



Department of
Wildlife and
National
Parks
Peninsular Malaysia

Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in Peninsular Malaysia

Basic Facts

Found in Asia and Africa, the elephant is the largest terrestrial mammal. It belongs to the Family Elephantidae in the Order Proboscidae. Asian elephants can grow as tall as 2.5 to 3 m at the shoulder and weigh up to 5,000 kg. Only the males have tusks. However, there is tuskless male also known as *makhna*. They have 4 cm-thick skin that is tough yet very sensitive. Elephants take frequent dust baths for protection from diseases and parasites, and spray water and wallow in mud to keep themselves cool. The flapping of the ears also serves as a thermoregulatory function in hot weather. Found in lowland to hill dipterocarp forests, they feed on fruit and grasses, stems, twigs, bark, root and leaves of a variety of plants, including palms and bananas.

At the beginning of the 20th century, more than 100,000 Asian elephants may have existed. While an accurate estimate of the current size of total elephant numbers is unavailable, it is roughly estimated that there are between 30,000 and 50,000 Asian elephants remaining, as opposed to 10 times as many African elephants.

Asian elephants live in matriarchal herds, of breeding groups of 3 to 40 females and young. Females give birth to a single calf, sometimes twins, after a 21-month gestation period. A unique feature of the elephant social system is called *allo-mothering* behaviour, where females look after and protect calves that are not necessarily their own. Males leave the herd upon maturity, and join other males, or live alone. They only seek females to mate.

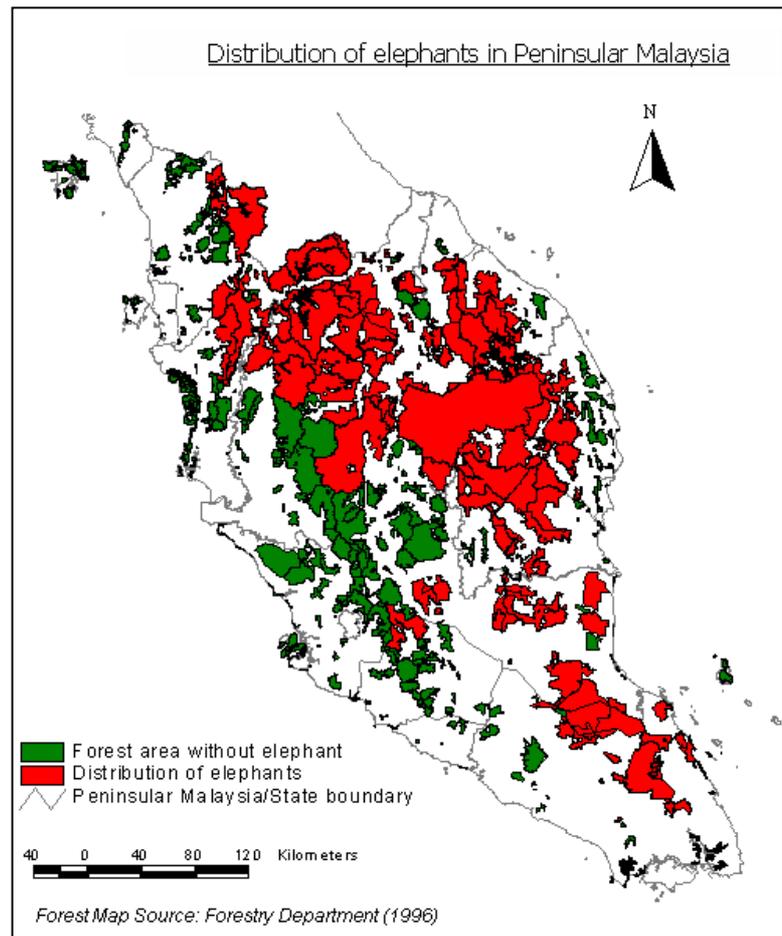
Protected status

Internationally, it is listed as an endangered species on the 2004 IUCN Red List and on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). In Peninsular Malaysia, it is protected under the Protection of Wild Life Act No. 76, 1972, which makes it an offence for anyone to unlawfully shoot, kill, take or possess an elephant or part thereof. If guilty, the penalty is a maximum fine of RM3,000, or 3 years imprisonment, or both. If it is a female elephant, the maximum fine is RM6,000, or 3 and a half years imprisonment, or both. A juvenile elephant entails a maximum fine of RM3,500 or 2 years imprisonment, or both.

