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Outlook

A GIANT PROBLEM

Elephant incursions on farmland around the Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary are an ongoing challenge

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Photos courtesy of
ELEPHANT CONSERVATION NETWORK

MAIN PHOTO
Human-elephant conflicts can be solved by respecting the problems of both sides.

The forestry officers at the Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary sat on the back of a pick-up in semi-darkness, stars twinkling above their heads. Only the soft sound of their chat penetrated the silence. The gathering was so pleasant that we almost forgot why they were here — to prevent wild elephants from the jungle coming to eat crops on the farm.

"They are very intelligent animals. They will wait until no cars are passing and then cross the street," said one officer. It takes 10 of them to surround the invaders and drive them away with firecrackers.

They are here almost every night in the dry season, from November to March or May, when the ripening corn or sugar cane crops lure elephants with their irresistible smells. Elephants usually pay a visit to farmlands at night, from about 8pm onwards, because it's quiet and they're less likely to be disturbed.

Perhaps the herd knew they were going to be ambushed that night, and they stayed away. Luckily for the farmers, their crops were safe for another night. But only for one night. The crop raids, or what the Elephant Conservation Network (ECN) calls "human-elephant conflicts" (HEC), are a common problem found across the world, including Africa and South Asia. In Salakpra, the first incident was reported in 1982 and has persisted for more than 25 years, with more damage incurred in the last five years.

"It happens throughout the year, sometimes more than 30 times a month," said Jittin Ritthirat, manager and coordinator of the ECN, who has conducted research on the issue in this district.

At the beginning, the affected areas were in the vicinity of the sanctuary, before spreading southwards to the city of Kanchanaburi.

According to the report, 80 per cent of the affected farms lose less than 1,000 baht a year. Only 10 per cent, the large plantations, lose 30,000 to 50,000 baht a year.

Most of the farms grow single crops such as mango, papaya, sugar-cane or corn, all food that elephants love to eat. When the elephants raid the farms, they not only devour crops but also destroy trees over a vast area.

"After eating, they usually wander around, causing more damage. It's their habit," said Somchoke Arayawattanavej, owner of more than 48 hectares of sugar-cane plantation, who admitted that the damage is sometimes almost unbearable.

But it can take a while for the farmers to understand the elephants' grazing habits. At first, Jittin said, farm owners, especially those who were not locals and lived far away from the sanctuary, had a negative attitude towards the elephants.

"They were never aware that they lived so close to the sanctuary. They couldn't imagine how and why the elephants come to their farms," she said.

It's actually a case of perspective: The farmers assume that the large creatures are raiding their land, but from the elephants' point of view it is people who have invaded their territory. And it seems that deforestation and forest fragmentation in the Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary has pushed the elephants to do such damage.

Following the construction of the Srinakarin Dam by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat), some areas of the sanctuary have been lost, flooded as water filled the dam, and the western edge of the sanctuary was set aside as a site for the relocation of those who had to be evacuated from their now flooded villages.

Then, in 1972, a total of 2,700 hectares of the sanctuary were lost to a mining concession. In total, the sanctuary has lost about 105km² over a five-year period, and that doesn't take into account the damage from forest encroachment by locals who have gradually depleted the forest in search of food and other resources, such as bamboo, a main food source for elephants.

"Bamboo cutting is done on an industrial scale. But it has no value for the local communities since the profit is made elsewhere," commented Belinda Stewart-Cox, director of the ECN during a workshop on human-elephant conflicts held recently in Kanchanaburi.

Deforestation is hastened by changes in land use, including the growth of fruit and crop farms, the turning of scenic locations on the banks of the Kwae Yai River into resorts and hotels, as well as the increase in cattle farming, a recent government-promoted policy.

There is no need for a formal study to show that elephants are being deprived of habitat, food and water, and are consequently being forced to raid farms to survive. The average daily food requirement of an adult bull elephant is about 150kg, and the crops offer an abundant food supply for the giant mammals. Also, some new farmland is located on well-used elephant tracks, so it's not surprising that these creatures of habit eat the food found on their familiar routes.

To solve the problem in the short term, Salakpra farmers employ several methods to drive the animals away. Noise, firecrackers and lights are common techniques. Man-made trenches and permanent barriers such as electric fences are the most popular and efficient options to prevent the elephants from accessing farmland.

To tackle the problem efficiently, the ECN suggests improving food and water sources in the forest, and for farmers to grow fruit or vegetables that are not as tempting to elephants' palates. Jittin added that a proper land use plan around Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary should also be put in action.

Whichever the chosen method, attitudes must be the first priority. Luckily, most farmers near the sanctuary have compassion and understanding towards elephants, and they are cooperating with NGOs and the government in order to find an answer. Kanok Duangplee, a native of Kanchanaburi whose farm is located south of Srinakarin Dam, used to plant corn but later switched to chillies simply because elephants dislike them. He also left a path on his land which is an old elephant track for them to use.

"I don't want to have problems with elephants. People and elephants can live together. We have similar ways of life — we also need water and food," he said sympathetically.

"Do you know that they don't like Kaek Dum papaya. They prefer Hawaii papaya," the farmer laughed when talking about the picky habit of elephants.

However, Stewart-Cox insisted that in long run, sustainability is the best solution. Protecting the elephants and forest conservation are what should be done.

Compared to other affected areas, such as Kaengkracharn National Park and Kuiburi National Park, the problems at Salakpra are on a smaller scale, but the director of the ECN insisted the area deserves attention. Ecologically, protecting the elephants is protecting the forest.

"The elephant is a flagship species. They play a vital role in the ecosystem," explained Jittin.

Usually, elephants would eat and walk all over the forest, so the seeds of the plants that they eat are excreted and grow in other areas too. When they reach up and crack top tree branches, other animals can eat the plants too. They also use their trunks to dig for underground water, which also benefits other animals. These are just a few examples of what elephants contribute to the ecological system.

Now, there are about 175 elephants in the sanctuary, and about 20 villages around Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary. Solving the problems of human-elephant conflict is based on how to mutually benefit both sides.

"It's challenging to find sustainable solutions that respect elephants and the forest as well as forest users and farmers," Stewart-Cox said.

When elephants raid farms, they not only devour crops but also destroy trees over a vast area due to their enormous size.