

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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### TESTIMONY OF MARSHALL P. JONES, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

REGARDING H.R. 1787, THE ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION ACT OF 1997.

JULY 31, 1997

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to provide the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's assessment of H.R. 1787, The Asian Elephant Conservation Act of 1997. On behalf of the Administration, the Service fully supports the enactment of this legislation and congratulates the Congress on its foresight in recognizing and addressing the plight of the Asian elephant.

Briefly, I would like to discuss the needs of the Asian elephant and the ability of the Service to handle implementation of the Act and to administer the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund. In addition, I would like to provide information on the capabilities and commitment of Asian countries to protect this species and their habitat, as well as what additional steps could be taken to support the implementation of the Act.

From the first appearance of a fairly small tapir like mammal in what is now Egypt 45 million years ago, elephants evolved a number of species which at one time inhabited nearly every continent. By the end of the Pleistocene glaciation about 10,000 years ago, however, only two species survived -- the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). As the largest land animals and as the ultimate symbols of power, elephants have always been viewed by humans with a mixture of awe and fear, commanding respect by their great size but also being viewed as a dangerous and sometimes difficult neighbor. However, elephants also have other, more intangible values. In Asian cultures in particular, people have embraced the Asian elephant as a treasured partner in life, deified and venerated it into their culture and religion, trained it for hunting and war, and bonded with it at the most basic level. Today, the Asian elephant is also a keystone species for the preservation of biological diversity, since habitats which support wild elephants also provide a home for a vast array of other species, large and small, and thus also is a magnet for ecotourism.

Nevertheless, despite these acknowledged values, the Asian elephant also suffers from a series of paradoxes. Because it is the elephant species usually seen in zoos and circuses, with more than 16,000 animals in captivity, it may be more familiar to the average American citizen. Yet its status is generally less well known by the media and the general public than that of its larger cousin in Africa. With all of the publicity about the decline of the African elephant, they are still more than ten times more numerous than the Asian species, which now numbers only 35,000 to 45,000 animals. The story of the dramatic decline of the African elephant, primarily from large-scale poaching is well known. The dramatic decline of Asian elephant numbers due to the ever-increasing population of the Asian continent is relatively undocumented.

The Asian elephant must share its habitat with some of the largest and poorest human populations in the

world. The combination of pressures on the environment brought on by these conditions has resulted in the conversion of forest cover to agriculture and villages, fragmenting elephant habitat and populations. It is believed that today there are only about ten populations with over 1000 elephants, with half of these located in India. The majority of remaining populations are small, with less than 100 elephants each and some with lone bulls.

The dynamics of human population growth have inevitably led to increasing conflicts between humans and elephants. This is not a new phenomenon, but as the competition for the same resources grow, people's tolerance for elephants has dropped. Asian peoples have captured elephants for almost 5,000 years for training for work-associated tasks, religious ceremonies, and war. Where people once revered the elephant and tolerated the occasional crop raiding and destruction, now they are striking back, unfortunately often with lethal results.

Unlike African elephants, Asian elephants have not traditionally been threatened by poaching for the ivory trade, perhaps because females are tuskless and only 60% of the males carry tusks. However, recent trends since 1994 indicate that poaching for ivory, as well as for meat, is on the upswing, especially in southern India. The proportion of sub-adult and adult tuskers in various populations over the last 20 years has dropped dramatically, in some areas by as much as 75%. In one outstanding example, investigations in 1994 revealed that out of 1000 elephants in Periyar Tiger Reserve, one of the strongholds for elephants in India, only five adult males were left. Even among these, only two were tuskers. This preferential decrease in the number of tuskers indicates increased poaching pressure for their ivory.

The implications of this marked sexual disparity have yet to be assessed. But it is obvious that it will result in changes in population structures, not only among adults but among sub-adults and juveniles. A drastic reduction in fertility has already been seen which will affect the long term demographic structure of this population. Similar effects have been well documented in African elephants which have been subject to heavy poaching; and even if poaching is brought under control, it may take years for normal birth rates and juvenile survival to be restored.

