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BUY ELEPHANTS AND GET YOUR EDEN FREE

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The View from Durban

Rising above short-term politics to secure environmental integrity of protected areas, the 2003 World Park Congress in Durban projected three scenarios for an uncertain future in a book entitled "Protected Areas in 2023". Using scenario planning to address such forces as economics, social dynamics, demographic changes, politics, technology, and environmental processes (McNeely, 2003), the three possible futures for protected areas are: 1) The Triple Bottom Line - is about getting local as possible and global as necessary; 2) The Rainbow - means domination of local interests; and 3) Buy Your Eden - entails privatization of protected areas which widens the gap between rich and poor through ecotourism (IUCN, 2003). Unfortunately, decision-making about protected areas in recent years suggest that the rich may eventually get their Eden in Nepal.

Jaded Promises and Imperfect Dream

This paper is about the prosperous wildlife market for the rich who will glide into the realm of ecotourism, pocketing profit with their 'elephant safari' in the Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP). The process is fairly simple because the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation has paved a way by enforcing 'Domestic Elephant Management Policy 2003.' The policy objectives are: 1) to maximize economic and environmental benefits through management of domestic elephants; 2) to bring private entrepreneurs and others into domestic elephant management; and 3) to uplift the living standard of resident communities through equitable sharing of profits that accrue from management of the domestic elephants. Although the policy is jaded with jargons and odd promises such as the government will relinquish its authority to become promoter, facilitator and regulator to bolster social equity and biodiversity conservation through management of domestic elephants against volume tourism, the policy does not cast one word about elephants in the wild and ecological integrity of protected areas. Moreover, there cannot be fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the domestic elephant management to indigenous communities or poorer households because elephants belong to rich entrepreneurs. Also, there is a thin line between 'captive' and 'domestic' elephants. Captives are caught in the wild

and trained. But, domesticated are bred and raised by the humans. Given this, there are no Nepali households in the past, who have bred elephants and raised them viably except the government elephant stables (*hattisar*) which has not produced even ten 'domestic' elephants sired either by captive or domestic male elephants in the last 154 years (JBK, 1985; WWF Nepal Programme, 2003).

Inside, Outside and the Other side

Chitwan assures plenty of wildlife viewing, where tourism development has occurred with private sector's ability (demand-driven management) to respond to tourist needs (Banskota and Sharma, 1995). These initiatives have been spontaneous but uncoordinated resulting in spatial congestion. Without a proper environment resource management (supply-driven management) in Nepal, the economic value of protected areas and their biodiversity remains to be realized (Wells, 1993; 1995).

Tourism in Chitwan comes with elephants. The core of RCNP is saturated with seven concessionaires and their 70 elephants. No outside elephants are allowed in. Outside the Park, at least four entry points have lodges. Of these, Sauraha in the northeast corner, had 52 lodges and tea shops once, within a radius of 1.5 km, where budget travelers flock. As community forests in and around Sauraha began to revive in the eighties, wildlife spillover from the Park that include large mammals such as rhinos and tigers, undoubtedly benefited these forest user groups such as Baghmara and Kumrose and thus, began the 'outside elephant safari'. There are 25 elephants of four different operators in Sauraha, outside the Park. Although there are no data on households who keep elephants in Nepal, most elephants have moved to Chitwan. For example, all five privately-owned elephants from Kapilvastu District, are in Chitwan for tourist services.

A recent study suggested that ecotourism in RCNP, as it is currently structured, provides little employment potential, has a marginal effect on household income, and offers few benefits to local people. Thus, it is not a panacea for long-term biodiversity conservation (Bookbinder et al., 1998). The study team suggested policy changes and

alternative approaches to privately owned ecotourism industry, may redirect an appreciable amount of revenue to local development and strengthen local guardianship of endangered species and their habitats. On the contrary, the seven concessionaires argue that the lion's share (over 50%) of the RCNP's annual income of US\$ 708,000 in 1997/98, comes from them and over 95% of the Park's income is related to tourism. They suggest that effects of tourism in Chitwan has to be examined at three levels: 1) concessionaires inside the Park; 2) low-budget privately owned developments who are located in Sauraha; and 3) community-based tourism at Baghmara and Kumrose.

