

SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN WILD AND CAPTIVE ELEPHANT POPULATIONS – FACETS THEN AND NOW

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A well established “captive elephant industry” evolved in Sri Lanka beginning from the time of the hydraulic civilization in the island that flourished and spanned for well over a thousand years from about 300 BC. Elephant calves captured from the wild were the source of this industry. Captive elephants were the modern day equivalent of construction machinery that enabled the development of irrigation infrastructure making the country the “Granary of the East”. Added export and trade in captured elephants brought in revenue. With the growing prosperity, arts and crafts developed and the elephant became an integral part of the culture. The “Elephant Owners” who were the investors in this elephant industry came from the nobility and the industry made them wealthy while giving them an elevated status. With the usefulness both for economic and cultural reasons becoming indispensable, the general population developed a deep love, affinity and respect towards elephants both captive and wild. The preservation of elephants in the wild was essential to ensure an unending supply of captive elephants. The modern concept of breeding in captivity was therefore not a necessity. Due to the viability of the industry, a lineage of well trained professional mahouts evolved. Similarly the science of native elephant medicine developed.

With the waning of the advanced civilization beginning around the 15th C. due to repeated invasions from India, the elephant industry too waned. The human population declined due to wars and diseases and vast tracts of cultivated land were overtaken by the jungle. The paddy fields became grasslands and the irrigation reservoirs became water holes. Wild elephant range and numbers thus increased. This was the scene at the time European colonization started in the 16th C. The country thus became a playground for the European sportsmen who hunted elephants in vast numbers and also exported them for sale. On top of that the jungles were reclaimed for the growing of introduced cash crops like tea, rubber and coconut. Elephant habitat rapidly decreased along with their numbers. This was the setting at the time of independence in 1948. On the positive side, a decade or so earlier finally sensing the impending disaster, the first wildlife protection legislation and the creation of protected areas came into being. However, the capture of elephants continued.

Kralling was the preferred method of elephant capture where herds were frightened and driven into stockades. Once in, they were starved and then broken with the help of captive elephants. Then they were auctioned. This was often a cruel practice that resulted in the death of many elephants. Events climaxed at the krall named “Panamure Krall” held in 1953. A majestic and towering bull defended his kind to the end and refused to bow down. The lives of people conducting the krall as well as visiting dignitaries were at risk and the bull had to be put down. This was the tipping point that rallied the whole country against elephant capture. Capture of wild elephants was proscribed.

With unending supply of elephants from the wild now ceased the numbers of captive elephants started to decline. The income derived from elephants too declined due to the introduction of

machinery for work. The availability of low cost fodder reduced with urbanization and elephant owners found that their upkeep was becoming more expensive while the income was reducing. The lineage of professional mahouts too got dented with the declining fortunes of the owners. The attention to the health of elephants suffered. However the prestige associated with owning an elephant due to the affinity the people have with them remains and so does the place of the elephant in the culture of the nation. Those remaining captive elephants are now aged and their health is failing. The owners did not have the means or the drive to begin a captive breeding programme in time.

The latest chapter now of this unending saga is the recent uncovering of elephant abductions from the wild, where abducted calves are posed off as offspring of captive elephants, taking advantage of loopholes in the law. The author as a wildlife official has been at the forefront of investigating such cases. New legislation to plug the loopholes and prevent this activity is in the offing.

The silver lining in the dark clouds is the success of the Elephant Orphanage in breeding elephants. The sustainable herd here can be the future of the captive elephant industry where they can be trained and loaned for cultural activity thereby keeping the traditions alive and retaining the bond between people and elephants. Similarly, the Elephant Transit Home acts as a buffer for orphaned wild elephants that are reared and returned to the wild. While the country has a significant network of protected areas more emphasis on its management can sustain the wild populations well into the future in spite of the myriad of issues affecting effective management today. There is hope that the unique symbiosis between wild and captive elephants can remain if the playing field can continue to evolve with the changing times.