

Loki Elephant update

Last issue there was no time or space for printing Dr. Sukumar's letter about the makhna elephant "Loki" issue. We are publishing this letter in full along with an update of the situation.

The animal welfare group IPAN has responded to Dr. Sukumar's balanced letter, which merely tried to set the record straight after exaggerated and incorrect reports by IPAN and others on the incident by bringing in issues such as the Pykara Ultimate Stage Hydro-Electric Project in the Nilgiris recently reactivated by the Tamil Nadu Government stating that there is a "hidden agenda" and "part of a deeper and greater conspiracy". Quotes from possibly spurious publications of unknown organisations have been used to back their claims. Another example of this is an erroneous report of a plan to import 15 young African elephants from South Africa to the Teppakadu Elephant Camp? This Report, which seems to have been created out of thin air, appeared in a small Tamil newspaper. IPAN has claimed that because of the treatment of Loki, the plan has been withdrawn by the South Africans when there was never such plan at all. It is simply unimaginable that such a plan would be considered even a moment by the Tamil Nadu government or the Central government. To quote such statements from small publications without checking the official source in order to promote one's own cause and destroy respectable individual and institutions is simply irresponsible.

Remarks made by IPAN about the "current tide that funds your institute" suggest that perhaps ENVY of Dr. Sukumar's success in generating funds for research is a motivating factor in this exchange. What is most revealing about this entire incident is that although Dr. Sukumar as well as Dr. Krishnamurthy have been seriously maligned personally as well as professionally by IPAN, they continue to simply try to correct the inaccuracies, to maintain a balanced view of IPAN's earlier good work and seem to consider the current onslaught a surprising and uncharacteristic aberration. This is characteristic of Dr. Sukumar and Dr. K.

In the meantime, many animal welfare enthusiasts have disassociated themselves from the accusations of IPAN as it has been borne out by trusted people that this issue has used to promote wrongful objectives.

It may be noted here that much damage diplomatically has been done by the letter signed by fourteen American Congressmen supporting statements made by IPAN and their supporters. It is puzzling in the extreme why such an impulsive action was taken without first assimilating the facts which the US Embassy in India had collected and communicated.

I am fond of talking about the Three C's of Conservation and the Three E's of Extinction. I believe they apply as well to any issues. I will conclude this update by again stating the 3 C's and the 3 E's.

Three C's of Conservation (. . . and Animal Welfare)

Communication

Cooperation

Coordination

Three E's of Extinction (... of species, good will, progress)

Ego

Envy

Elitism

There have been allegations of cruelty to a tuskless male elephant ("makhna") in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, made by the India Project for Animals. While we appreciate the concern shown by our friends in the United States for the welfare of elephants, we would like to point out several half-truths and misinformation being spread as part of the campaign launched by IPAN. Incidentally, the elephant is not a "tusker" as headlined in the Washington Post, but a "tuskless" bull, locally known as a "makhna".

The problem with the captured "makhna" as we see it is as follows. The "makhna" elephant was not only a habitual crop-raider but had also killed at least a dozen villagers in the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala. Dr. Fox, the IPAN consultant, while mentioning that the elephant was a crop raider conveniently

leaves out the fact that this elephant had been a human killer for several years, an example of the half-truth in the IPAN report. The local villagers had petitioned the forest departments for action to control the animal and threatened violence if their sufferings continued. In possibly any country, but India, such an animal would have been immediately shot ! The Indian wildlife laws also allow for the destruction of a dangerous animal. However, for nearly two decades now the Indian authorities have been experimenting, with reasonable success, in capturing and taming such "rogue" elephants as opposed to killing them. It was with this intention that the Tamilnadu forest department decided to capture the "makhna" elephant.

The elephant was *captured outside* the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and it was injured badly in its legs when it was chained

for transportation to the sanctuary. It is evident that the haste in which the animal was removed from the area was because of the duress the officials were under during a potentially volatile situation locally. This 4.5-ton, 40-year old bull elephant was also a very powerful animal, capable of enormous destruction if it had escaped while capture, and before it had been tamed (anyone who has seen mangled steel in western zoos keeping bull elephants would certainly believe this). Anywhere in the world, it is probably in only two Indian states, Karnataka and Tamilnadu, that an attempt is made to capture and tame such large bull elephants; anywhere else such an animal would be considered as unmanageable and destroyed. An elephant that had engorged itself on cultivated crops is bound to lose some weight when taken into captivity. Some weight loss is not necessarily bad; it would also have reduced the load on its injured legs. Bull elephants also go through considerable weight loss under natural conditions, as during the period of musth annually, without any ill effects. Allegations of extreme starvation in captivity in the case of the makhna are highly exaggerated. The animal was placed in a wooden *kraal* in the Theppakadu elephant camp, Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, which is the normal procedure followed in Asia. The dimensions of the *kraal* are designed so as to prevent the animal from gaining enough momentum during a charge at the walls, breaking them and consequently escaping. While it is true that the elephant was injured badly in its legs, due to its own struggle, we also think that the subsequent care and treatment has resulted in good recovery.