The more recent development is about tourism infrastructure activities of Kathmandu-based entrepreneurs. Once these infrastructures are built outside the Park, the bottleneck for them would be park access for their clients, riding elephants. Thus, a facilitatory policy was much needed. Resources Himalaya conducted a collaborative field study through the Land Revenue Office to ascertain whether land tenure has changed across the fringe area of RCNP, suitable for hotels and lodges. Results show that 33 relatively large suitable plots (area: 159.46 ha, range: 1.36 – 24.48 ha) for hotels and lodges, were sold by locals to entrepreneurs. This is fitting with the management policy of domesticated elephants.

Asian or Indian Elephants?

The Asian elephant with a minimum population of 34,000 animals (Sukumar, 1989) measures meagerly to a tenth of the population size of its African relatives. It has a patchy distribution in South Asia where they are limited to relatively small forest areas. In contrast, elephants in Southeast Asia are scattered across large forested land. But, both have intense conflict with humans because of fragmented forest and growing cultivation. Having run

out of options to cope with elephant-induced damages including loss of life, desperate farmers persecute elephants using poison, guns and electrocution.

The name, Asian elephant, is generic for its all four subspecies: 1) Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus bengalensis*), 2) Ceylon elephant (*E. m. maximus*), 3) Sumtran elephant (*E. m. sumtrana*), and 4) Malaysian elephant (*E. m. hirsutus*) (Macdonald, 1985). The elephants that occur in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal and Thailand are, essentially, the Indian elephant. All subspecies are endangered and listed in CITES Appendix One.

A viable population of 87 - 108 Indian elephants occurs in Nepal with four geographic distributions: 10 - 15 elephants in eastern Terai, 25 elephants in central Terai, 40 - 50 elephants in western Terai and 12 - 18 elephants in far western Terai (ten Velde, 1999; Yadav, 2002) (Fig. 1). Although the Indian elephant is a protected species, a comprehensive knowledge on its ecology within the territory of Nepal, is in want. Only two elephant surveys have been conducted (ten Velde, 1999; Yadav, 2002) and a study is on-going in western Terai.

Buy Your Elephants in Sonepur

In Asia, India has the largest elephant population (23,500 – 27,000) in the wild (Dey, 1996). 'The State of Wild Asian Elephant Conservation in 2003' the first ever independent audit of elephant conservation, suggested that specific Asian governments are failing to arrest the sharp decline of the elephant population in the wild (Jepson and Canney, 2003). The audit assessed performance of 10 Asian governments on their capacity to save elephants, and assist in resolving human-elephant conflicts. Only India and Sri Lanka performed strongly and demonstrated the best practices through their wildlife and forestry agencies.

