Greetings from Asian Elephant Support!

The following is a special update as it not only tells about a very important research project to help Asian elephants, but it is also the story of teamwork that AES believes is so crucial to the future of Asian elephants.

The goals of this research project are to identify emerging diseases and their prevalence in the largest global population of Asian elephants, and to determine the impact of these diseases for long-term conservation. These goals will be met through (a) assessing health-related aspects of the free-ranging elephant population (for example, stress, morbidity, and mortality), (b) evaluating the presence of infectious and non-infectious diseases and their dynamics in the elephant population, and (c) identifying risk factors and possible solutions to mitigate impact.

The study area is located in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) in Southern India, and occupies parts of three states: Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. The study area has an estimated 3900 to 4800 elephants. This population is genetically quite distinct and unique in that 95% of males are tuskers, compared to only 5-7% of males in the Sri Lanka population and 50% of males in the Eastern Indian population.

Many studies in the Nilgiri Biosphere show the elephant population in this region under ever increasing pressure, with degraded and fragmented habitat posing the biggest threat. Summer forest fires coupled with delayed monsoon seasons can result in greater migration and thus increased instances of human/elephant conflict.

Adult elephants are not vulnerable to top predators like tigers and leopards. Thus it is important to study the disease dynamics in this species. Anthrax, Elephant Herpes Virus, and tuberculosis are among the diseases identified, clearly indicating the necessity for an understanding of the emerging diseases in the population.

The research is being led by two veterinarians highly experienced in elephant diseases:

~ Dr. Arun Zachariah, Assistant Forest Veterinary Officer of the Wildlife Disease Research Laboratory, Department of Forest and Wildlife, Kerala, India.

~ Dr. N. Kalaivanan, Assistant Forest Veterinary Surgeon, Department of Forest and Wildlife, Tamil Nadu, India

These two investigators bring a wealth of experience to this project. In addition, international advisors will partner to advise on ecology and genetics of wildlife diseases.

Asian Elephant Support is excited to play a part in helping this research get underway. In addition to AES financial contribution, this was our first grant submission to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Asian Elephant Conservation Fund. AES helped write the grant application and will serve as the grant administrators for this project. The USFWS and AES have provided funding for project support staff, transportation, research station costs, lab analysis fees, and medical supplies. The initially funded study period will run for one year.

We would be remiss if we did not express our sincere appreciation to Heidi Riddle, Riddle's Elephant & Wildlife Sanctuary, for bringing this project to our attention, and to the staff at USFWS for their patience and assistance in securing this funding for Drs. Zachariah and Kalaivanan. Working together we can make a difference for the future of the Asian elephant.

It will be exciting to follow the findings of this important field work, and we will share updates as they are available. You can contact us for more information, go to our website (www.asianelephantsupport.org), and follow us on Facebook (Asian Elephant Support).

Please consider making a donation so that we can remain in a position to help other projects that need support in their work for the future of Asian elephants.

Thank you for your Support!

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