

An analysis of Human-Elephant conflict in Sri Lanka

Written by Kalana Krishantha

Friday, 08 December 2017 03:04 - Last Updated Friday, 08 December 2017 03:04

Recently the famous tusker, “Dala Puuttuwa of Galigamuwa“was killed and it created a massive public discussion regarding the human –elephant conflicts of Sri Lanka.Finally,investigators found that the intention of killing the mammoth being was sell the tusks and elephant pearls of it.There is a controversy even some Buddhist monk is also connected with this killing and it reveals up to which extent this barbarian phenomenon has been spreading in so called Sinhala Buddhist Country. The human elephant conflict here is not new one, even centuries ago it was in this land according to historical records like Robert Knox.According to data gathered by the Elephant Conservation Unit of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), around 2,844 elephants were killed by farmers and 1,138 people were killed by elephants between the years from 1991 to 2010, while a total of 3,103 homes in Sri Lanka were destroyed by elephants (2004 to 2007)

Sri Lanka have ten to twenty percent of the Asian elephant population; the density is higher than any other state in this region. A land area of nearly five square kilometers is needed to support an elephant to make sure the natural balance that exists between the elephant and the dry zone habitats is not disturbed. According to this data, to current population of 3,500 elephants requires around17,500 km² or 27 per cent of the total land area whilethe protected areas in Sri Lanka covers only 12.5 per cent of the land area (or 8,200 km²). This indicates that nature parks and reserves are not able to ensure the sustainable prevalence of these beings and sustainable solutions are needs and to reach the prevailing solutions and the political willingness is the most necessary factor.

The lack of sufficient land area for existence of elephants is the foremost reason for human elephant conflicts. Droughts, floods and other climate change related incidents have been intensifying the conflicts in Sri Lanka while Sri Lanka has been ranked as the riskiest country for climate changes in 2018, according to global climate risk index.

Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve(MER)

Within this circumstances, the concept of managed elephant reserve has come back into the stage. This plan was prepared by, GajaMithuro’ organization with a help of villagers, prominent academics of the conservation field and wild life department officers. They did that for two years

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(2009-11) and completed the project in 2012 which was suggesting to establish Managed Elephant Reserve and sent the proposals to wild life department head office. However, officers of the wild life department still have failed to implement the proposed MER.

It's a fact that around 300 – 400 elephants inhabit the greater Hambantota area. This is nearly 10% of Sri Lanka's elephant population. So, it should be a prominent tasks of wild life conservation department to ensure the safety of these elephants. The proposed conservation plan connects Udawalawa, Lunugamvehera and Bundala wild life reserves while understanding migration traits of animals as a result longitudinal research which was done by even using satellite technology. This plan suggests to nominate those enormous areas to be protected areas and gaining the lands of residents of this area and rehabilitate them in outer side which can be helpful to avoid human elephant conflicts.

Instead of implementing the proposed managed elephant reserve, what previous Rajapaksha regime did was initiated new vain development projects in Hambantota such as Mattala airport and the Suriyawewa International Stadium which are located in the proposed MER and it has deprived elephants of their habitats inspiring them to roam about in search of basic needs like food and water. These elephants then have to face various violent ways initiated by the villagers to keep their paddy culture such as gun shots and poisonous pumpkins.

According to credible data, 25 persons in the Hambantota district have been killed from 2010 to 2017 due to wild elephant's attacks. 347 properties were damaged by elephants. Meanwhile, 58 elephants have become a victims of gun shots and other disastrous efforts of humans. So, it's a timely need to establish proposed managed elephant reserve as soon as possible.

But actually what really happening, even under this government, people are clearing more and more lands of MER and utilizing that for human needs. Construction of the Matara highway has been progressing through the MER. While many factories have been established including solar power generation plants in MER and it has caused lot to a reduction of the land area of MER and as a result of it elephant human conflict has become bad to the worst by day by day.

Unfortunately, it is dark reality that one powerful minister of Hambantota district who is holding high portfolio in United National Party, who is trying to convince to public that he is a nature lover, is secretly blessing all these environmentally harmful projects and there has been a gossip that government is also going to give part of MER for a Chinese company to establish an oil refinery.

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Steps to Reduce the Human Elephant Conflict

The urgent step what government should take is establish the proposed MER in Hambantota district and this will pave the way to reduce human elephant conflict in Southern province.

Some of the main activities conducted for conflict mitigation and elephant conservation in Sri Lanka are translocation by capture-transport, elephant drives, distribution of elephant thunder crackers, construction of electric fences and law enforcement. Elephant drives and thunder crackers cannot be considered as successful and many times it was proved that giant beings got more and more aggressive because of these methods. Electric fences are useful, but it's only a psychological barrier, when once elephant break it adapts to break it continuously. The need to select the right locations to install fences is detected as a critical need which wild life conservation department has failed in many times.

Under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance, elephants are given protection where the harming or killing of an elephant carries a penalty of a fine of Rs. 150,000 – 500,000 or imprisonment of 2-5 years or both fine and imprisonment. In Sri Lanka around 250 have to become victims of HEC per year but unfortunately prosecutions are relatively low.

Strategies to protecting elephants both within the system of protected areas and as many animals outside these areas that the land can support and landholders will accept, and not restricting elephants to the protected area network alone may be a wonderful approach. As a short term effort, organizing and mobilizing farmers in conflict villages and raising deep awareness on elephant behavior patterns is necessary. From convincing people about the important nature of this IUCN Red Data book listed giant and its innocent nature will reduce the human elephant conflict. Eco friendly bus service which was introduced to Wasgamuwa can be considered as one of the best example. Erection of DanduWeta (Log fence) along the areas where elephants cross may also be helpful. In previous few years ago, there was a discussion over palmyrah bio fences, but with the time, discussions became diluted. Villagers in some of the frequently raided areas have experienced that the invasion could be prevented with the DanduWeta or the Wooden Fence. The fence is erected using large logs and does not fix strongly on the ground. When touched it moves as it is not steadily fixed. Usually elephants do

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not touch or move over fences those are swinging or unsteady as a long term approach, habitat enrichment can be implemented. This could be done by planting fodder trees in the elephants' forest areas. For example, cultivating Beru (a water grass elephants love to eat) in tanks (reservoirs) and other trees (such as Velang) that form main part of the diet of elephants. There are about 100 species of plants that are eaten by elephants. The best and the long-run conflict mitigation approach is conservation policy planning precise for different geographical locations. This needs years of research, awareness and lobbying and more understanding over the prevailing situations.

And, it's highly accepted fact that Sri Lanka is one of the densely populated country in the Asia. As a result of limited resources and increasing population, people tend to invade the wild lands and establish habitats there. Time has come to introduce birth control laws to all Sri Lankans irrespective of race, religion or anything else. Otherwise, within soon future, Sri Lanka will become a land without wildlife or forests. Above all the things the concept of, "political willingness" is needed to implement any policy, otherwise the large sum of money which has been spent for various researches will be in vain.

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