country and also see whether there are similarities in the behaviour of the elephants in Mali and Samburu.

The whole of the third day was spent with Iain Douglas Hamilton who demonstrated the tracking of the radio-collared elephants through the satellite and on the computer. He uses various computer models to track their movements throughout the year. Interestingly he is also able to determine the speed at which the elephant moves in various places and under different situations.

The afternoon was spent with Iain in the field studying the methods used to identify the individual movements of the elephants. Iain Douglas Hamilton also showed how the presence of elephants could be used by the local community for ecotourism that benefits both the humans and the elephants.

The final leg of the tour was to the Trans Mara where Noah Sitati continues to conduct a seven year human-elephant conflict mitigation project. Various methods are being tried out to repel elephants in this area where elephants come up from the Masai Mara and destroy the crops that the Masai have cultivated in the corridors used by elephants.

Jayantha Jayewardene, who organized this tour and the very successful Symposium on Human Elephant Relationships and Conflicts in Colombo, Sri Lanka said that the tour proved to be extremely useful to the participants and that they have learnt many elephant conservation strategies which they can adopt and adapt in the conservation programmes in their countries.

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