We are pained at the preposterous allegations of incompetence leveled at Dr. V. Krishnamurthy, currently a Senior Technical Consultant at our centre. Dr Krishnamurthy retired almost ten years ago after 30 years of veterinary experience in looking after over 100 captive elephants in Tamilnadu. He was called in to advise on the treatment of the "Makhna" after it had been captured and has been doing so *purely in a voluntary capacity*. He had been ailing from a major heart surgery and, despite his health, never hesitated to travel from Chennai (a distance of 300 miles) to inspect the animal when called upon by the forest department. That alone testifies to his deep love for elephants. The attack on him indicates utter insensitivity on the part of IPAN staff.

During the 30 years of his service in looking after captive elephants in Tamilnadu, the elephants under his care represented a real success story of elephant health care and breeding as seen from hard scientific facts. These elephants witnessed a birth rate and longevity record unsurpassed by any major elephant holding facility in the world (see paper in the American journal *Zoo Biology* 16: 263-272, 1997)). Dr. Krishnamurthy was responsible for the successful rearing of a number of orphaned elephant calves, a feat earlier deemed impossible in most parts of the world. His practical knowledge of elephants is legendary (Douglas Chadwick's book "The Fate of the Elephant" provides a sensitive portrait of Dr. Krishnamurthy). *We request anyone to demonstrate a consistently better record in any major elephant holding facility than that achieved by Dr. Krishnamurthy.* We have seen figures for captive elephant reproduction and longevity from several populations across the globe, including North America, Europe, and Asia. There is none to surpass the record of Tamilnadu's captive elephants under Dr. Krishnamurthy's care. In addition, he has assisted in the control of dozens of problematic, wild

elephants all over the country, providing indisputable relief to the hapless victims of their depredations. It must also be noted that Dr. Krishnamurthy introduced the most gentle methods of training elephants, involving only a wooden stick, unlike the metal hook ("ankus") used in most other parts of the world. The complete absence of metal in training a powerful animal such as the elephant has been appreciated by many other elephant holding facilities.

Since August 1998, when this issue of the makhna's welfare was brought to my notice, I have visited Mudumalai several times and seen the elephant. I also spoke personally to the Chief Wildlife Warden of Tamilnadu, and later have been in regular touch with the Wildlife Warden of Mudumalai Sanctuary. They have assured me that the elephant would receive the best treatment possible. Dr. Krishnamurthy has made monthly visits to Mudumalai, spending 3-4 days each time, to advise the forest department on the treatment of the elephant. In spite of the hysteria being raised of the elephant dying at any moment, the *bottom line is that it has survived and its injuries healed substantially*. The elephant was taken out of its *kraal* on February 6, 1999 and is now more or less following the routine of other elephants in the camp. I will be visiting Mudumalai again during the third week of March and will be happy to report back to you on the condition of the elephant as well as send pictures of the elephant.

This issue raises the need for the international conservation community and wildlife officials to address the more substantive issue of wildlife conflict with people, in particular elephant depredation of crops and manslaughter. This is a complex issue with loss of habitat being only part of the story. There are numerous examples of elephants raiding agricultural fields on the borders of intact and high-quality habitat. Male elephants, in particular, often become habitual crop-raiders and it is not an easy task to deal with this situation (see publication in the British journal *Biological Conservation* 55: 93-102, 1991). Our scientific understanding of the issue of crop depredation is still inadequate.

We therefore call upon the world conservation community to keep in mind the need for support to broader conservation issues, in addition to the care of an individual animal. Volatile issues such as problem-animal control (whether it be grizzly bears in North America, lions in Africa or elephants in Asia), if not handled sensitively and pragmatically, could lead to unstable situations greatly hampering future conservation efforts. We urge that a more serious and mature dialogue is taken up as to how to deal with the broader issues of conservation of species and their habitats.

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