

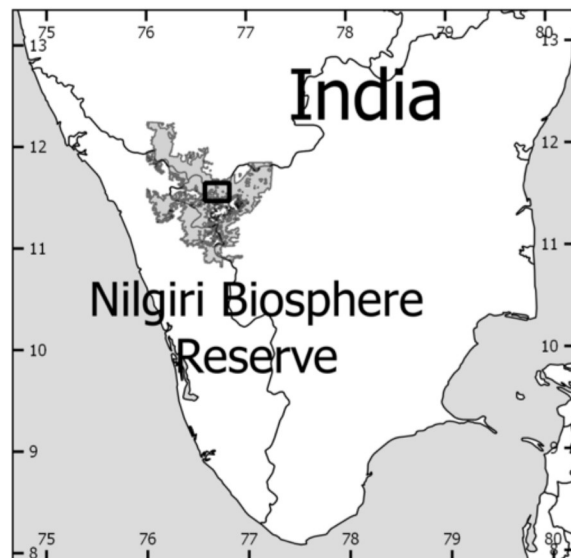
Rehabilitation of an elephant named “Rivaldo” in the Sigur Region, Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, India

Priya Davidar¹, Shermin de Silva², Jean-Philippe Puyravaud¹

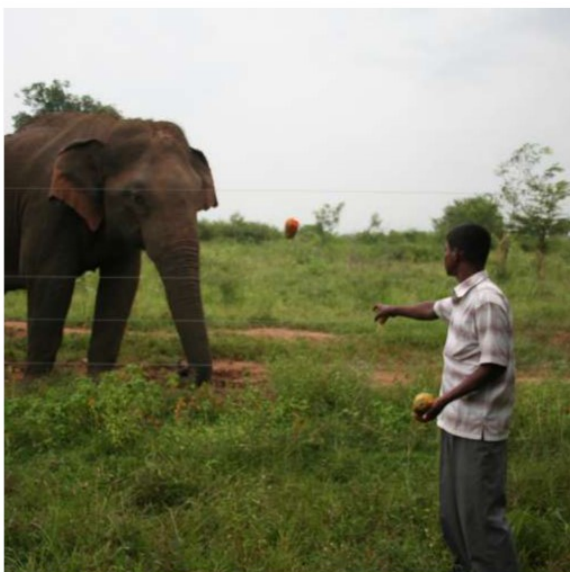
Wildlife in general naturally tends to avoid people. In order to attract cryptic wildlife, tourists with limited schedules and budgets encourage the regular providing of food at particular locations. The consequences of feeding wildlife can be negative. They can become habituated to human food, turn aggressive and face increasing fatalities. In Udawalawe National Park (Sri Lanka), people started feeding a wild makhna (tuskless male elephant) named Rambo in 2003. Because of this, other elephants started coming to be fed. The display then became a regular tourist attraction that proved to be lucrative for the local vendors. Although some researchers have claimed this to be a “win-win” situation for all parties, the long term impacts of such provisioning of food is very dubious for the animals. It was observed by the Udawalawe Elephant Research Project (<http://elephantresearch.net/index.html>) that Rambo’s behaviour changed from 2016 onwards after more than a decade of roadside begging. He became aggressive, started breaking through electric fences in order to raid the sugar cane plantations that were near the feeding site. Other instances of elephant habituation were reported in a coffee estate in Kodagu, Karnataka (Malavika Narayana pers. comm.), and in the region of Gudalur, Nilgiris (Bantan, forest watcher, pers. comm.), both in India. We are convinced that many more elephants throughout the present range are habituated.

The Sigur plateau, the buffer zone of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (Figure 1), is among the network of protected areas that supports the highest elephant population in the world. The Tamil Nadu Forest Department has notified the major and minor elephant corridors in this important place (<https://>

www.livelaw.in/top-stories/sc-upholds-tamil-nadu-governments-elephant-corridor-notification-164471). However, this region is pockmarked with settlements, with high densities of people and livestock, degraded forests dominated by invasive species.



