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Providing Support for a New Elephant Response Unit at the South Bukit Barisan National Park, Sumatra-Indonesia

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Background of the Elephant Response Units

With support from different conservation NGOs, the Way Kambas National Park Department in southern Sumatra-Indonesia, established four Elephant Response Units (ERUs) in 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2018. The ERUs were created for the dual purpose of improving the health and welfare of captive Sumatran elephants, and ensure protection and welfare of wild Sumatran elephants inside the Way Kambas National Park (WKNP), by preventing illegal activities in the park and mitigating conflict between wild elephants and people farming next to the park. Prior to the creation of the ERUs, the welfare of wild Sumatran elephants, a critically endangered species, in WKNP was threatened by various illegal activities.

Today the ERUs work closely with local communities to prevent human–elephant conflict (HEC) and conduct regular forest patrols to monitor and prevent illegal activities inside the WKNP. HEC on farmlands bordering the WKNP has compromised the livelihoods of local communities; illegal activities including hunting, setting

snare, encroachment, and illegal logging that cause injury and death to wildlife and destroys their habitat has threatened wild elephant and other wildlife. Furthermore, illegal grazing and forest fires destroy natural elephant food sources. Before the ERUs began patrolling, illegal activities threatened wild elephants' safety, forced them to move out of their normal habitats, and reduced access to fodder inside the WKNP. These illegal activities affected wild elephant health, socialization, and everyday behavior. Thanks to the ERUs, the improved wild elephant welfare reminds people that the WKNP is a unique and important habitat for endangered Sumatran wildlife and is an area of national significance.

Regular patrols allow the ERUs to record sightings of wildlife, including wild elephant herds. The ERUs keep detailed records of the herds they see, including new calves and numbers of elephants in each herd. These records are an important source of information for the National Park Department about the health of the wild elephant population in the WKNP. The wild Sumatran elephant habitat originally was not contained within the WKNP borders.



Way Kambas ERU mahout feeding elephants. Photo provided by AES.

Therefore, older animals living inside the WKNP close to its borders still have memories from their previous home ranges outside the WKNP area and sometimes naturally want to roam to these areas. Before the ERU camps were built, farmers on the boundary of the WKNP had no means of peacefully preventing the elephants from damaging their crops. Through their rather violent approaches to stop the elephants entering their farmlands, they compromised the wild elephants' health and welfare.

The Way Kambas National Park Department also inherited a captive elephant population from the previous government policy of capturing wild elephants to reduce HEC. The captured elephants have been kept in an Elephant Conservation Center (ECC) at the WKNP without a specific purpose. Overall management of the captive elephants in the ECC is poor. These elephants lack welfare needs, i.e., few social interactions with other elephants, no access to natural habitat, poor nutrition through lack of food and water, poor general care, lack of mahout training, and a significant lack of veterinary care. Establishing the four ERUs has meant that 21 captive elephants have

been moved to these units.

Moving the captive elephants to the ERU camps has given them an opportunity to socialize that improves their welfare; they now live in a natural habitat and, through support of donors, the mahouts and their assistants receive advanced training to build their skills and capacity. The health of the captive elephants in the ERUs has also improved as they are regularly checked by veterinarians from the Wildlife Ambulance of the Veterinary Faculty at Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh, organized by a local NGO, Komunitas Untuk Hutan Sumatera (KHS). The management of the ERUs is supervised by KHS, who also monitor the welfare of the ERU elephants. Regular elephant veterinary care is provided by KHS Project Coordinator and Veterinarian Dr. Christopher Stremme, through his position as Coordinator for the Wildlife Ambulance.

According to the ERU Coordinator, Nazaruddin, who was instrumental in creating the ERUs, the move to the ERU camps has resulted in improvements in the elephants' health and wellbeing. This is due to the elephants

having regular exercise while on patrols, mental stimulation, and interactions with wild elephants. The elephants' diet has also improved as they are able to graze and eat a variety of plants in the WKNP. In the ERUs, the welfare of the captive elephants has improved due to better handling and management and the better skills of mahouts (elephant handlers).

The ERUs are a much needed example of proper welfare management of captive elephants in Indonesia. Their role and employment is for forest and wildlife protection. The ERU success has been recognized by the National Park Department and by government conservation agencies in Jakarta who support the program and are interested in developing more ERU camps.

In addition to patrolling, it is important that the ERUs maintain open and frequent communication with people living on the WKNP boundary. Farmers and other local community members contact the ERUs when they hear or see wild elephants near the border area. It is significant that the community members are in close contact with the ERUs; this shows they trust the ERUs to respond effectively, and ensure their farms are not damaged by wild elephants leaving the WKNP. The location of each ERU camp is chosen in a hotspot for HEC. Prior to the establishment of the ERU camps, when elephants left the WKNP, local people in the area would retaliate violently due to crop damage and/or damage to property or people by the wild elephants. This often resulted in injuries to the wild elephants and disturbance of the elephants'

natural behavior and group dynamics. Today, the ERUs are able to prevent this conflict by using peaceful methods to herd wild elephants away from the WKNP boundary before they venture into adjacent farmland. The ERUs use trained elephants to herd the wild elephants, and train local people to use loud noises (e.g., firecrackers) to move wild elephants away from the WKNP boundary.

Furthermore, ERU teams help and train local community members to conduct regular nighttime crop guarding at strategic locations right outside the WKNP boundary. Community-based crop guarding occurs routinely in each ERU area, and the community members who join are all volunteers. The ERU helps to build observation posts to support local people. An ongoing information exchange scheme by mobile phone between the ERU teams and local community groups has been established to ensure timely exchange of information about wild elephant sightings and movement in the boundary area, to effectively anticipate potential HEC risks and incidents by coordinating actions between the ERUs and local community teams.

