



The Sumatran elephant is a subspecies of the Asian elephant; all Asian elephants are classified as endangered. The Sumatran elephant is under serious threat from illegal logging and associated habitat loss and fragmentation in Indonesia. The island's elephant population long-term viability is jeopardized by rapid forest conversion to commercial plantations.

Asian elephants are "flagship" species for their habitats – that is, charismatic representatives of the biodiversity within the complex ecosystems they inhabit. Because these large animals need a lot of space to survive, their conservation will help maintain biological diversity and ecological integrity over extensive areas and so help many other species.



Physical Description

Males rarely develop long tusks, while those of adult females may be so short that they are hidden by the upper lip. This elephant can live up to 70 years in captivity, less in the wild. Adult Sumatran elephants can reach 1.7-2.6 meters at the shoulder.

Threats

The leading threat to Sumatran elephants is the loss of their habitat to an unending parade of chainsaws and bulldozers. Sumatra has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world and the elephant population is disappearing even faster than the forests. This is because forest loss forces elephants into closer proximity to people, leading to conflict and elephant deaths as plantation managers and villagers react to crop damage and property loss.

Sumatran Elephant

(Elephas maximus sumatrensis)



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In the last quarter century, Sumatran elephant population estimates in central Sumatra's Riau Province – long a stronghold for elephants – declined by as much as 84 percent, to possibly as few as 210 individuals in 2007. If the trend continues and the two largest remaining elephant forests – Tesso Nilo and a block of ex-logging concessions near Bukit Tigapuluh National Park – are not protected, Riau's wild elephant population will no longer be viable and will face extinction.

The pulp & paper and palm oil industries are driving the loss of elephant habitat. The creation of palm oil plantations leads to ever escalating human-elephant conflict, the young palm trees are favorite food of elephants. The damage to plantations can lead to the killing of elephants and captures; hundreds of elephants have died or "disappeared" in Riau Province alone since 2000 as the result of captures, often funded by palm oil plantations eager to get rid of "problem animals."

It is critical that the last remnants of Sumatra's elephant forests be protected if there is to be any hope for the survival of viable Sumatran elephant populations. Forested corridors between these forests need to be maintained, or recreated, to allow elephants safe passage to new food sources and breeding opportunities.



What WWF is Doing

WWF works in three landscapes in Sumatra that are important for elephant conservation. Major breakthroughs were achieved with the 2004 declaration of Phase One of Tesso Nilo National Park in Riau, and the 2005 declaration by the APRIL company on the protection of all High Conservation Value Forests in their pulp wood concessions – significant steps towards the protection of elephant habitat in Sumatra.

In 2004, WWF introduced its first Elephant Flying Squad to a village near newly established Tesso Nilo National Park. The squad, consisting of nine rangers and four trained elephants, drives wild elephants back into the forest whenever they threaten to enter village fields and gardens. Since it began operating, the Tesso Nilo Flying Squad has significantly reduced the economic losses of the local community from elephant raids and prevented retaliatory killings of elephants by angry farmers. The APRIL, Indo Sawit and Musi Mas companies have now adopted the Flying Squad idea and have or are in the process of establishing additional teams in their plantations as part of a fully coordinated human-elephant conflict mitigation effort.

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