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Sri Lanka wildlife conservation, wasgamuwa elephants, people, human elephant conflict, leopard bear research volunteer

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Sugarcane for all its sweetness, spells death for wild elephants. Killed at the Pelwatte Sugar Industries sugarcane plantation, Handapanagala.

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Over the past ten years nearly 200 elephants have died annually, as a result of conflict with humans in Sri Lanka! This is considering that man and elephant have co-existed in the island from pre-historical times, and over the past 3,000 years the elephant has been considered an important and venerated cultural and religious icon. Used as a beast of burden, for war, and still used for ceremonial purposes, the elephant is an ingrained artifact of Sri Lankan culture. The tragic decline of the Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*) began with colonization of the island by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. Trapped and shipped as a commodity, shot for ivory and sport, and later decimated to establish large coffee and tea plantations, elephants in Sri Lanka have been on a downhill path for the past 3 centuries. Post colonial independent Sri Lanka did not make the situation any better for the elephant. For the past 50 years since independence from the British, successive Sri Lankan governments have pushed a mandate to make the country self sufficient in agriculture. An increasing human population, now nearly 20 million, also puts pressure on the government to open more land for agriculture. Sri Lanka is a tropical island situated off the southern tip of India and is a little larger than the State of West Virginia. Yet the island has a diversity of habitats that harbors a diverse array of fauna and flora mostly endemic to the island. With over 450 species of birds, many species of mammals, reptiles and having the world's highest density of frogs per kilometer, the island is indeed a naturalist's paradise.



Ill-advised government mandated clearing of land without due consideration to ecological consequences has led to escalation of human elephant conflict. Illegal encroachment into remaining habitat left for elephants which goes ignored by the government exacerbates this situation. The present human-elephant conflict is a new phenomenon, and is mostly caused by the lack of understanding of the island's largest mega-herbivore. Habitat degradation, fragmentation, and utilization all contribute to this conflict. Where ever human settlements have encroached and abut on elephant habitat there is intense conflict. Farmers who have been translocated from areas where they have not lived in the presence of elephants show a marked inability to co-exist, and to successfully cultivate in the presence of elephants. Many such farmers end up in abject poverty due to elephants frequently raiding their crops. Poaching for ivory is systematically eliminating the tuskers which constitute seven percent of the male Sri Lankan elephant population. Experts believe that at the turn of the 19th Century there were 20,000 elephants in Sri Lanka. The present population is less than 3,500 elephants. In 1998 alone over 350 elephants were killed in Sri Lanka. At this present rate of mortality the prognosis for the Sri Lankan elephant is indeed bleak.



Top Right: This majestic tusker from the Anuradhapura District was shot on the right foot by a shotgun which broke all the wrist bones in its front leg.

**Above: It died from the infection caused by the gunshot wound.
The killing of elephants still goes on.**

The Department of Wildlife Conservation is using measures to resolve some of the conflict, but these are mostly ad hoc methods, inadequate and not focused on the real issues. They have so far tried immobilizing and relocating problem bulls that habitually raid crops, and held drives to move large herds of elephants from their traditional range to make room for agriculture. Without a proper long term plan for the conservation and management of the Sri Lankan elephant, these efforts are ineffective in resolving the human-elephant conflict, abating the tide of elephant deaths, or ensuring the elephant's survival in this millennium. Today elephants die a horrendous death. Shot with mostly home made muzzle loaders, elephants suffer for prolonged periods before they succumb to their wounds. Some elephants are poisoned, others step on planks imbedded with iron spikes, and become lame for life or die from the wounds. Some get electrocuted by illegally erected live current wires. The Sri Lankan elephant is fighting its last battle for survival. It is a very difficult and extreme situation and needs all the support the public, the experts and the politicians can give to resolve it. Several organizations are working to resolve human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society and the Biodiversity & Elephant Conservation Trust of Sri Lanka, together have initiated a series of programs to educate the rural villagers and youth about elephants and how to minimize crop raiding. Another project on board is to train veterinarians in conflict areas on how to treat wounded elephants. If knowledgeable treatment can be given on time to some of these animals, the rate of mortality can be reduced considerably. The Wildlife Preservation Trust International, USA and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund have established a program for integrating community participation into conflict management. There is still much more that can be done to save our magnificent elephant. A deeper understanding of elephant ecology and a greater commitment from the local as well as the international political community is urgently needed to bring a resolution to the human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. Otherwise the Sri Lankan elephant will only inhabit the folklore of the rich culture of Sri Lanka which will be poorer for the loss of its most

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VISION: To help protect and conserve the diminishing biodiversity of Sri Lanka and to make the local and international community aware of its endangered status.

