**Beyond Ivory: Asian Elephants In Crisis**

The smaller cousin of the African elephant, the Asian elephant, *Elephas maximus*, is classified as an endangered species.

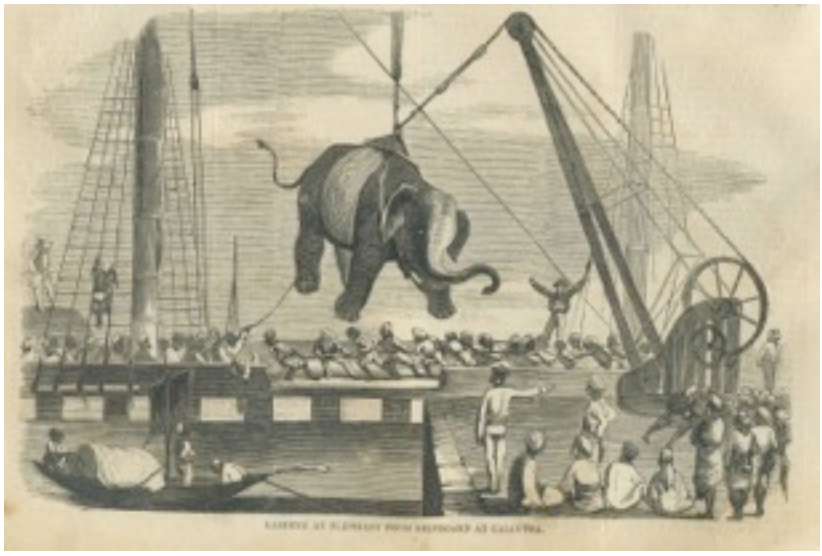
There are fewer than 45,000 of them left on the planet today.

The Asian elephant used to have a vast range, from the Iranian coast to China. Now extinct in many regions, Asian elephants exist in isolated populations throughout 13 range states: Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; China; India; Indonesia; Laos; Malaysia; Myanmar; Nepal; Sri Lanka; Thailand; and Vietnam. In half of these range states, including China, only a few hundred elephants remain. In others, such as Thailand and Myanmar, the majority of the few thousand elephants living there are in captivity. The largest number of Asian elephants left in the world live in India, with 20–30,000 remaining.

Asian elephants have been spiritually revered and deified in religious traditions throughout Asia for thousands of years. For at least 5,000 years we've kept them in captivity, and used them in warfare, ceremonies, transportation, logging, and other industries, and they have been integral to these aspects of Asian civilization.

The majority of captive elephants in the Western world are Asian elephants: they are often the ones in zoos, marking the first elephant encounter for many people. As early as 1796, the first Asian elephant arrived in New York City.

Since the early 1800s they have been captured from the wild and exported to zoos and circuses around the world, for use in the entertainment industry.



