

# The Elephants in Sri Lanka

Posted on

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A Majestic elephant receives a Presidential pat. Raja, the tusker of the Temple of the Tooth Relic, being patted by His Excellency President J.R. Jayewardene, who is also an elephant lover. The elephant is the symbol of the President's political party.

Sri Lanka has a rich and exotic variety of wildlife and a long tradition of conservation rooted in its 2500 years old Buddhist civilization. Ancient kings gave protection to wild animals by royal edict and the world's first Wildlife sanctuary was established at Mihintale near Anuradhapura in the 3rd century B.C. The elephant is the star of Sri Lanka's wildlife and an essential part of its heritage. Sri Lanka's elephant, which is the largest land animal in the country, averages about 8 feet in height and 5 tons in weight. Some male animals grow tusks while others have tushes. An elephant needs about 300 kgs. of foliage and grass each day and plenty of water for drinking and bathing. A female elephant gives birth once in 4 years and the baby weighs around 100 kgs. An elephant is full grown when it is about years old. For centuries the elephant occupied a unique place in Sri Lanka's art and architecture. Ancient temple carvings depict elephant very prominently. Elephant carvings are found around the Ruvanveliseya, one of the tallest Buddhist stupas in the world built in 3rd century B.C. at Anuradhapura. Bas relief sculptures of elephants sporting in a lotus pool are found at the ancient Isurumuniya Temple and in the pleasure gardens close by. Elephants also figure in Sri Lanka's folklore, legend and literature. The gait of a woman has been likened to the graceful walk of an elephant by the great poet who wrote the Guttala Kavaya, a classical poem of the Sinhalese. One of the 18 folk melodies -vannams -describe the elephants' walk. The elephant is perhaps the best example of Sri Lanka's animals that have been particularly helpful to man. From time immemorial elephants have played a key role in the life of the people.

Ancient Sinhalese kings were found of keeping a large number of elephants and used them during wars. Elephants were the forerunner of the modern armoured

tanks. In fact the might of the kings was measured by the number of war elephants they possessed. Only kings were privileged to ride elephants. The royal elephant was adorned with rich garments and garlands. A cruel mode of punishment in ancient Sri Lanka was to have criminals trampled to death by elephants trained for the purpose. Robert Knox in his "An Historical Relation of Ceylon" provides a graphic description of such punishment. Today no important ceremony, festivity or village happening is complete without an elephant parading in colourful caparison or just walking along peacefully with the mahout by its side. Elephants are a common yet important feature on religious occasions. Each year in August Sri Lanka's most famous elephant, Raja, parades majestically in the city of Kandy about 115 km east of Colombo, in the pageant held to honour the Tooth Relic of the Buddha. For half a century this 80 year old magnificent tusker, accompanied by nearly 100 other elephants and 2000 drummers and dancers, has carried the sacred relic casket on his back during the Esala Festival which is one of the most spectacular pageants of Asia.

Raja-which means king-was declared a national treasure by President J. R. Jayewardene in 1985 and all expenses for his maintenance are provided by the State. As the tusker is now old, the temple authorities have obtained a 11 year old elephant from Thailand named Vijayaraja. This young creature who lived in a Thai jungle is being trained to succeed Raja as the casket bearer for the perahera. He is also being trained to understand commands in the Sinhala language, to get used to the sound of drums, the glare of flames and flares and the sight of thousands of people who throng the city to witness the colourful pageant. Two centuries ago elephants roamed the high hills of this country freely and in great numbers. Due to the clearing of slopes for tea plantations these animals lost their montane habitats and were confined to limited areas in small and isolated populations. Elephants were also hunted in great numbers in the hill country. Although no elephants are seen in the hills today, there are signs of their presence in the Peak Wilderness.



Working elephants gelling a scrub after a day's work. Photo – Fred R. Malvenna



The richly caparisoned Raja, the tusker of the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, carrying the relic's casket in the Kandy Perahera. Elephants are a feature of festive

and religious processions in Sri Lanka. Photo – Department of Information

Elephants in Sri Lanka have been domesticated for work and commercial purposes for centuries. They are used for heavy work such as logging, to fell trees and carry heavy logs. It was after the advent of the British that the situation changed with the shooting of elephants for sport and financial gain. Thousands of elephants were killed by English “sportsman” during the last century. Even a reward often shillings per head had been offered by the colonial government for every elephant killed. It is said that over 10,000 elephants were killed by the end of the last century.

Perhaps one of the best known elephant hunters in Sri Lanka was Major Thomas William Rogers who had bagged 1400 elephants. Rogers was an Englishman who served as an Assistant Government Agent and District Judge of Badulla in the middle of the last century. Changes in ecology and habitat caused by opening the forests made masses of elephants go on the rampage causing loss of life and material possession. Rogers, the great sportsman that he was helped to thin their ranks and especially those of the crop-devouring herds. Major Rogers met with a tragic death at Haputale when a streak of lightning struck him down. The villagers still believe he came to this tragic end because he had killed an elephant in the sacred boundaries of the holy shrine of Kataragama, in the south.

According to local tradition the curse of the elephant followed him even to his final rest, for more than once lightning has struck his grave.

