

Elephants never forget and neither will I...

Through my binoculars, I have been intently observing for the past ten minutes what I believe is a questionable looking dark greyish boulder, obscured by surrounding vegetation. Or it is in fact my first sighting of a wild Asian elephant? My suspicion is confirmed when this dark shape stealthily moves forward into a clearing in the trees. Fingers tighten around binoculars. Camera lenses snap into focus. We fall silent in our open safari jeep, which is sitting in an ancient elephant corridor. These majestic beings have used this ancient migratory route for generations and we attentively watch this gentle giant grazing peacefully. (We can identify that he is a bull elephant, because he is alone. Elephant herds are strongly matriarchal and once the males have reached maturity they go off by themselves).

All too soon, this serene moment is broken when a farmer enters the scene and unexpectedly lights a firecracker, there is an explosive sound and smoke fills the air. We jump; startled by the sound. Apparently, this was a necessary move to carry out to scare the innocent bull elephant away in order for the farmer to reach his livestock.

I have just witnessed my first encounter of "Human-Elephant conflict" (HEC).

I am in Sri Lanka, more specifically in the Wasgamuwa region, where I will spend just over a month volunteering with The Sri Lankan Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS). HEC is responsible for the plight of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in Sri Lanka. In this case, this elephant was not hurt but seeing that he did not so much as flinch shows that this unfortunate incident is not an uncommon one. This is a perennial cycle where both people and elephants suffer. SLWCS aims to mitigate this conflict by working closely with local communities and wildlife, and by addressing environmental, social, economic and land use issues - in other words "helping elephants by helping people".

No two days are the same when volunteering with SLWCS. My days entail adventures of trekking (sometimes up to 4 miles!) through scrub jungle, in sweltering heat with temperatures coming up to 40°C, through grass so tall it feels like something out of "Honey, I Shrank the Kids". Jostling and bumping in our seats, the journey to our location of research is only half the fun. We travel along a great off road stretch, skirting paddy fields so vibrant that the grass is almost glowing, passing cormorants sunning their wings, while pairs of Alexandrine parakeets and Malabar pied hornbills soar above me.

At the end of each day, I would be completely exhausted from our work, returning to our fieldhouse but I always found myself eager to wake up at five o'clock the next morning to go bird watching. You will catch the most spectacular sun rises over prehistoric looking jungle; an ethereal haze hangs over the mosaic of dark emeralds and yellow-green hues. We are surrounded by an orchestra of birdsong, frequently seen are paradise flycatchers, drongos, black-hooded orioles and Indian rollers. It feels thrillingly remote, on our crowded planet, it is a privilege indeed to be here. Sri Lanka's rich biodiversity of unique flora and fauna will never cease to amaze me. I have often heard that elephants are the gardeners of the forest, if we want to save the elephants; we also have to conserve the ecosystem they live in. This doesn't apply to just elephants but to all the world's exotic and magnificent species that are on the decline. It is all the more important to preserve natural beauty such as this.