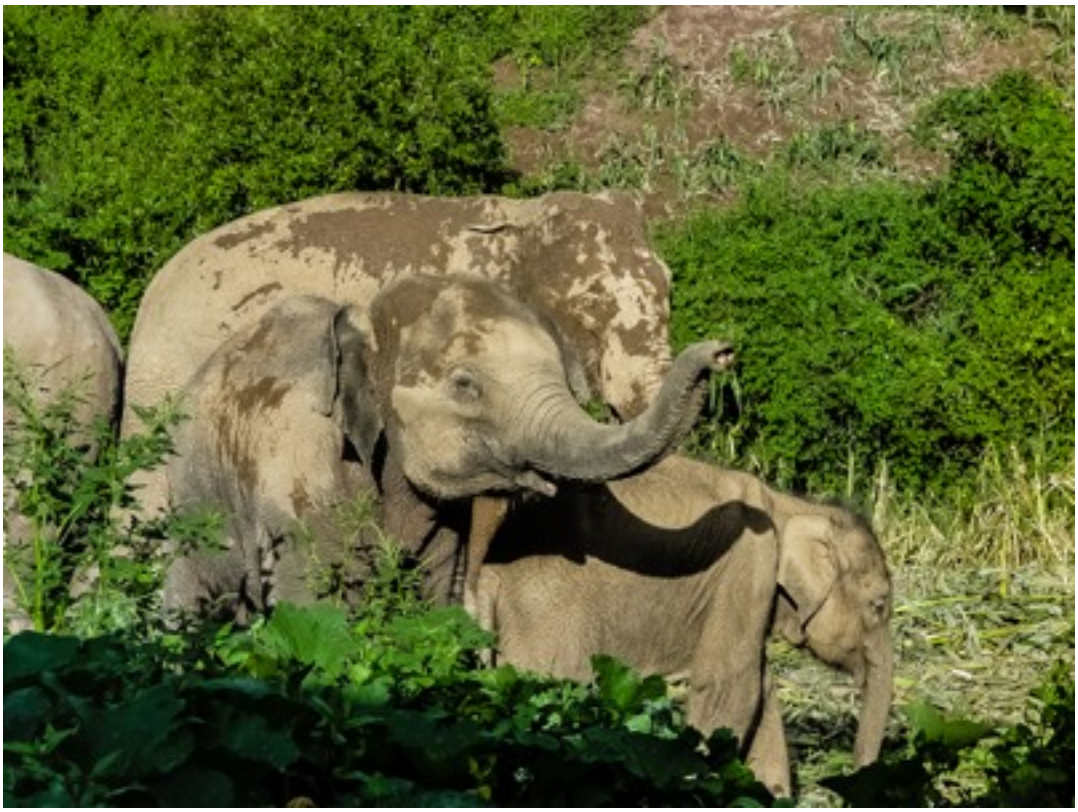
**Harpers Weekly, 1858**


Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F010223-0007
Foto: Unterberg, Rolf | 1. Mai 1961

We've had a long history with Asian elephants, in traditional culture and modern society. Today they face many problems, but the most destructive is habitat loss.

**Habitat Loss**

Since 1950 the global Asian elephant population has declined by over 75% due to the expansion of agriculture, large-scale deforestation, palm oil plantations, and the mining and agricultural interests of mega-corporations. This makes it difficult for them to breed, and squeezes them into smaller and smaller areas, increasing the risk of conflict with humans.



Asian elephants are also threatened by poaching for their ivory, meat, and body parts. Young or baby elephants are often kidnapped from the wild and sold into captivity.

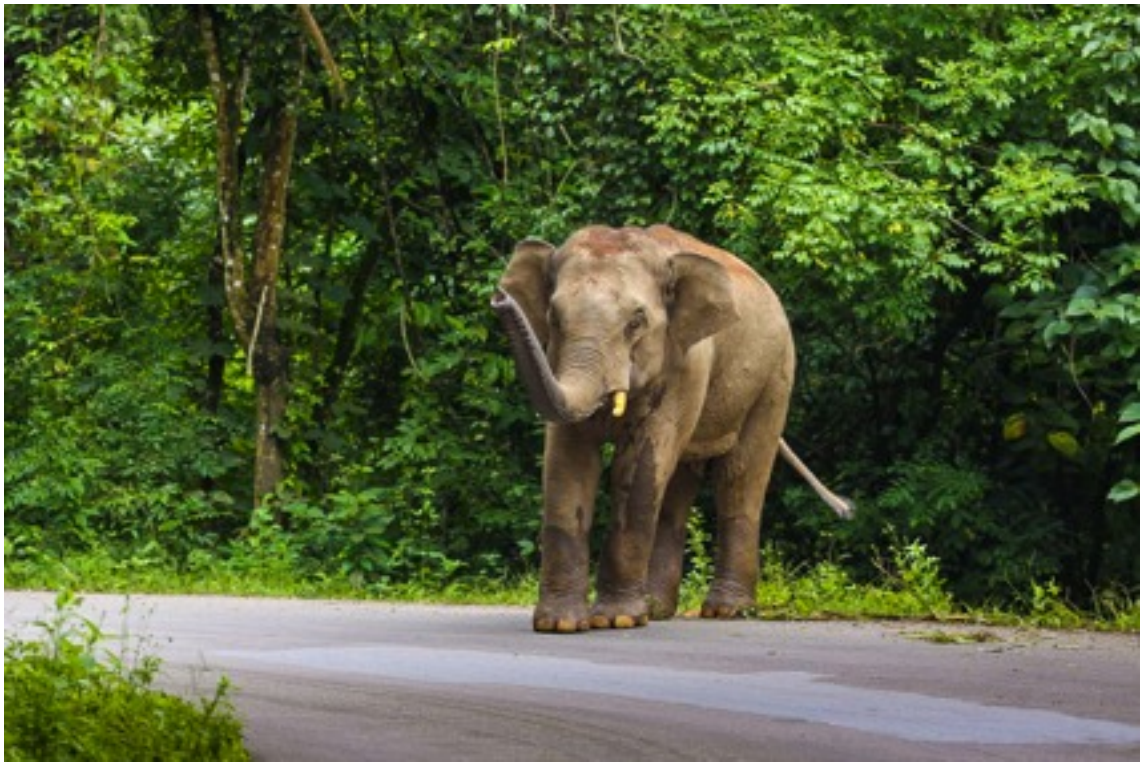
The Sumatran elephant, a distinct subspecies of the Asian elephant, is critically endangered, facing the destruction of their forest habitat. Nearly 70% of the Sumatran elephant's habitat has been destroyed in one generation. Illegal logging, pulp and paper industries, and palm oil