Nightly, one or two members of each ERU join the community for night guarding. This is an important opportunity to discuss elephant conservation and improve the understanding of local people. Prior to the ERUs, people presumed wild elephants were a greater threat to crops, property, and themselves than the actual damage caused by elephants. Crop damage by diseases and insects far outweighs that caused by wild elephants. Therefore it



Way Kambas ERU staff training new staff in Bukit Barisan Selatan ERU. Photo provided by AES.



Way Kambas ERU staff teaching elephant management to new staff in Bukit Barisan Selatan ERU. Photo provided by AES.

is very important that the ERUs build the communities' capacity to peacefully prevent wild elephants from leaving the WKNP. This communication gives confidence to the local communities and protects and ensures the wellbeing of the wild elephants.

The ERUs are a very successful and important part of the WKNP habitat protection and HEC mitigation strategy. The implementation of the day-to-day fieldwork is ensured by teams of highly motivated and skilled staff from the WKNP in close collaboration with local communities. The base camps for each ERU are located at well-known HEC hotspots inside the WKNP close to the boundary. Bungur is the first ERU established; Tegal Yoso is the second ERU located on the northwest border about 8 km west of Bungur; the third ERU is Margahayu on the

southwest border of the NP. The fourth ERU was built in the Braja Harjosari area on the southeast border. Each ERU employs four to six adult captive elephants, four to six mahouts, and one forest ranger from the WKNP ECC, and eight to twelve local community members recruited from nearby communities affected by HEC and trained as ERU staff. The ERU camps are an important training site for young staff aspiring to join the National Park Department, or become mahouts and learn about wild elephant conservation as well as welfare, care, and management of captive elephants.

Currently 23 villages bordering the WKNP—for a total population of about 69,000 people—benefit from existing ERU activities. As a result of ERU work, the occurrence of incidents where wild elephants actually pass the WKNP boundary and reach farmland has been reduced by more than 70%; the actual loss of crops due to early warning and quick intervention has been reduced by more than 90%. Having an effective means of preventing wild elephants leaving the WKNP means there have been no cases of people retaliating against wild elephants that do leave the WKNP.

Due to the massive decrease in the loss of crops, and thus improved income, local communities are now willing to stop illegal activities inside the WKNP such as logging, cultivation, poaching, and cattle grazing, and they are willing to accept the ERUs' law enforcement role for the protection of the WKNP as undisturbed habitat for wild elephants. Regular patrolling allows the ERUs to quickly report new cases of illegal activity to the National Park Department. This prompt response improves the success for those investigating crime.

In summary, before the creation of the ERUs, the welfare of wild Sumatran elephants was directly compromised by illegal human activities inside WKNP, and the livelihood of local communities was threatened by frequent HEC. Today the ERUs are successful in preventing many of these illegal activities, and they continue to work closely with the local communities to prevent HEC and increase their understanding and respect for wild elephant conservation.

Establishing a New ERU in Another National Park

Earlier in 2020, Asian Elephant Support (AES) helped fund the initial operation of a new ERU in South Bukit Barisan National Park (BBSNP), located on the southwestern corner of Sumatra. This request came from the BBSNP headquarters to help with funding to enable setup and training while long-term funding was finalized. The establishment of a new ERU on the western border of

the BBSNP was supported by AES during the period of March to July 2020. The two main goals of the new ERU unit are:

1. To mobilize a team of experienced senior mahouts from the Way Kambas National Park ERU program to train the newly recruited team members of the BBS-ERU, and
2. To provide resources for an initial period of three months for basic operational costs of the new BBSNP ERU.

During the period from March to May 2020, the WKNP-ERU Project Coordinator and nine senior mahouts spent a total of 28 days at the BBS-ERU to train the new team members in all relevant skills of captive elephant care and management, HEC mitigation, and forest patrols. Furthermore, five of the new BBSNP-ERU team members visited the Way Kambas ERU program for a total of 17 days, during which they accompanied all ERU activities to further study and learn all needed hands-on skills under the guidance of an experienced and well-established team. The most hands-on practice of learned skills for the new BBSNP-ERU team members was conducting a wild elephant driving operation under the guidance of the WKNP-ERU team, lasting from April 25 to May 10. The wild elephant herd had left the BBSNP area and had ventured deep into community forests and plantations. Due to the distance and the fact that the elephants had to be driven through plantation and community land, the situation was very sensitive and the elephants had to be herded

slowly and cautiously in the direction of the BBSNP without causing them to panic and cause unnecessary damage.

On May 6, the elephants were finally herded back into the BBSNP. The team stayed another four days to guard the BBSNP border to prevent the elephants from immediately coming back. The elephants finally gave up on their attempts to come back to the farmland and ventured back deeper into the BBSNP.

To further monitor the wild elephant herd and be better able to block future attempts to leave the BBSNP, GPS satellite collars were fitted on two of the 12 elephants. The experience of actively participating in all parts of this operation has clearly increased the new ERU team's knowledge and confidence to be able to better handle future HEC incidents on the border of the BBSNP.

The training and operational support provided by AES during the period from March to July 2020 enabled the establishment and operation of a new ERU unit at the BBSNP in West Lampung province. The new staff has received basic training in all skills for captive elephant care and management, HEC mitigation, and forest patrols. The new team is enthusiastic to learn and implement all new skills to the best of their ability. The local communities welcome the establishment of the new ERU that provides employment for some community members and, it is hoped, will greatly contribute to preventing HEC in this area. The support provided by AES has laid the first foundation for the new ERU to become an effective tool for peaceful coexistence between local communities and elephants by working together for sustainable livelihoods, forest and wildlife conservation, and animal welfare.

