

Symposium on Human-Elephant Relations in South and Southeast Asia, University of Canterbury, May 7 & 8



This two-day symposium brought together an international array of senior and junior researchers from across the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences for an interdisciplinary exploration of the manifold aspects of the human-elephant relationship. Hosted by the Department of Anthropology and the New Zealand South Asia Centre (NZSAC), anthropologists, ecologists, geographers, historians, political scientists,

Sanskritists, zoologists, and zoo elephant experts from Australia, France, Germany, India, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, the UK, and the USA met for an intensive meeting featuring dynamic presentations and vibrant discussion. The event provided a unique opportunity for productive debate across disciplinary boundaries on issues of welfare and conservation, history and coexistence, policy and practice, through which elephants have been variously

bound up in human projects as weapons of war, emblems of prestige, symbols of divinity, objects of entertainment, icons of conservation, commodities for exchange, vehicles for labour, and intimate companions.



Raman Sukumar giving the keynote lecture

India's premier elephant ecologist, Professor Raman Sukumar of the Indian Institute of Science gave the keynote lecture; a magisterial survey of the human-elephant relationship through the ages. His talk ranged from the archaeological evidence of the Indus Valley Civilization through to the post-colonial present; discussing the use of elephants in war, Sanskrit literature encoding expert

knowledge about elephants, the emergence of the elephant-headed deity *Ganesha*, the political significance of elephants in the Mughal period, and the use of elephants in logging under British colonialism, concluding with remarks on the future prospects for captive and wild elephants in Asia. This was followed by the first of four sessions, on humans and elephants as mutually entangled species, beginning with a presentation by Piers Locke (Canterbury), in which he proposed an integrated approach to the study of human-elephant relations called ethnoelephantology, in which he recognized elephants as well as humans as ethnographic subjects. Maan Barua (Oxford) then discussed the role of elephant encounters, both real and virtual, as experienced in the lives of rural people and in mobilizing action for conservation, considering elephants not only in terms of use value, but also in terms of charismatic authority. Kierin Mackenzie (Canterbury) concluded the panel with a presentation on the application of ethnoecological methods in mapping traditional knowledge about environments, elephants, and interactions with humans.

The second panel, *Humans and Elephants Through Time* began with Thomas Trautmann (Michigan) reporting

on his work developing a history of the ancient origins of mahoutship and the transmission of elephant knowledge through the Greek, Persian, Roman and Egyptian civilizations. Then Jane Buckingham (Canterbury) explored the significance of the elephant during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar as a symbol of masculinity and power. Patrick Olivelle (Texas) detailed the contents of Kautilya's *Arthasāstra* as it pertains to knowledge of elephant behavior, elephant capture, elephant care, specialist roles, evidence for the trade in elephants and their ivory, and the challenges of interpretation. Finally, Amy Fletcher (Canterbury) discussed the implications of sequencing the woolly mammoth genome, how and why one might resurrect an extinct species, and what such a mooted project reveals about human desire and technology.

The third panel, *Living With Elephants* showcased recent anthropological work on the ethnography of captive elephant management. Nicolas Lainé (Paris West) analyzed songs used by ethnic Khamti mahouts in Assam, exploring their role in the mutual socialization of human and elephant as intimate working companions. Ingrid Suter (Queensland) discussed the results of an extensive survey of mahouts in Laos, exploring the variable conditions,

expertise, and self-evaluations of those working in logging and those working in tourism. Nikki Savvides (Sydney) outlined the problems facing captive elephants in Thailand, focusing on the loss of traditional employment opportunities for humans and elephants in Surin province. These papers were followed by two presentations dealing with welfare issues. Surendra Varma (Indian Institute of Science) summarized his extensive research in ten Indian states on the relations between elephant and mahout welfare in zoos, circuses, forest camps, temples, private ownership, and street begging. The panel concluded with Erin Ivory (Franklin Zoo), who explored the controversies and internal politics of elephant-keeping institutions in the western world.

The final panel, *Sharing Space with Elephants* was concerned with conflict and coexistence in South India and Sri Lanka, where solutions are sought to best accommodate the needs of human and elephant. Charles Santiapillai (Rajarata) presented the results of the 2011 Sri Lankan elephant survey, discussing the landscape modifications that facilitate the persistence of elephants on an island with limited habitat and a high human population density, whilst his colleague Shanmugasundaram Wijeyamohan

(Rajarata) discussed new initiatives to monitor wild bulls and to alert local villagers to the presence of potentially dangerous wild elephants. Tarsh Thekaekara (Shola Trust) presented research from the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu investigating the differential tolerance toward elephants in different human communities, the ways in which elephants are perceived, their incursions mitigated, the main drivers of human-elephant conflict, and the significance of media reports. In her absence, Piers Locke presented Ursula Münster's paper (LMU Munich) on the contrasting case of human-elephant conflict in and around the Wayanad wildlife sanctuary, Kerala,

which highlighted the social, historical and ecological entanglement of human and elephant, the latter locally recognized as persons in consonance with findings from animal behavioural science.

The points of intersection between the disciplines represented at the symposium made the case for future interdisciplinary approaches to researching human elephant relationships in South and Southeast Asia, yielding the prospect of new research collaborations and talk of new plans to support the needs of elephants, captive and wild. Symposium participants agreed to develop their papers for publication under the editorship of the conveners Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham. 🌟

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