plantations have reduced their population drastically: there are only three groups remaining.

This is an accelerating problem for many populations throughout their range, but the situation in Vietnam is especially grim. As of April this year, it was reported that there are only about 60 elephants left in the wild (down from 550 in the 1980s); the captive elephant population in Vietnam is only around 40 individuals.

**Human-Elephant Conflict**

Habitat loss results in human-elephant conflict. Asian elephants suffer from ever-expanding human populations, which have been growing in Southeast Asia at an unprecedented rate. For every 1 elephant, there are 70,000 people in the region.



This human expansion is pushing elephants out of their habitat, increasing both human and elephant deaths from human-elephant conflict. Humans and elephants are in direct competition for habitat, and elephants often wander into human settlements, causing crop damage, destroying property, and killing or injuring people. Many people live in fear of elephant raids, and are sometimes driven to retaliate with violence.

India is particularly affected by human-elephant conflict, having the largest Asian elephant population of any country. Up to 500 people in India are killed every year by elephants, and more than 100 elephants are killed by humans every year.

Dozens of elephants have also been killed by moving trains, which has caused the forest and railway departments in India to limit the speed of trains as they pass through forested elephant habitat.

Whether people care about elephant lives or not, there is also a staggering *human* cost to these conflicts: people die every single day from elephant-related conflict. Farmers and villagers are trampled during crop raids; mahouts (caretakers of captive elephants) are killed by their own elephant or someone else's; and park rangers are killed while trying to protect elephants.