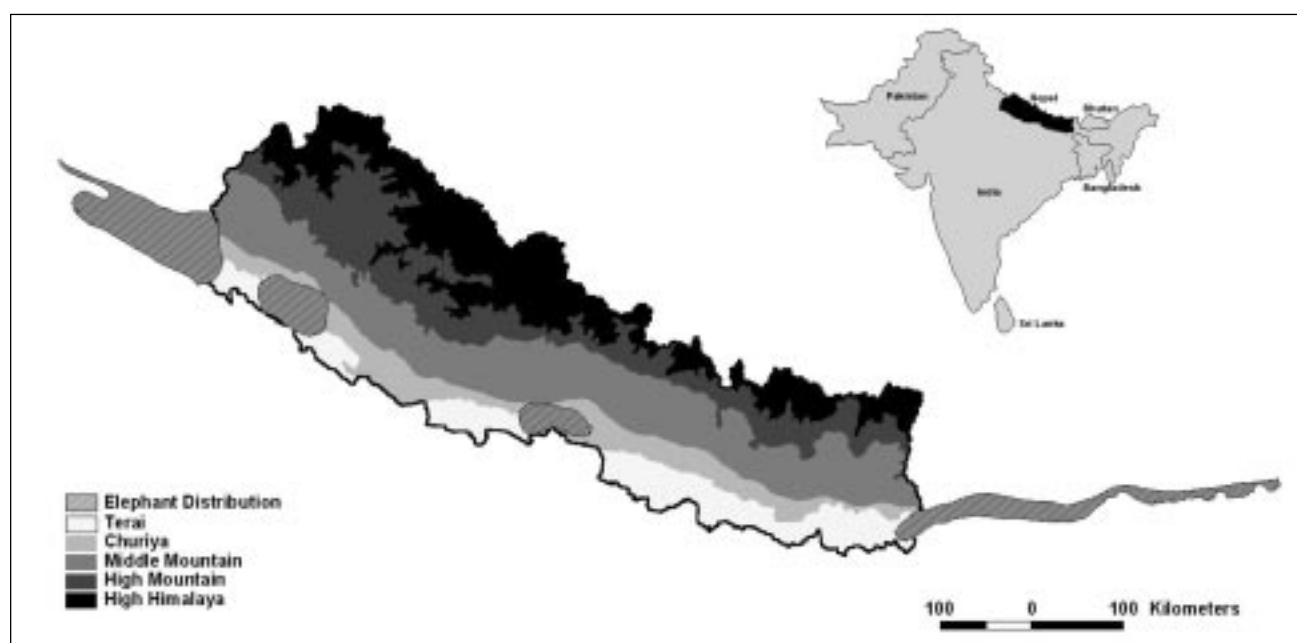


Figure 1. Elephant Distribution in Nepal (Yonzon et al., 2003).

Captive elephants in India, offers two different settings. Elephants in the north, are considered 'financial drain' today. Traditionally, elephants are owned by the rich in northern India as a status symbol, used in marriages and other processions. However, many are forced to sell them as elephant upkeep has become difficult. Conversely, elephants are much in demand in the south for temple festivals as in the state of Kerala. A recent rise from 500 to nearly 700 captive elephants in Kerala, was possible through elephant purchase from the northeastern states. For example, the Forest Department of West Bengal, identified 26 elephant calves 'for sale' in 2002 for it could not carry on. Buying and selling of nearly 100 or more elephants each year in Sonapur, Bihar (India) is traditional until today, where the largest cattle fair of Asia is held in November. Not only those who cannot afford to keep elephants bring their elephants to sell but also agencies conduct brisk transaction. Sonapur appears to have several connection with Nepal's history because captive elephants in Nepal predominantly come from there. In addition, Sonapur is the historical site where Jung Bahadur Rana, the then prime minister of Nepal, received investiture from Lord Mayo for his service to the British Government to quell the Great Mutiny of India in 1857. The British rulers restored some of Nepal's territory which was conceded to the British India in 1815 back to Nepal in 1860 (Hunter, 1896). This restored area, known as 'Naya Muluk', included Banke, Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur Districts (Regmi, 1988; Landon, 1928).

All Roads Lead to Chitwan

Since 1898, there were 31 government elephant stables that stretched from Jhapa (east Nepal) to Kanchanpur, (farwest Nepal) (JBK, 1985). Elephant stables then, were necessary for forest officials as elephants were the only transport and they could be maintained relatively well because forests were not degraded. By 1970s, elephant stables declined drastically with loss of forest and the high cost of up keeping elephants. As of now, there are five elephant stables, one each in all five Terai (lowland) protected areas

and one elephant breeding center in Chitwan, totaling 69 government-owned elephants in all (Fig. 2).

Chitwan, a World Heritage Site, may suffer from the onslaught of captive elephants. At present, the 122 captive elephants in RCNP include 47 government elephants, 70 elephants from concessionaires and 5 elephants from Biodiversity Conservation Center. It is disappointing to note that Nepal has a wild population of 108 elephants in its entire stretch and 147 captive elephants are packed in one national park (RCNP: 932 km², buffer zone: 750 km²). As there is neither a policy on free-ranging elephants nor elephant action plan, this policy essentially, is about private elephants and protected areas, especially Chitwan.

Mending Future

Breeding domestic elephants are extremely costly and unsuccessful when compared with buying captive elephants. A recent WWF publication suggests that the 18 year old Elephant Breeding Center in Chitwan has produced so far 19 calves. Of which, 13 (69%) were sired by free-ranging male elephants (WWF Nepal Programme, 2003), suggesting how vital it is to maintain elephant population in the wild, for the captive breeding program.