In recognition of these threats, the Asian elephant has been accorded the highest levels of legal protection through national laws and international treaties. It is listed as "Endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and on the IUCN--World Conservation Union Red List, and on "Appendix I" of CITES. Most of the thirteen Asian elephant range countries, including India, reinforce these international listings with domestic laws of their own. CITES listing, which is designed to eliminate the world-wide trade in ivory, has been partially successful. However, some illegal ivory obtained from poaching continues to move from country to country. Many Asian countries have the strong desire to reduce the levels of poaching and stop all illegal trade, but they need assistance if they are to improve their ability to enforcement the CITES controls.

In addition, while national legislation has afforded the elephant with maximum protection on paper, local conditions often serve to make this safety net more illusory than real. Forests in many areas can be owned by local District Councils or private individuals and subject to uncontrolled slash and burn, shifting cultivation, leading to disappearance of prime elephant habitats. Erratic economic and political situations as well as lack of emphasis on wildlife-related crimes have made it difficult for some countries to effectively enforce laws and to efficiently manage their elephant populations and other natural resources.

For these reasons, the Asian elephant is in trouble -- and it will take more than legal paperwork to ensure its survival. Asian elephants need active protection and management of their habitat, resolution of the

deleterious conflicts with humans over land uses, better law enforcement activities to protect against poaching, reduction of captures from the wild, and better care and humane treatment of the remaining captive populations. They also need the restoration of the harmonious relationship that previously existed with humans through community education and awareness activities.

Given the already endangered status of the Asian elephant and the new and insidious threats now facing it from the factors described above, it is indeed timely that this Subcommittee is now considering H.R. 1787, the Asian Elephant Conservation Act of 1997. This Act acknowledges the problems of forest habitat reduction and fragmentation, conflicts with humans, poaching and other serious issues affecting the Asian elephant. The Act addresses the need to encourage and assist initiatives of regional and national agencies and organizations whose activities directly or indirectly promote the conservation of Asian elephants and their habitat, and it provides for the establishment of an Asian Elephant Conservation Fund, authorized to receive donations and appropriated funds. While many range governments have demonstrated a commitment towards conservation, the lack of international support for their efforts has been a serious impediment.

Patterned after the African Elephant Conservation Act of 1988 and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act of 1994, the Asian Elephant Conservation Act would assign responsibility for implementation to the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Administrator of the Agency for International Development. The bill would authorize the Secretary to make grants designed to benefit Asian elephants in the world.

The Service would also mesh the administration of this new legislation with our existing responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act, using our experience gained during more than twenty years of participation in cooperative wildlife programs in Asia -- including, among many other projects, a ten-year ecological study of the Asian elephant in India involving training, research, and management activities.

Additionally, the Service has facilitated CITES implementation workshops in six Asian countries, and has so far provided support for 15 projects under the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act in three countries, with many more proposals now under review. The Service has developed an excellent working relationship with most Asian elephant range countries and with the CITES Secretariat, as well as establishing an important network of worldwide experts, advisors and cooperators that can be drawn upon for support and expertise.

Implementation of the Asian Elephant Conservation Act by the Service would be based on the pattern established by the African Elephant and Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Acts. The Service would develop a grant program with a call for proposals that would be sent out to a mailing list of potential cooperators from regional and range country agencies and organizations, including CITES partners and the CITES Secretariat. The Act's criteria for proposal approval gives the Service clear guidance, and priority would be given to proposals which would directly support and enhance wild elephant populations and which include necessary matching funds.

All amounts made available through the Conservation Fund would be allocated as quickly and as efficiently as possible. We expect that Asian elephant range countries and international organizations would submit a variety of conservation proposals for support, including research, management, conflict resolution, community outreach and education, law enforcement, CITES implementation, captive breeding, genetic studies and traditional mahout and koonkie elephant training.

Given the success under the African Elephant Conservation Act and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act, we expect that the Asian Elephant Conservation Act would make a major contribution to conservation, filling a significant void in our current programs. It would send a strong message to the world that the people of the United States care deeply about Asian elephants and that the U.S. government is committed to helping preserve this keystone species of the remaining tropical and subtropical Asian forests.

For these reasons, Mr. Chairman, we urge this Subcommittee to give favorable consideration to H.R. 1787, the Asian Elephant Conservation Act of 1997.

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