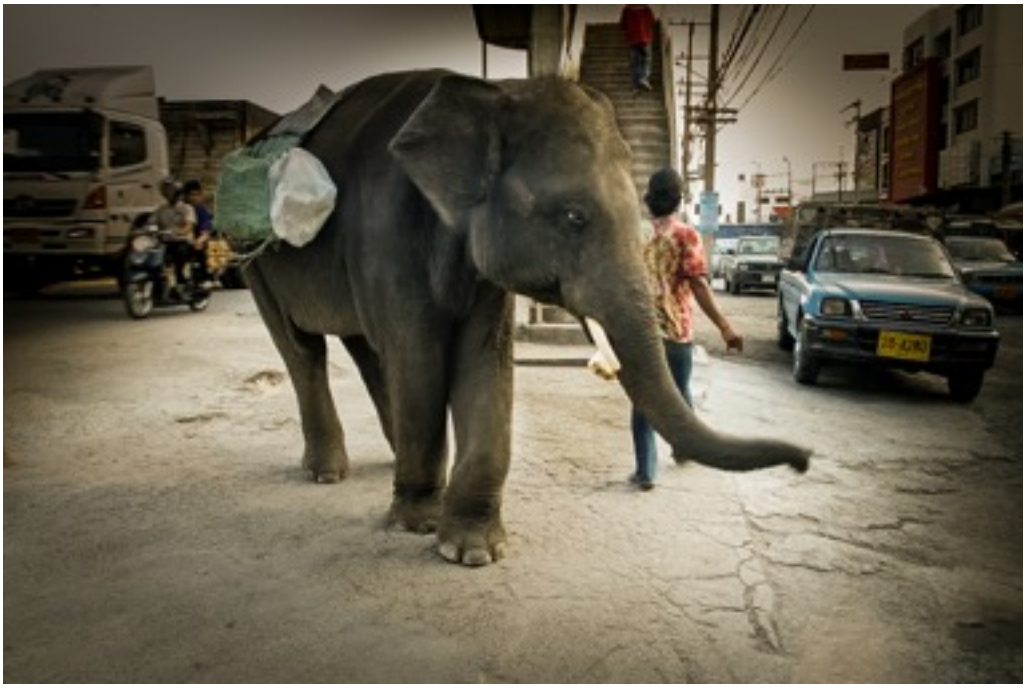
**Captivity**

Despite their use in captivity, elephants have never been domesticated in a scientific sense. Yet, while the estimate varies, around one-third of all Asian elephants live in captivity. Their long gestation and other factors can make it difficult for elephants to breed in captivity, meaning most of these elephants have been – and continue to be – captured from the wild to supply the billion-dollar entertainment and tourism industries. Because elephants are intelligent and have good memories, it is relatively easy to train them. They're usually taught tricks for human amusement, which are often degrading to the elephants' true nature and sentience.

Young and baby elephants are the most susceptible to wild capture, and mother elephants are often killed trying to protect their calves. Most are subjected to some form of abuse, to break their spirit and "tame" them for use with humans. In captivity they typically live a solitary, or near-solitary life, unable to interact with other family members or roam the vast areas of their forested homeland; confinement and isolation can cause serious emotional distress and psychological harm.

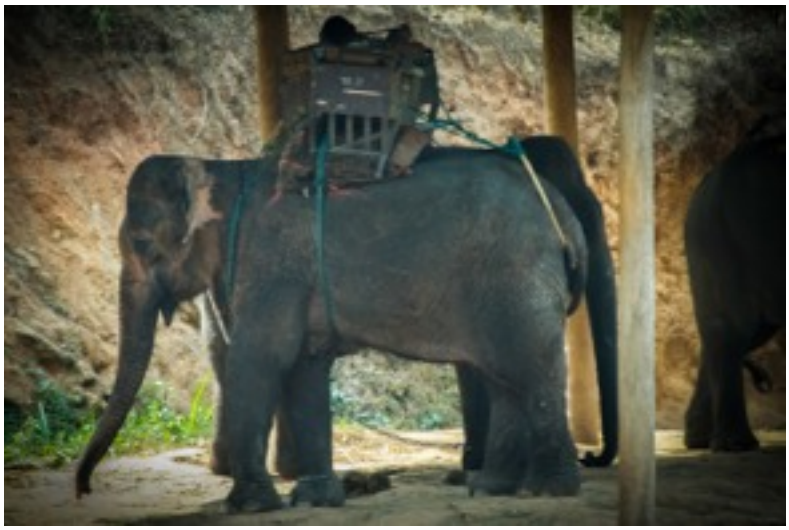
Elephants also face a much shorter lifespan in captivity – as little as half the life expectancy of wild elephants. Many countries lack proper legislation to protect elephants and ensure adequate care, which can lead to severe mistreatment. They can be subject to injuries, illness, infections, and

exhaustion. In Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka, captive elephants are also used for other purposes, such as street begging or ceremonial events.



When living in these urban environments they face many dangers. The conditions are completely unsuitable for their health; they may ingest improper foods, get foot infections from standing and walking on hard concrete, or die from accidental electrocution.

In the tourism industry, elephants may have to carry humans on their back for hours on end. In many cases these tourist operators do not adequately maintain the seats or "howdahs," which can cause injuries to both the elephants and the tourists when not outfitted properly.



**Poaching**
Asian elephants have recently begun to face increasing danger from poaching, as the price of ivory continues to soar. Poaching has returned to many areas in India; in Kerala, poachers have started hunting elephants for their ivory after a gap of 20 years.

Only male Asian elephants typically have tusks, and they're poached not only for their ivory, but also for meat and other body parts. A variety of elephant parts are also used in traditional Asian medicine. Consequently more bull elephants are hunted, which dramatically skews the sex ratio, impacting reproduction of Asian elephants in the wild and their genetic diversity even further.

