

MINUTES OF THE 1ST STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

SUB-REGIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE: CITES/MIKE-SOUTH ASIA

June 17th-18th 2004, Negombo, Sri Lanka



1. Welcome address: Mr. D. Kariyawan, Director General, Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC), Sri Lanka

Mr Kariyawan welcomed all steering committee (SC) members from the South Asian Sub-region and the CITES/MIKE staff. He thanked the CITES/MIKE programme for providing technical assistance for furthering elephant conservation in the sub-region.

Mr Kariyawan then provided an overview of the status of elephants and their conservation in Sri Lanka. He emphasized that elephant-human conflict, largely caused by increased habitat fragmentation and isolation, is a serious problem in Sri Lanka. This has led to an average of 3 elephants and one person being killed per week.

The last elephant population survey was carried out by the DWLC in association with University of Peradeniya in 1993 and updating the data is a priority. Such a survey is needed, as due to mortality caused by this conflict, there is a possibility that the demography of populations have been altered with deleterious consequences for the future. Furthermore the DWLC is in need of a central focus for managing elephants largely through conflict mitigation and the creation of corridors and data from recent population surveys are essential to convince policy makers to support these activities.

2. Welcome address: Mr. S.S. Bist, Chairman, Sub-regional Steering Committee and Director, Project Elephant, Government of India.

Mr. Bist observed with pleasure that this was the first time the Steering Committee for South Asia is meeting. Looking back at the MIKE implementation meeting in New Delhi, it was emphasized there that the MIKE programme should be a platform for furthering elephant conservation. He pointed out that since then the MIKE programme has progressed and the time has arrived to take stock. Furthermore this meeting is also timely due to the COP 13 in October, 2004.

He re-iterated that the South Asian range states will continue to look forward to the MIKE programme as a platform for fostering sub-regional cooperation in elephant conservation through dialogue, technical exchange and training. He thanked all participants for attending and Sri Lanka for hosting this meeting

3. Welcome address: Mr. Nigel Hunter, Director, CITES/MIKE

Mr. Hunter welcomed all participants and thanked Sri Lanka for hosting the Steering Committee meeting. He suggested that the steering committee meeting could serve as a forum for free and internal discussions of all bottlenecks and impediments to the MIKE programme in particular and trans-border issues in general. He also welcomed the participation of the Sub-regional Support Officer (SSO) from East African in the meeting and looked forward to his demonstration of the MIKE database to all participants.

4. SSO Report of the Progress of CITES/MIKE –South Asia

The SSO-South Asia presented his progress report for the period August 2003-June 2004. The progress report is given in Appendix 1.

5. Reactions of SC members to SSO Progress Report

i. Bhutan

Reacting to the SSO's report that insurgency in India and the frequent closing of borders has impeded access to Samchi (Samtse) site, the SC member from Bhutan stated that access has now improved and patrol activities are taking place within the site. The last comment was also in response to the Chair of the SC, commenting that patrolling should still take place despite the closing of borders.

Reacting to the SSO's report that there could be a delay of data collection due to the need to integrate the MIKE forms into other data collection protocols, the National Officer reassured that this is taking place.

ii. Nepal

Responding to the SSO's report that funding for the MIKE Programme may be constrained due to insurgency, that has not affected the implementation of the MIKE programme directly, the SC member for Nepal indicated that funding constraints are not serious though of late, insurgency may be directly affecting activities in the MIKE site.

iii. Sri Lanka

In response to the SSO's report that the MIKE programme could be impeded in both MIKE sites due to the inaccessibility of certain areas, the National Officer indicated that the road network has been recently expanded in both sites and more areas are now accessible. The greater impediment is the use of the MIKE forms. As there are several other forms, the Site Officers cannot be pressurized to fill the MIKE forms. Similarly veterinary officers have to gradually get used to carcass forms before they start using these.

Identifying the site boundaries is a priority for both sites in Sri Lanka

iv. Bangladesh

Responding to the SSO's report that as he has not visited the country, he has no first hand assessment of the MIKE programme in Bangladesh, the SC member indicated that the MIKE process is well underway.

Patrol and carcass data are summarized in the report “Asian Elephant Conservation Programme in the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary: A MIKE site in Bangladesh” distributed at the meeting. The raw data are with the Site and National Officers and can be collected by the SSO during his visit. The SSO is welcome to visit Bangladesh for GPS and forms training after the planting season in July.

v. India

As the site officers in India are Conservators of Forests, in charge of elephant reserves with constituent divisions, the SC member from India requested that the Divisional Forest Officers (DFOs) be trained on use of the MIKE database in addition to the site officer. Data can then be sent from the division offices to the site officer for completion of the monthly and annual reports

It was agreed that Deomali Elephant Reserve still has not had its boundaries fully defined.

vi. Responses to computer procurement and delivery

For computer procurement as the purchase agreement with M/S Thakral commits them to delivering computers to the site, computers should be delivered to the site and not the offices of the respective Chief Wildlife Warden’s of states in India receiving MIKE computers.

vii. Responses to Progress with respect to MIKE Baseline:

The SC member from India observed that the quality of mortality data collected prior to the start of the MIKE programme is variable and some sites may not be collecting data with the necessary rigour. Is it thus appropriate to use this kind of data for the Director’s Progress report to the CITES standing committee?

