

Watch Them Grow



'Watching you watching us': three curious jumbos at the Ritigala Transit Home for elephants

They shuffled and jostled along in their haste, one baby giant tailing the other led by the eldest, Kandula. Humans were an utter curiosity to them. They crowded against the thick fence extending their trunks and radiating oodles of adorability. Heeding the very many notices along the fence I restrained myself from petting this cuddly lot who would eventually find their rightful place in the wild. Just three months into its existence the Ritigala Transit Home for Elephants was already a refuge for seven orphaned jumbo babies.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

Following in the footsteps of the elephant transit home in Udawalawe, the enclosure in Ritigala serves the same means for this region which is populated with elephants. The transit home is located a few kilometers down Galpitagama Road, off the main Ritigala road. The baby jumbos residing at present however are from various parts of the Island found orphaned or injured.

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The five in the main enclosure, Kandula, Soba—the only female, Kalana, Mahasen and Waruna show no signs of distress and instead seemed a boisterous bunch. In two separate enclosures were Atlas and Wasala who were less fortunate, each making slow recoveries from grievous ailments. Their ages range from three months to two years and the littlest jumbo Waruna still appeared wobbly on his stubby legs while the hair on his back stood comically as he tumbled along shepherded this way and that by the rest.

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The enclosure is still in its early stages of development and only able to manage the upkeep of not more than seven elephants. The transit home is located adjacent a reservoir, the Mahadivul Tank, for ample water supply and suitable environs for the growing pachyderms. These elephants are raised in these safe confines till up to five years when they are released into the wild. The success of this endeavour however is yet to be seen. Each of the seven young ones are satiated on milk given every three hours! We were on time to view this spectacle at three in the afternoon. The keepers brought out the goods, the buckets, the Lactogen formula powder, feeding tubes and funnels. And the flurry of activity that ensued to prepare the milk soon bred impatience within the little herd. Kandula in particular trumpeted petulantly and went as far as attempting a climb over the fence.

Finally the thick creamy milk was brought forth in a flagon filled to the brim and poured down the funnel and feeding tube that ended in large gulps down the jumbo throat. The older elephants eagerly wrapped their limber trunks around the tubes as they guzzled down the milk in a matter of seconds. Kandula proved a handful as he became the bully of the playground and had to be chased away so that the younger elephants could be fed without receiving rude thumps or being pushed aside unceremoniously. It was a case of hierarchy and a resigned and sombre demeanour came over little Waruna as he stood motionless – the picture of enduring patience. The keepers doted on these elephants and the jumbos in turn responded to their christened names.

The keepers at the transit home are animal lovers no doubt as it is not only elephants that find refuge. A blind deer and even an abandoned baby squirrel are cared for and the sick elephants are given special treatment by the resident veterinarian. Looking after these needy jumbos, they say, is an elephantine task, requiring their undivided attention and resources in plentiful. The expense for milk alone easily exceeds 20,000 rupees a day. While sponsorship programmes are underway, donations are always welcome to keep these chubby cherubs full of life and vigour till they find their home in the wild.

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