Anyone who injures, mistreats, starves or confines in an enclosure or cage that is not conducive to the elephant's comfort or health is liable to a maximum fine of RM5,000, or 3 years imprisonment, or both. Anyone who provokes or wounds an elephant that consequently becomes an immediate danger to human life, will be fined up to RM5,000 or 3 years imprisonment, or both.

Distribution and Population Status

An estimate puts the Peninsular Malaysia elephant population at 1,220 - 1,460. This is based on data collected by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), Peninsular Malaysia through its inventory and monitoring programmes from 2000 to 2002. The Taman Negara National Park holds the largest population in Peninsular Malaysia at 290 - 350 elephants. This is mainly because it is the largest protected area and it has been the main release area for translocated elephants since 1983.



A bull elephant photographed with camera-trap near one of the salt-lick site in Taman Negara

Conservation Actions

As the government agency responsible for wildlife conservation in Peninsular Malaysia, DWNP conducts a variety of programmes that contribute to elephant conservation. It manages 40 Protected Areas (PA) peninsula-wide, totaling 7,514 km². Taman Negara National Park is the largest of all the PAs, encompassing 4,343 km², spanning Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu. In 2003, it was announced that Perak's 1,175 km² Belum Forest Reserve would be gazetted as the Royal Belum State Park, promising good prospects for elephant conservation.

In 1974, DWNP established a team to capture and translocate elephants in conflict situations to safer areas such as national parks and large forest reserves or state parks. More than 500 elephants from Pahang, Terengganu, Perak, Perlis, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan and Johor have been captured and translocated to the Royal Belum State Park, the Endau Rompin and the Taman Negara National Parks.

The Kuala Gandah National Elephant Conservation Centre, the state Biodiversity Conservation Centres and Zoo Melaka conduct conservation education and awareness programmes. Elephant specific awareness programmes run daily at Kuala Gandah NECC.

The DWNP's Rhino Protection Unit conducts patrols to protect the Sumatran rhinoceros and its habitat. As the priority conservation sites are similar, the protection extends to the elephants and many other species.

A number of research projects on elephants have been conducted by DWNP or external researchers in collaboration with DWNP since 1960's. The DWNP researchers are currently monitoring the movement and habitat utilization of elephants using the latest satellite tracking system. The scope of other studies includes elephant ecology, populations, distributions and human-elephant conflict management.

Starting in 2005, the DWNP also conducts a new enforcement monitoring programme called Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE). Initiated by CITES, this programme uses a data collections and management system standardized throughout the Asian elephant range states. The information gathered will be a useful management tool for elephants in Malaysia.



Displace elephants are translocated from conflict areas to safer areas like Taman Negara, Endau Rompin National Park and Royal Belum State Park

Research on translocated elephant movements in Taman Negara was conducted using satellite transmitter



One of the popular activities at Kuala Gandah National Elephant Conservation Center is bathing with the elephants



Main Threat

Habitat loss and fragmentation are the main threats to elephants in Peninsular Malaysia. Prior to the 1980s, vast areas of lowland forests - prime elephant habitat - were converted into oil palm and rubber plantations. Much had to make way for the construction of dams and highways. From only 540 km² in 1960, oil palm plantations covered more than 16,000 km² in 1987. Various government agricultural land schemes such as Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), Rubber Industry Smallholding Development Authority (RISDA) and Federal Land Conversion and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA) develop land to eradicate poverty among the rural community. While the deforestation rate has stabilized since the late 1990s, forest clearing for small scale plantation continues to create fragmented forests where the situation is worsened by logging activities within. For instance, the elephant population in Negeri Sembilan currently survived by only 3 – 5 individuals. There are no more elephants left in Selangor even elephants were once abundant in both of these states.

Shrinking of elephant habitats forces them out of the forests in search of food. This then creates the human-elephant conflicts. Elephants inhabiting the forest fringes neighbouring plantations find that these plantations, usually oil palm and banana, offer easy pickings. These crop-raiding elephants cause large financial losses to plantation owners. In the past, DWNP rangers would shoot the problem elephants, but presently the elephants are translocated elsewhere. Landowners often resort to killing the elephants. They have also adopted several preventive measures, such as constructing trenches and watch towers, patrolling with tractors, installing bright lights, or driving elephants off using shotguns, bamboo canons and burning tires and logs. These, however, aren't always successful or necessarily legal. Electric fences are often more effective, but are expensive to maintain.

Worldwide, the elephant is poached for its tusks, called ivory. Elephants are also illegally captured for zoos and private collections. Although less serious than habitat loss and fragmentations, poaching is still a threat to the elephants in Peninsular Malaysia.