

When I see an elephant... flying squad

Elephant Flying Squads may sound like an idea from a Disney film – but they are proving to be a vital tool in the fight to protect elephants in Sumatra

WWF has introduced the evocatively titled squads to tackle the growing human-elephant conflicts in some regions. Elephants often wander into human settlements in search of food, completely unaware of the havoc they cause in the process. They can eat whole yields of crops and destroy vital equipment. And, often unwittingly, they have

been known to kill or injure villagers. This often triggers a dangerous sequence of events, as villagers seek to take their revenge and kill or maim elephants in retaliation.

But Elephant Flying Squads – a system already working for similar conflicts in India – are now helping to quash the problem in Tesso Nilo, Sumatra. The squads feature

teams of trainers (called mahouts) and elephants that collectively help drive away other elephants from human-inhabited areas. They operate from Lubuk Kembang Bunga, a village on the south-east border of Tesso Nilo National Park. On call 24 hours a day, the team drives away crop-raiding elephants using a variety of ingenious techniques.

Often the first tactic is to trigger explosive cannons to disperse the elephants. If a raid happens during the night, the team will startle the wild elephants with high-powered torches and sound car horns to drive them away from plantations. On occasions, the domestic elephants in the squad will drive the wild elephants back, locking tusks.

The squad is also experimenting with chilli and dung cakes! It may sound funny, but baking local chillies and elephant dung into dried cakes and then igniting them helps to discourage elephants.

The Flying Squad and their newest recruit - ready for action!



Bath time for the Flying Squad



The pungent odour emitted by the patties has been shown to be an effective deterrent.

Since the flying squads were put into force, crop losses have declined significantly. And the patrols have also helped ward off illegal loggers, in turn sparing valuable forest. Villagers are also reported to be more confident and motivated to grow crops – safe

in the knowledge that flying squads will stop elephants from approaching their land.

Birthdays for baby elephants

A party was held recently to name and welcome the newest additions to the Elephant Flying Squad in Tesso Nilo. Around 80 guests helped baby Nella celebrate her first

birthday with specially-made elephant brownies. Meanwhile the youngest calf, born three months ago, was officially given the name Tesso. It is tradition in Indonesia to have a naming ceremony soon after the birth of a baby. It is hoped that the elephants will soon become fully active members of the flying squad, helping WWF to combat the continuing human-elephant conflict in Sumatra.