

Asian Elephants in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Perspective

Joyes Chakma, Priyasi Chakma

ABSTRACT

CHT is a unique part of the country of Bangladesh, both in terms of landscape and its people with 13 different ethnic groups. The area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is about 13,184 km², which is approximately one-tenth of the total area of Bangladesh and is characterized by evergreen and semi evergreen dominated forest. CHT elephant belongs to the category of the Asian elephants. Only about a hundred years ago, elephants were abundant in most of the forests of Bangladesh. But now resident wild elephants are present only in Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar. Trans-boundary elephants reside in the north-east and south-east with ranges overlapping neighbouring India and Myanmar. Recent estimate conducted by IUCN Bangladesh in 2004 show that the number of wild elephants is no higher than 150 in the region. Elephants are critically endangered due to habitat crisis. One of the major threats to the elephants is artificial population growth sponsored by Bangladeshi government since 1980 for mitigating. Apart from that Kaptai hydro-electric power project, Karnofuli Paper Mill, Logging, Illegal Bengali Settlement, Tourism, degradation of forest cover, intensification of agricultural practice, unplanned road construction and establishment of monoculture forests and militarization are also liable.

There is no conflict between humans and elephants in general. But conflicts arise when the so called development projects are implemented breaking the natural law. Elephants come into conflict with humans because of inadequate space, food shortage, and various human activities. Being umbrella species, elephant is a symbol of healthy ecosystem, contributing to the ecological functioning in the forest in various roles. It is thus essential to observe the present status and come up with a long term action plan to perpetuate remaining elephants in CHT. Although all the wild elephants are protected under the Bangladesh wildlife Conservation act 1974 and cannot be hunted, killed or captured. According to the wildlife act 2011, the penalty for killing of a elephant will be imprisonment for 2-7 years or fine of 100,000-1,000,000 or both.

But the need for conservation of elephant is not receiving enough attention at implementation levels. In this case, practical interaction with regional shadow governments and associated local communities by Sustainable Jum Cultivation and participatory forestry

can ensure the sustenance of the species and the reduction in Elephant - Human conflicts. Likewise, awareness programs can be conducted based on both in governmental and non-governmental organizations with local people's participation. Above all there's no other way than the implementation of "CHT Peace Accord".

Keywords: *Kaptai Hydro-Electric Power Project, Artificial Population Growth, Sustainable Jum Cultivation, Illegal Bangali Settlement, Shadow Government, and CHT Peace Accord.*

Researcher, CHT Research Center, Rangamati, Bangladesh.

Jibtoli, Baghaichhari, Rangamati Hill District, Bangladesh

E-mail: Joyes_info@yahoo.com