The following responses occurred to the above

- The Director CITES/MIKE stated that providing this data to the SSO/ CCU was entirely voluntary.
- The SC members from Sri Lanka and Nepal maintained that their data is reliable.
- The SC member from India agreed to provide this data. However given that in some sites data may not have been collected with the rigour of the MIKE protocol, necessary qualifiers should be attached with this kind of data.

6. Summary of Country Reports by SC members and Progress of MIKE

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a land with high biodiversity and endemism and has therefore been identified as a global biodiversity hotspot. Out of the total protected area, 88% of the area is controlled by the Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Until 1830 elephants were so plentiful that their destruction was encouraged and in combination with mortality of elephants through elephant-human conflict (EHC) resulted in the drastic decline of elephants from 12,000 to 3500 during the period 1800s to 2004. This amounts to nearly 140 elephants per year dying largely as a result of EHC. Every year elephants kill approximately 30-40 people in the country.

Gunshot injuries are the main reason for deaths among elephants followed by electrocution, falling into wells etc. The Northwestern Provinces, areas around Wilpattu NP, have the highest mortality rates followed by the Mahaweli Valley areas. Most of these deaths occur during cropping months and almost 60 % of elephants killed are males. A lack of males may lead to a future reduction in recruitment

Levels of conflict have a strong correlation with increase in human population and reduction of forest cover. As conflict has increased, the already limited resources have been further strained

Significant conservation measures have included electric fencing, translocation and elephant drives, mitigation of EHC, the augmentation and restoration of wildlife corridors and the integration of elephant conservation with economic development.

Scientific research such as population and distribution surveys, behavioural studies and information on carrying capacity are a must for proper long-term management planning.

With respect to the progress of MIKE, 126 GPS units were requested to augment the 6 units already provided by MIKE. After the training programme carried out by the MIKE SSO and the National Officer, 100 more officers were further trained

Issues

Data collection in MIKE forms is delayed due to the lack of infrastructure and GPS units. At present old forms are being used for patrol data and it will take nearly a year before these can be replaced by the MIKE forms.

Nepal

The SC member from Nepal summarized the statistics for the MIKE site with respect to area, elephant numbers, staffing and equipment. He also summarized the patrolling effort within the site and provided data on illegal activities detected and persons arrested and prosecuted.

He summarized the objectives of the Terai Arc Landscape Project and indicated that a management plan is under preparation. Regarding population surveys he pointed out that in Nepal the number of elephants moving into different jurisdictional areas is monitored very closely which gives an estimate of numbers for each jurisdictional area and the whole country. However a population survey carried out every two-three years is also possible and should be carried out.

Issues

The major impediment to the MIKE data collection was the inability to fill the forms in English.

India

The SC member from India summarized the relationship between CITES and India, the CITES organizational structure and the legal framework for the implementation of CITES in India. He provided data on the populations of elephants in India emphasizing the regions where populations are in decline and the factors responsible for this decline, largely habitat loss, selective poaching for males and mortality due to elephant-human conflict. He next indicated the progress of MIKE in India and pointed out that MIKE has several special features in India namely

1. MIKE is an approved activity of Project Elephant
2. The following activities of MIKE are of special interest to India
 - Establishment of a management information system
 - Capacity building of field staff
 - Regional cooperation
 - The bull Asian elephants with tusks are particularly vulnerable to poaching and illegal ivory trade. Therefore, bulls will be the prime focus of monitoring in India.
 - LEM forms have been revised based on the management practices in India.
 - To take full advantage of the MIKE process, it is proposed to do the data analysis at:
 - Site level
 - National level
 - Sub-regional level
 - Continental & global level (by the CCU).

Issues

1. The issue of elephants traveling from India to Bangladesh, was raised by the SC member from Bangladesh. It was claimed that nearly 100 elephants traveled regularly from Garo Hills to Bangladesh.
2. The SC member from India said that the above number had to be confirmed and Bangladesh should take steps to mitigate conflict within the country through e-fencing etc.
3. The SC member from India said that the tolerance of people in Bangladesh should be enhanced by activities such as Joint Forest Management.

Bhutan

The National Officer from Bhutan first gave the chronology of the implementation of the CITES/MIKE programme in Bhutan. She then pointed out that even though the CITES/MIKE programme has one designated site for its implementation, given the small size of the country and the increasing levels of elephant-human conflict, there is a strong need for a national elephant conservation strategy across all elephant habitats. She then summarized the training and data collection activities under the MIKE programme. She next indicated the status of the national elephant conservation proposal for donor funds and the IUCN/SSC elephant action plan for Bhutan.

