

Success of Rehabilitation of Orphaned Elephant (*Elephas Maximus Maximus*) Calves in Sri Lanka

B. Vijitha Perera, B.A.D. Suhada Jayawardena, Neshma Kumudini, Tharaka Prasad

ABSTRACT

At present, the natural range of the Asian elephant is confined to 13 countries in Asia. Compared with these countries Sri Lanka harbours more than 6000 elephants who represent approximately 10% of the global Asian elephant population. Even though Sri Lanka is an island with an extent of 65610 km² and over 22 million people, 14% of its land has been devoted for its wildlife. Human-elephant Conflict (HEC) is, however, the major wildlife conservation issue faced in Sri Lanka. An average of about 150 elephants associated with human elephant conflicts die annually and 10 to 15 elephant calves orphaned. The Elephant Transit Home (ETH) in Sri Lanka was established in 1995 for rescue and rehabilitation of orphaned elephant calves. This is the world's first facility established for rehabilitation of Asian elephants. Over the last 21 years, ETH has received 305 elephant calves as orphans from throughout the country, comprising 181 males and 124 females of ages between less than one week: 14 (5%), 1 week to 3 months: 105 (35%), 3 months to 1 year: 98 (32%), 1 to 2 years: 47 (15%) and over 2 years: 41 (13%). Orphaned elephant calves are usually found in areas where HEC is intense. The calves are usually found in a critical condition due to dehydration, starvation, poor body condition, heavy parasitic burden, infected wounds and congenital abnormalities. Of the orphans ETH has received, 137 (46%) have died with 112 (86%) of mortalities occurring within 2 months of arrival and 5 of them have died during transportation. Even though, the mortality is higher in new arrivals, after introduction to the rehabilitation group, the mortality rate is 3%. ETH has developed a process for rehabilitation and release of orphaned elephants by empirical methods, with the release of 103 rehabilitated calves a ratio of 53 males to 50 female (50) back into the wild, where they are tracked and closely monitored. Among them, only 7 (5 male/2 female) deaths have been recorded, while 15 of the released females have given birth to calves. A further 21 (16 male and 5 female) elephant calves have been transferred from ETH to other elephant facilities. As of July 2016, 41 elephant calves are undergoing rehabilitation at ETH. Conflicts over space and resources between elephants and people appear to be the principal source of orphaned elephants in Sri Lanka, although some weak calves may also become orphans as a result of rejection by their mothers. The high mortality of elephant calves occurs mostly

just after arrival at ETH. The successful reintegration of released elephants with their wild counterparts and reproduction observed in the released females are the major indicators of the success of this rehabilitation program.

Key words: *Orphan, Asian elephant, rehabilitation*

Department of Wildlife Conservation, Elephant Transit Home, Udawalawe 70190, Sri Lanka

Correspondent author- vijithawildlife@gmail.com