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Re: Asian Elephant Conservation: Too Elephantocentric? Towards a Biocultural Approach of Conservation—Response to Duffillot: a Long Road Ahead

Nicolas Lainé and Serge Morand

What is sometimes ungrateful about the anthropologist's profession (or other scientific work, in particular from the social sciences) is the delay between data collection in the field and effective publication in an international peer-reviewed journal, after double- blind peer review, an often lengthy process guaranteeing scientific validity. This delay is especially grating in a fast-paced world of mass communication and social media with promotional campaigns on which many conservation NGOs and professionals depend. Mr Duffillot's comments to the article partly reflect this asymmetric temporal- ity and the friction that sometimes appears between social science research (and its long-term ecological studies guarantying the reliability of their findings) and the world of conservation professionals that rely on immediate valuations by donors (Duffy 2015).

While the data and their analysis published in ABR at the end of 2018 are based on a survey conducted in Laos in 2015 (as clearly mentioned in the article), Mr Duffillot's comments are based on a 2019 perspective. At this point, it must be noted that the conditions for keeping elephants in the ECC and the ongoing projects have changed. This update, which must therefore be contextualized, is, in this sense, welcome. At the time of the survey, the ECC did not possess the same number of elephants, neither a dedicated area of 530 ha, but a much smaller area.

But beyond this update on the ECC structure, it seems unfortunate that the author of the reply has gone beyond the central arguments of the article, which will be taken up further, because, let us stress, the article did not target a particular centre, but on the contrary wished to provide broader reflections regarding mainstream projects and trends conducted across Asia to conserve pachyderms.

At first sight, it therefore seems damaging that the initial article was taken 'too personally', which led to a point-by-point response (omitting some of the context of neo-liberalization and globalization of nature in which each conservation participates). A reaction then that was undoubtedly too personal while it invited some retreat, height, and even self-reflexivity, especially when one presents oneself as the uncontested leader in elephant conservation in Laos, with the potential to serve as a model for other regions in Asia.

Let us therefore return to the fundamental reflections, which primarily aim to open up a dialogue for the future of pachyderms, human and their ecosystems, including the forest but also the village often forgotten in conservation projects.

In addition to conservation biology, which wishes to conduct reflections at the same time as actions for the conservation of biodiversity, the anthropology of conservation to which the article relates comes in addition to this 'crisis science' as defined by R. Barbault (1997). Indeed, in its analyses, the anthropology of conservation takes into account the relationships and network of conservation actors. This was indeed one of the main objectives of the article, which, by advocating a biocultural approach to conservation, aims to emphasize the role of local knowledge for the conservation of pachyderms across Asia.

Returning therefore to the Lao case at the time of the survey in 2015, data collection and field observations have shown a folklorization of mahouts in Laos. This is particularly the case during the procession marking the end of the elephant caravan organized by the ECC, where mahouts had to parade in Luang Prabang in costumes from another time. Far from the current threats the species is facing (in particular, the risk of elephant TB outbreak), this ceremony fossilized the mahout's knowledge into folklore. Mahouts who took part of the caravan were wearing royal costumes. Such event, which embodied the global and the local, could have

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been an opportunity to effectively put mahout's knowledge at the forefront of the species conservation (Lainé 2018a).

In general, since several years, many regions of Asia have been witnessing a loss of traditional (particularly mahouts') knowledge. This has been shown in South India (Lainé 2014, 2015) and more recently in Myanmar (Crawley et al. 2019). This same knowledge is part of daily knowledge and practices that have undoubtedly contributed to the state of knowledge on biodiversity. This is the case for great apes (Brunois-Pasina and Krief 2017) and also elephants (Lainé, forthcoming). Also, by pointing out a form of a too elefantocentric vision of conservation, the article insisted on the interweaving of ecological and social systems in order to better take into account the complexity of elephants have not only shared space for thousand years but also possess and copro- duce knowledge together. With the 2019 data presented in Duffillot's comments, we can only be pleased that the ECC seems to be really promoting the knowledge of mahouts through a formal project on the medicalization of pachyderms. One last word on this medicalization project: we should remember that conservation and health have found a common ground in a meeting held in 2014. The main promotor of this meeting, a major global conservation NGO, the World Conservation Society, emphasized the link between biodiversity conservation and public health targets by linking the emer- gence of infectious diseases from wildlife to biodiversity conservation priorities. This initiative gave rise to the 'Twelve Manhattan Principles' (http://www. oneworldonehealth.org/) and later to the 'One Health' initiative. Scientific ecologists may question the instrumentalization of global health for conservation objectives in the same manner as social scientists may question the instrumentalization of local knowledge.