Regarding ex-situ conservation, there is no information to know about captive elephants in twenty districts in Terai. Also, it is reasonable to assume that Nepal's captive elephant population will not die-off because many come from the annual fair at Sonapur and other Indian markets like Sitamadhi. Records show that there is no bar to purchase captive elephants in India and bringing them into Nepal. Actually, this has been practiced for years after Nepal lost most of its elephant population through deforestation. The last capture of wild elephants in Nepal was in 1969 (JBK, 1985). Perhaps, the best option is to open a formal channel with the Government of India about captive elephants and to develop a time-bound bi-lateral policy that will allow Nepal to purchase elephants from animal markets in India.

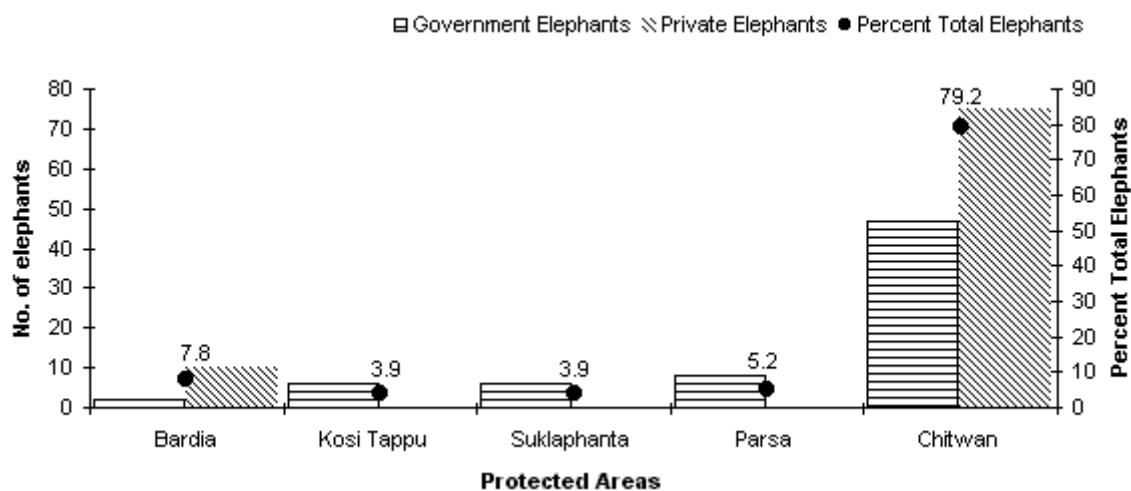


Figure 2. Captive elephants in protected areas.

At present, it is not advisable to allow more captive elephants into the Park for any purpose including tourism unless a full-length study is available. Although captive elephants eat molasses and rice, they are fed with 150 - 250 kg of green fodder daily (WWF Nepal Programme, 2003) which means 6,588 - 10,980 tons of green fodder from the Park each year. Elephants are both grazers and browsers depending on season. Therefore, during dry seasons, several fodder species of *Ficus*, *Artocarpus*, *Acacia*, *Bauhinia*, *Mallotus*, *Phyllanthus*, *Bombax* and other fruit-bearing trees are lopped intensely for captive elephants. A better grip about ecosystem knowledge can be had, once a full-length study on the ecological damages from captive elephants in the Park, is conducted.

Authorizing private elephants, is even more sensitive in these times of civil conflict. Once inside the Park, it is almost impossible to track their movement. Many

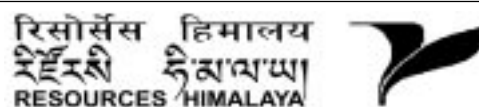
including armed insurgents and poachers may disguise themselves as visitors and use elephants: 1) to collect information on army and park personnel and their locations; 2) to set land mines that may incur loss to both wildlife and humans; 3) to identify areas where rhinos and tigers could be easily poached; and 4) even use elephants to haul poached animals and/or ferry arm cache within and across the Park. These are unseen now. But it explains why the policy was unanimously opposed by all the wardens from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation during the 19th Annual Warden Conference.

Conservation policies are not carved on ivory. They get reformulated with amendments because good science and a well-defined mechanism for profit sharing need to be in place before advocating ecotourism development is compatible with biodiversity conservation.

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