The National Officer then provided a summary of the distribution and status of elephants in Bhutan with data on elephant human conflict levels and mortality.

Issues

1. The plan to make Royal Manas National Park a MIKE site should be sustained. The training for MIKE data collection protocols can start for Samchi and be expanded to RMNP in the future
2. GPS requisition should be increased through donor funding

Bangladesh

The SC member from Bangladesh first provided a background on the protected area system of Bangladesh and highlighted major fund raising and elephant conservation achievements of the Forest Department. He then provided an insight into the progress of MIKE in the country where MIKE data collection protocols are well in place and data has been now collected for over a year. He then provided details on the MIKE site, Chunati

Sanctuary, focusing on the biodiversity, economic activities within, threats it faced and conservation measures. He then provided demographic data on elephants encountered on patrols and monitored under the MIKE programme. He finally provided some insights of cross border issues with India.

Issues

Given Bangladesh's progress in the MIKE site, it may now be time to think of expanding the MIKE programme to another site. This should however be planned carefully with proper bureaucratic support from Dhaka.

7. Cross Border Issues

- While considering the resolution of cross-border issues, both ecological and political issues have to be considered-SC member from Nepal
- As cross border issues are mostly political, education of politicians is required as the fate of elephants is in their hands. Political tempers are often exacerbated by issues such as elephant-human conflict-SC member from Bangladesh
- The scenario in West Bengal, India confirms the above scenario. Anti-depredation measures etc. enforce political will for elephant conservation. Politicians should also be given the proper picture-SC member from India
- Is it possible to think of an information sharing system where information on the movement of elephants is exchanged across borders-SC member from India
- Expertise on technologies such as electric fencing should be shared across borders. Rich farmers have the money for implementing robust designs but should be given advice. This will reduce deaths through tapping of direct lines-SC member from India
- MIKE and other agencies such as the USFWS could stimulate thinking on conflict mitigation through meetings and the dissemination of forms such as the present MIKE EHC forms-Director, CITES/MIKE
- Compensation payment advice should be extended to Bhutan for elephant damage However compensation payment is like fire-fighting-SC member from Bhutan
- If information is passed on about an individual who commits an offence in India and travels to Bhutan what can be done about this individual. Is some investigation possible and can contacts be discovered?- SC member from India
- New developments in activities such as poaching should be shared across the borders –SC member from India

- Relationships between Bhutan, Assam and West Bengal are excellent and this kind of information sharing is already happening-SC member from Bhutan
- The MIKE secretariat can facilitate meetings on cross border problems given that it's within the mandate of the programme-Director CITES/MIKE.

8. Elephant Human Conflict Forms

- The use of the elephant conflict forms are voluntary
- They require field trials and subsequent modification
- They can be used in analysis for assessing the efficacy of mitigation and the design of compensation schemes. This is very important in India as analysis of EHC data has been neglected in the past
- Data collected with this form can be used by insurance companies for designing insurance plans for property and crop damage
- The MIKE database training should not be merged with the EHC database training
- Carcass forms distributed to all elephant areas in Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. For Sri Lanka and India since mortality databases already exist for the entire country MIKE carcass forms to be only used in MIKE sites and their environs.

9. MIKE Database Demonstration

The MIKE SSO of East Africa demonstrated the MIKE database Version 1.04 to all SC members. The following comments were made regarding the database

Given the fact that in South Asia, within a site, patrols could either be random perambulations or fixed routes. The database should have the flexibility to incorporate recording of both random perambulations and fixed routes on base maps linked to the database.

The Director noted this point and assured the members that he will request his database designer to incorporate this feature

The Director also indicated that the database is being further developed to link with Arcview so that waypoints downloaded from a GPS can be viewed on basemaps.

10. Discussions on CITES Proposals

At the request of the Steering Committee, the Director CITES/MIKE explained the amendments to annotations in CITES proposals to be placed before COP 13 by South

Africa and Namibia. He also summarized the contents of two working documents to be placed before the COP by Kenya.

11. Next Steps for the SSO-South Asia

In consultation with the SC members the following schedule for the next 6 months was finalized

1. Computers to be dispatched to all National Officers and Site Officers (5 in India) by early July and will be received by mid-July.
2. Re-training for GPS and forms usage and assessment of the MIKE programme in Manas National Park. Possibility of inviting additional personnel from Eastern Dooars Reserve and Bhutan to this training programme.
3. Divide database training into several sessions having around 12 people in each session
4. By the end of September the training should be completed.
5. The Director to check with ESRI about procurement of ARCVIEW 8.3.

12. The Global Progress of MIKE

At the request of the SC members the Director provided an insight into the progress of MIKE across the sub-regions highlighting successes and shortcomings and administrative, logistical and funding constraints

13. Vote of Thanks

The meeting ended with the Chairman, SC, the Director CITES/MIKE and SSO-South Asia thanking all SC members for taking time off from their busy schedules and attending this meeting