**Hope**
There are varying solutions across the thirteen range states where Asian elephants reside, which are being developed to hopefully protect them from extinction in the wild.

A few models for elephant warning systems have been tested in India, including an SMS text messaging system that warns villagers when elephants are in the area. This will allow them to avoid the elephants, and mitigate human-elephant conflict.

The Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society has developed the EleFriendly bus initiative to enable elephants and local communities to peacefully coexist. It has been designed to prevent villagers and school children from potentially dangerous confrontations with elephants.

Several initiatives have been focused on the reduction of crop raiding, through a variety of methods, including: elephant deterrents such as chili pepper and beehive fences; playing audio of angry tiger sounds; growing alternate crops not liked by elephants; and education and training for local communities. Orange trees can be planted as a barrier around crops – they are too tall to be trampled, and elephants tend not to raid them. Orange trees also provide an alternate source of income for the farmers, as does the honey utilized in the beehive fence deterrent model.

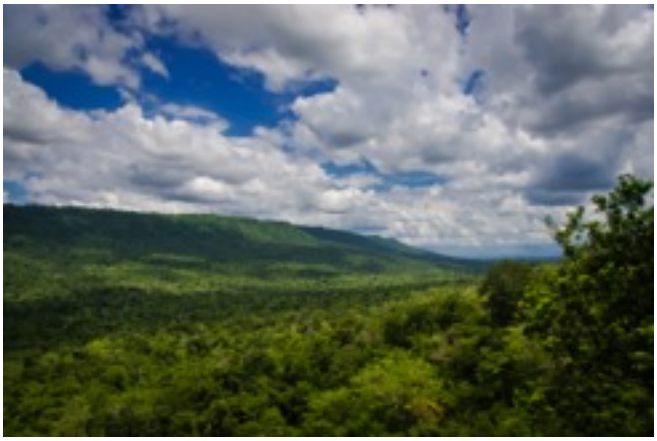
Captive elephants may have finally seen the beginning of a societal change in attitude regarding how they are used in entertainment. One of the most recent changes for captive elephants in the West is the Ringling Bros. circus

announcement, that they will retire their elephant performers by 2018, citing a "mood shift" among its audiences.

This is a step in the right direction but much more needs to be done on this front. Many elephant tourism operations worldwide must revise their activities to treat the elephants with dignity and respect, and properly care for them in environments where optimal care is afforded them.

Some believe that "we cannot give elephants back what we've taken away from them – their extended families, native homes, and natural lives." While this may be true, there are some positive conservation models whereby we can protect elephants in their natural, rightful environments – and even release them back into the wild.

In Nepal, for example, degraded biological corridors are being restored so that elephants and other wildlife can travel safely through their natural environment. Nepal is also an incredible example of how countries can achieve zero poaching, through habitat protection, committed leadership, and community involvement.



In Thailand, the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation has been returning formerly captive elephants back to the forest since 1997. This is an unprecedented conservation program, which has proven very successful. To date, nearly 100 elephants have been returned to 3 vast, protected forest habitats in Thailand, which are managed by the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation. Since 2012, there have been nine elephants born to previously captive elephants that have naturally mated.

Wild Asian elephant habitat is also being protected in Cambodia, where the Wildlife Alliance's Elephant Alliance campaign preserves a major elephant corridor from deforestation and other threats. The Southern Cardamom Forest Protection Program (SCFPP) provides on-the-ground protection, with

rangers patrolling against elephant killings, illegal logging, and forest encroachment.

Humans have known for eons that elephants are uniquely intelligent and self-aware. Over 100 years ago, we wrote that the elephant "shows something beyond instinct … it shows reflection".[i] If we have known for so long that these are beings of great intelligence, why have we decimated them? It's clear that ecologically significant areas need to be protected and designated as habitat for elephants and other endangered species. But by the time these necessary measures are put into place, it may be too late.

Do we want to go down in history as the generation that allowed elephants to disappear?

Written by: Patricia Sims, Jesse Holth, and Anne Dillon

Photos courtesy of: Canazwest Pictures, Roger Luo Aidong

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[i] "Sagacity of Elephants," New Zealand Tablet, May 6, 1907.