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Letter to the Editor

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Sanctuaries Are Not the Answer to Human-Elephant Conflict

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) refers to the upcoming elephant sanctuary in Kota Tinggi, Johor known as the Kampung Panti Elephant Sanctuary and another proposed sanctuary to be built in Hulu Perak. These two elephant sanctuaries are intended to address the human-elephant conflict (HEC) in those areas but SAM is doubtful that sanctuaries are the best option to resolve the human-elephant conflict and elephant conservation issues.

In the absence of policy there is an overemphasis on the symptoms rather than the causes of the problem. Sanctuaries are not the only effective solution, and different approaches need to be integrated to address the HEC proactively.

What are the real objectives in the establishment of these two sanctuaries other than to mitigate the human-elephant conflict? Reputable sanctuaries make every effort to replicate an animal's natural habitat as well as providing them with the highest standards of humane care, free from any form of further exploitation. Is this the case here in Malaysia?

SAM noted that the stated intent of these sanctuaries is to serve "as a tourism attraction for nature lovers." Do the planners understand that no reputable wild animal sanctuary allows any kind of hands-on interaction, and that includes posing for photos, take part in bathing them or even ride on them. Such interactions are disruptive and frightening for them—and endanger both the animals and the visitors. Animals are not props.

A major concern is space at both facilities. At Kampung Panti, can the Minister of Water, Land and Natural Resources, the Johor and Perak State Governments, and the Wildlife Department attest to a 100 ha site as adequate for 150 elephants? That is about 1.6 acres per elephant and the total area would contain paddock, food storage area, administrative block and others, therefore the actual space left for the elephants will be much less.

At Hulu Perak, the elephant sanctuary is a 40 ha site with other amenities such as a clinic, food storage facility, office, research office and interpretive centre and gallery occupying much space. Bear in mind that these are wide ranging wild elephants that need a lot of space to forage, feed, explore, and socialise; is this a large enough site?

If the plan is to put all the wild elephants into these two facilities, then that is indeed a dramatic and inhumane way of dealing with the HEC. If it is only for taking in captured wild elephants, then they are not so much sanctuaries, as they are holding facilities or zoos. In any case, the number of elephants is likely to be too large for such small sites.

There is a need for a clear policy and strategic planning to resolve the human-elephant conflict and elephant conservation issues. The current approach to dealing with conflict is largely ad-hoc, and predisposed to failure

because of inappropriate application of methods, lack of involvement of local people, lack of monitoring of conflict and conflict mitigation measures, and inadequate understanding of elephant ecology in deploying mitigation strategies.

Since habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation are the root causes of the problem, these issues need to be addressed to provide long-term solutions to the conflict.

Elephants are intelligent mammals competing for resources, and mitigation must involve not just curbing animal movement and consolidating habitat, but also enabling local villagers to withstand the costs as some level of conflict will be inevitable. Conflict mitigation cannot be solved by Wildlife Department alone; it requires multidisciplinary collaborations between the Forestry Department, companies, land-use planners and biologists working with the community to re-establish lost migratory routes, as well as a long time frame and political will.

The current and future land use plans need to accommodate elephants. This could be an entry point for a much wider conservation action whose significance goes beyond these large mammals. To be successful, a national policy, with a budget to implement it, is needed.

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