The large floating population of tourists numbers in hundreds of thousands per year. The accompanying mushrooming of resorts has fuelled incentives for quick wildlife viewing with among other means, the provisioning of food for elephants. Many adult male elephants, among

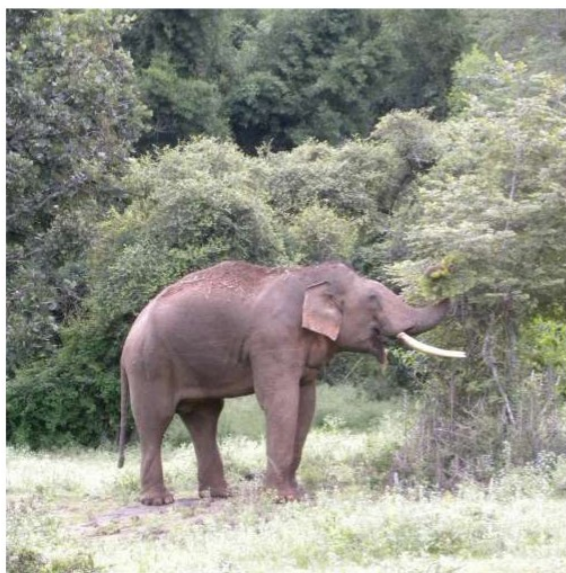
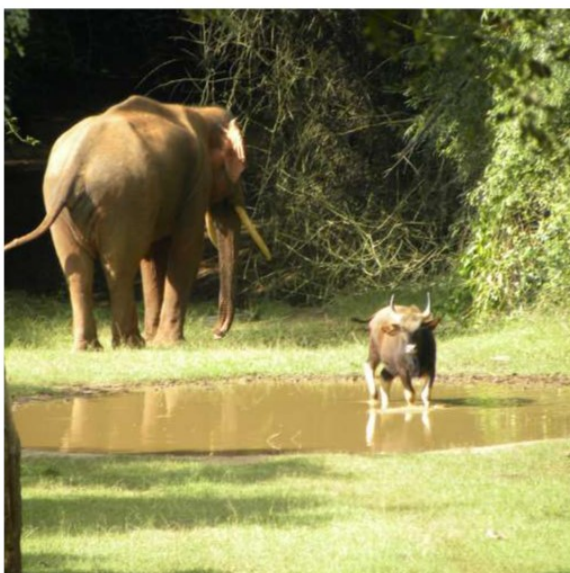


(Left) Makhna Rambo being fed in Udawalawe Sri Lanka; (Right) Rambo in Udawalawe National Park Sri Lanka

which an iconic tusker called Rivaldo, have become thus habituated to fruits such as jackfruit, pumpkin, watermelon and others. This has led to raiding of houses by some elephants, and retaliatory attacks by people. The latest victim being a huge tusker who was injured and later died when a fire bomb was thrown at him by resort personnel in January 2021 (<https://www.business today.in/latest/trends/40-year-old-elephant-dies-after-being-set-on-fire-in-tamil-nadu/story/428845.html>).

Rivaldo has been fed by people since 2008. In January 2013 he was seriously injured when about 30 cm of his trunk was severed, possibly when he went begging for food. After his trunk healed, he was slowly weaned away from

food provisioning, by gradual shifting to coarse vegetation and then the additional feeding was stopped. He would visit the premises where he underwent treatment and waited to be fed, sometimes for hours. When no food was forthcoming he would leave. His visits became sporadic and shorter. After 6-months, he would stop by for a few minutes and then leave. He was again injured in 2015 by a wild tusker. Again he was treated at the same place without restraint, and the same pattern of visitation was recorded after the feeding was stopped. Besides, it was observed that during the COVID lockdown, tourism in the region crashed, and after the lockdown was lifted, he had stopped begging for food in the roadside. This is one more indication that he can be de-habituated.



(Left) Rivaldo and gaur Oct 2010 before injury; (Right) Rivaldo foraging in the wild Nov 2014.

Table 1: Suggested protocol to rehabilitate an elephant that has been fed by humans

Emergencies

- A hot line should be available 24/7 to alert day or night of an intrusion wild elephant near habitations
- A rapid response vehicle of the Forest Department should be ready to handle emergencies
- The Forest Department and the Police should penalize people feeding elephants

Awareness

- The District authorities and local administration should be informed of the objectives
- A team of volunteers or social scientists should visit household to inform about the hot line and best practice with elephants
- School children should be informed about elephant behaviour
- Best practices with elephants should be explained in short videos in local languages

Village management

Waste management should be improved to avoid elephant visits to dumping sites

Tourism

Tourist operators and tourists should be made aware that feeding elephants change their behaviour a may lead to its death