Although established in the country since 2001 with Elefantasia as its base, it is good to read from Duffillot's comments that such a programme is finally emerging at the centre, after 18 years of effort, working for the conservation of elephants in the country.

To conclude and retrieve from the original article's objectives (Lainé 2018b), there seems to remain a last point that may explain the point-to-point reaction, instead of promoting dialogue between various scientific disciplines and local knowledge as emphasized in another article in this same issue of ABR (Morand and Lajaunie 2019). This point is related to the various representations of what is or what should be called 'nature' and ultimately its conservation. As stressed by anthropologist Marie Roué (2003), while sharing the same space, NGOs and local populations have practises and different views on nature. While the anthropology of Nature (Descola 2005), as well as other anthropological works (Descola and Palsson 1996; Ellen and Fukui 1996) have shown for years that nature itself does not exist, but is an artefact (Dwyer 1996), long-term ecological research reveals that in the era of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017), untouched or undisturbed 'nature' hardly exists on the planet (Purdy 2015).

Taking the above into consideration, interestingly, as reminded in Duffillot's re- sponse, the motto of ECC is "Rather than taking elephants from their natural home into urban tourist areas, we take YOU to THEM, in their undisturbed natural environment"[2]. But what is the 'natural home' of any individual elephant currently living in conserva- tion or tourist camps across Asia? Let us remember that before being sold or seasonally rented to live in such institutions, all individuals (except rare cases of calves born in a camp, as it happened once at ECC) belonged to a particular village and were considered a full member of a specific family. As mentioned in the original article, the village is the place where those individuals spend most of their life. The village is the place where they share life among other congeners and species, from where they have access to the adjacent forest areas, and that is actually their socio-'natural' home! So, maybe and ironically, taking the ECC motto seriously would mean to bring visitors to the villages to which each individual elephant belongs and has spent most of its life instead of bringing them to the centre, often situated dozen of kilometres from their original village. But such village life, not only is presented as a 'life of suffering' as shown in the original article but also does not necessarily coincide with the foreign visitors' view of what an elephant is and where such an animal should live. Most donors and visitors of these parks and camps indeed bring their own views of nature drawn from a dualistic conception of nature and humans, where—ideally—nature is separated from humans and human activity. This is particularly true when one is engaged with such a charismatic species as the Asian elephant, which provides visitors with what geographer Maan Barua (2017) calls 'encounter value'.

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Unfortunately, such (simplistic) dualistic view putting humans on one side and 'nature' on the other side seems to illustrate the long-term objective (if reachable) of the re-herding project currently undertaken at ECC. The overall goal is indeed to put elephants in a defined territory (i.e. national park) separate from human activities. A situation not unique to Laos, but also prevalent in India for example (Lainé 2015).

Let us finish by stating that anthropologic research does not have the intention to return to the ancient and 'good' old time, where traditions are fixed forever. On the contrary, the anthropologist considers them in perpetual movement and reinvention (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and the different factors that influence such transfor-mation are part of the research agenda of social sciences. Immersion among local populations allows the anthropologist to describe the complex reality and sometimes question what may appear obvious and evident. This may be a reason why its works are sometimes not fully recognized or appreciated. Therefore, and at first, instead of asking 'what would the world be without elephants?', we should rather ask 'what would the world be if humans and elephants had to live separately?'

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