MISSION: To enable communities to balance ecosystem protection and economic development by pioneering a model for sustainable conservation.

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A cultural and religious icon and a flagship species of our biodiversity lies dead shot by an irate farmer. At whom can you point the blame? Wasgumuwa

An increasing human population, diminishing land resources, and lack of proper land planning and management has lead to human elephant conflict





The large sugarcane plantation of the Pelwatte Sugar Industries. This sugar plantation was established in one of the last strongholds of the Sri Lankan Elephant in the Southern Province, displacing over 400 elephants

Today the interface between elephant habitat and human settlements is just an electric fence . It has become unavoidable for elephants not to come into contact with humans. Uda Walawe.



A house damaged by an elephant. The family narrowly escaped. One child was severely wounded by the falling bricks. Bundala

A farmer's hut damaged by a crop raiding elephant. Maduru Oya





A house repeatedly damaged by elephants lies abandoned. Bundala

This elephant was shot more than twelve times by a muzzle loader. The fatal shot that killed it, penetrated the body, entering from the spine and exiting through the rib cage. Polonnaruwa



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A female elephant shot and killed for crop raiding. Wasgomuwa

A baby elephant dead from injuries sustained from a fall into a 15 foot well. Anuradhapura



A month old orphaned baby elephant. Anuradhapura

A rescued baby elephant being transported.
Anuradhapura.



Severely injured orphaned baby elephant.
Polonnaruwa.

Human orphans of the human-elephant conflict.
Their mother was killed right on their front yard
in the night. Wasgomuwa.





This female elephant's right back leg was broken by a trap gun. When she came to drink water, slipped and fell hitting a head on the reservoir bund. Died soon after from the resulting head injury. Anuradhapura.

This female had several gun shot wounds on her feet including injuries sustained from a landmine blast. Anuradhapura.



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A deeper understanding of elephant ecology, and a greater commitment from all concerned people is needed to ensure the future survival of the elephant in Sri Lanka.



Education is vital to resolving human elephant conflict. Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust personnel conducting lectures in a rural School in the North Central Province.

A Project funded by the SLWCS.

A community integrated project to resolve crop raiding. The villagers of Pussellaya helping to erect a solar powered electric fence.

A project funded by the Wildlife Trust and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, USA.

Initiated and administered by the SLWCS



Integrating the community into conflict management is important for the sustained maintenance of such programs. The solar panels, the control room and 8 kilometer of power fencing was built with the participation of the villagers. A project funded by the Wildlife Trust and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, USA.

Villagers building the control room. Wasgomuwa. A project funded by the Wildlife Trust and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, USA.





Member of Parliament and other local officials and politicians at the opening of the community integrated solar powered fence project at Pussellaya, Wasgomuwa which was funded by the Wildlife Trust and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, USA. Political will and political support is crucial for the long term preservation of the Sri Lankan elephant.

These traditional watch huts can be a source of revenue for the farmers. They can be rented out to intrepid nature lovers to observe elephants by night. Such economic incentives will help the farmer to see the elephant as a resource and not just as a deadly adversary and a liability.



What would finally be the most important factor for saving elephants in Sri Lanka? Our cultural and religious beliefs? Or the need to preserve our

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How you can help



The elephant is a flagship species. Its protection will automatically offer protection to many species of plants and animals.

Please support the SLWCS. Your contributions are fully tax deductible in the United States. Mail your contributions to: Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society, 127 Kingsland Street, Nutley, NJ 07110, USA

Work as a Volunteer. Contribute a little bit of your time and expertise to the [SLWCS](#).

Inform others about these issues and about SLWCS.

Write to the following officials in Sri Lanka lobbying for action to save our most charismatic cultural icon the elephant.

His Excellency,
The Prime Minister, Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe
Temple Trees
Galle Road, Colombo 03
SRI LANKA.

Honorable Minister for Environment Rukman
Senanayake
The Ministry for Forest and Environment
Colombo
SRI LANKA.

Director
Department of Wildlife Conservation
No. 18 Gregory's Road
Colombo 07
SRI LANKA.



Elephants are highly social animals and show many behaviors that are very similar to humans.

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