Contemporary accounts reveal how thousands of these valuable animals were shot down just for the pleasure of the colonial Englishmen. Sir Samuel Baker, Major J. Forbes, Harry St. Orey. Thomas Skinner are some of the writers who have left accounts of elephant hunting in Sri Lanka in the 19th century.

Besides Major Rogers. Major Forbes is credited with the killing of over 1200 in ten years. Forbes mentions that within 7 days a party of 5 Europeans killed 106 elephants in the jungle. Baker mentions that he killed 50 animals close to Nuwara Eliya. Following an outcry by animal lovers about this wanton destruction of elephants by English hunters who were mostly planters. the British Government forbade the killing of elephant by legislation in 1901.

Today large scale development projects and increasing human activity in areas which were once the natural habitats of elephants have displaced these animals from their home ranges. Moreover, increased felling of timber has caused much

damage to jungle areas reducing their habitat. Remaining herds of elephants and solitary animals are pocketed in small jungle blocks -adjacent to human settlements.

Wild elephants are migratory by nature and have typical patterns of movement during different seasons. During these movements they come into contact with crops and plantations which are either in their tracks or habitats. Reduction and fragmentation of habitats and food sources force the elephants to seek their food elsewhere. They go in search of cultivated crops for their food requirements. Where there is a scarcity of water, elephants travel long distances in search of water often across cultivated land, resulting in damage to crops.

Sri Lanka's elephant is a highly mobile, grazing animal feeding on coarse forage which includes various types of grasses, leaves and vegetation. An adult elephant spends 70-90 percent of their time foraging. There is a popular belief that elephants go near a water source when they have to die. Emerson Tennent who lived in Sri Lanka during British times in his book on the wild elephants, mentions the belief that there is a secret graveyard for elephants.

Elephants usually roam the jungles in family herds, large herds consisting of several families, or alone as solitary bulls. While a family herd will consist of a male, several females, young adults and baby elephants, a large herd will number from 30-130 elephants including as many as ten babies. It is interesting to note the high percentage of baby elephants found in the jungles. There are a large number of babies in the jungles of Lahugala, Kantale and Yala. Elephant husbandry is not a new concept in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka has been mainly responsible for the protection and conservation of this majestic animal. There have been a few instances of breeding by domesticated elephants in the country. At Pinnawela, the first elephant orphanage in Sri Lanka was set up in 1972. On thirty acres of land there are 30 elephants at present, their ages ranging from a few months to twenty years. Elephants found lost in the jungles are looked after here. Some of the smaller ones are those stranded due their mothers being killed by poachers.

History was created at the Pinnawela elephant orphanage in July 1984 when Kumari, a she elephant, gave birth to a female baby, which was named Sukumali. This is believed to be the first elephant birth in captivity in Sri Lanka. Sukumali's father Vijaya, has now found another mate at the orphanage named Mathali. Vijaya and Mathali mated in March 1986. Mathali is about 18 years old and has acted as

foster mother for all orphaned babies brought to the orphanage. She is expecting her young one in January – 1988.

Although elephants are known to mate in secrecy deep inside jungles in a stream, Pinnawela does not offer such conditions for elephant breeding. So far there has been only one case of calving during the last 15 years and a second calving is expected by the middle of this year.

Elephants are a dwindling species in this country and are carefully protected in Sri Lanka's national parks where they are a major attraction. The Yala National Park, which lies 305 kilometres to the south of Colombo, has large herds of elephants. At Yala the visitor has the best chance of seeing wild elephants at close range in a full day's outing.



Babies and adult elephant at the elephant orphanage at Pinnawela.  
Photo – Department of Wild Life Conservation



A cross-tusker in the wild. Very few such animals are now left. Photo – Department of Wild Life Conservation.

At the Lahugala Elephant Sanctuary the open parklands, dense jungle, water holes, small lakes, lagoons and streams provide an ideal habitat for the elephants. Lahugala is elephant country and large herds of elephants roam the area freely. During the drought large numbers of these animals gather near two tanks to drink water.

Herds of over 150 have been observed in this park. Lahugala which is about 175 miles from Colombo is perhaps the finest place in Sri Lanka to observe elephants with total ease.

Wilpattu National Park, which is situated 176 kms. north of Colombo, has a denser jungle cover and also has a sizeable elephant population.

The Gal Oya National Park, which was a by-product of the massive Gal Oya multipurpose colonisation and hydroelectricity, scheme, provides sanctuary to the

wildlife of the area. Elephants are Gal Oya's pride and could be viewed early in the morning or late in the afternoon as they come to drink water from the irrigation reservoir – the Senanayake Samudra.

Ivory from the tusks of elephants is used to turn out exquisite carvings and pieces of art. Trade in ivory has been done from ancient times. Ivory trade is now banned in Sri Lanka to ensure the protection of tuskless elephants who number about 5 percent of the total elephant population in the country.

Elephants could also be taught to perform and entertain. At the National Zoo at Dehiwela on Sundays and holidays there is an elephant circus which is very popular among the visitors.

Sri Lanka's much loved and noble animal the elephant is now regarded as an endangered species. At the turn of the century the elephant population was around 36,000. However, according to present estimates, only 3000 of these animals including 500 domesticated elephants, are left in the country.