De-habituation of the elephant

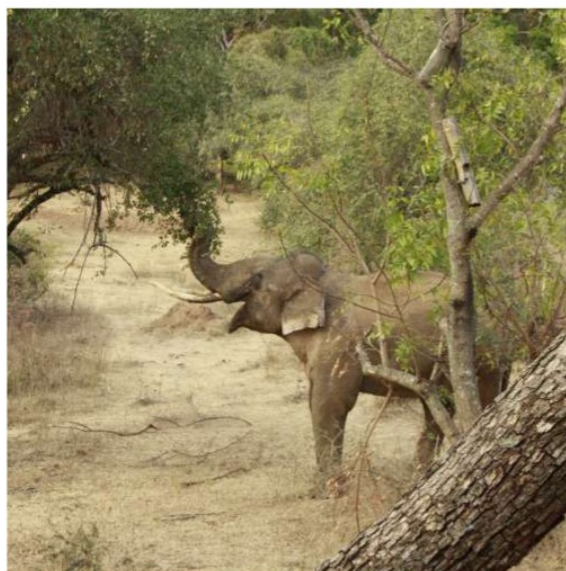
- Progressive reduction of provisioning of fruits and replacement with coarser fodder
- Food should be provided progressively away from the original base and towards the elephant's regular habitat
- Places regularly visited by the elephant should consider being fenced
- Incidents/locations of the elephant should be recorded with the hot line. Radio-collaring the elephant should be envisaged on a priority basis

Assessment

The assessment about the success of the rehabilitation should be made based on data analysis, in particular on the number of incidents over the course of at least two months.



Rivaldo treated for injuries 2015



Rivaldo treated for injuries 2015

After his second injury, Rivaldo started to become a roadside tourist attraction in the region. His visits to villages increased and although tolerated, some people attacked him, injuring his right eye, resulting in partial blindness. He has never retaliated to our knowledge. Now Rivaldo's freedom is at stake. He is the target of a well-meaning campaign from a recent settler. This person, invoking the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), campaigned to have Rivaldo "rehabilitated" in an elephant camp on the basis that the elephant was disabled and cannot exist in the wild. Rivaldo is perfectly capable of surviving in the jungle without human assistance and "rehabilitation" cannot involve captivity since captivity is a dead end for a male elephant in his prime.



Rivaldo in the wild feb 2021

This proposal culminated in a court case, where the justices observed that the elephant cannot be taken permanently into captivity. However, a kraal (a cage) was constructed by the authorities to capture him. Astonishingly, for months, all mitigating efforts were directed at luring the elephant to a location very close to a village and trapping him. We advised that based upon our observations if feeding was stopped, the elephant could reduce his dependence on handouts but no organized alternative plan was envisaged.

The plan to remove Rivaldo without concerted effort of rehabilitating him back to the jungle is questionable. Firstly, the process of capturing and “domesticating” an elephant (make it obey orders) is cruel. The elephant is restrained and is deprived of water, food, and any remaining relative freedom as long as he does not obey. It defies the purpose of fighting cruelty to animals by the SPCA member to propose a cruel treatment for the “own good” of the animal, especially if the animal does not need it. Secondly, removing an endangered wild animal into captivity based upon dubious health claims amounts to a form of “culling by concern”. This practice, “culling by concern” could become a convenient way of removing animals from the wild without any further consideration for facts. Lastly, for threatened species like the elephant, that have complex social systems, cannot have their older and capable members captured unless the efforts that

must be made, are really made. An ailing animal may recover, but once captured, the animal is as good as dead because it cannot reproduce.

For this reason, we propose a short protocol with a management plan, awareness program, de-habituating the elephant, and follow-up of the elephant’s behaviour, that can be improved and adapted to local circumstances (Table 1).

The rehabilitation program must ensure that the animal is not captured and changes its behaviour and there is reasonable evidence that the animal does not represent more risks to people than any other elephant. Both of these objectives can be quantified with such a protocol and be synthesized for the administration and the public. It is only on the basis of such systematic efforts and rigorous assessment that anyone can ascertain whether Rivaldo should be taken into captivity or not.

The question may arise why a single animal should be the target of so much attention and efforts. Rivaldo is famous and iconic, and his case has received a lot of media attention. But other elephants are habituated and unless people providing food are punished, the trend will aggravate in future. Consequently, opportunities to systematic learning on such instance will help frame best-practice management in future events.