

POPULATION ESTIMATES

WWF: MORE DATA NEEDED FOR ELEPHANT CONSERVATION

Population in some Sabah areas likely overestimated, says environmental group

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A RECENT paper on the Bornean elephant population in central Sabah signals the need for more data to be collected to better manage conservation efforts.

A peer-reviewed study titled "Recent Estimate of Asian Elephants in Borneo Reveals a Smaller Population" by WWF-Malaysia estimated the species' population in central Sabah is 387, with a density of 0.07 individuals per km square.

The surveyed area includes Ulu Segama, Malua, Kuamut, Gunung Rara, Kalabakan and Sungai Pinangah Forest Reserve.

If other areas of the central Sabah elephant range, such as parts of the Sapulut Forest Reserve, Ulu Kalumpang Forest Reserve and Kalabakan Forest Reserve, are included the total estimated elephant population in central Sabah is 451 individuals.

These estimates are smaller than figures obtained in a study published in 2010.

The study's co-author, Dr Cheryl Cheah, said the smaller estimate was not an indication of

population decline in the central Sabah elephant range.

"On the contrary, our study found that the elephant habitat in central Sabah remains stable with a substantial increase in the proportion of area allocated for total protection.

"Rather, the differences in estimates are due to methodological limitations in the previous estimations," said Cheah, who is also the Elephant Conservation Manager at WWF-Malaysia.

According to the Bornean Elephant Action Plan for Sabah 2020-2029 by the Sabah Wildlife Department, experts estimate that there are no more than 1,000 to 1,500 individuals in Sabah.

WWF said updated population estimates for the other elephant subpopulations in Sabah were needed, namely in Lower Kin-

abatangan, Tabin, and North Kinabatangan.

The conservation group said it was likely that these populations had been overestimated in the previous study.

WWF-Malaysia said it would work with the Sabah Wildlife Department and Sabah Forestry Department to conduct population surveys in some of these ranges.

It said the new estimate strengthens the case to keep the Bornean elephant as a totally protected species and decisions on population management should consider the long-term viability of populations.

"Information on other population parameters necessary for monitoring population trends and population management — birth rate, natural death rate, sex ratio, and age structure — is unavailable

for elephants in that range.

"As population size alone is inadequate to assess the population's long-term viability, it is essential to estimate other key characteristics for inferring population status and developing robust policies and actions for elephant population management," said Cheah, who is also WWF-Malaysia elephant conservation manager.

To protect elephant subpopulation in central Sabah, the study recommends that there should be no further habitat loss, forestry and agriculture plantations should not expand into the most suitable lowland habitats, and the protected area should not be reduced.

The study also called for measures to address alleged poisoning of elephants.



Elephants seen in the wild in Sabah. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 elephants in Sabah, and 451 of them are believed to be in central Sabah. PIC COURTESY OF WWF-MALAYSIA