

## Project Update: January 2015

The fieldwork which had lagged behind in November and December 2014 due to heavy rains were completed in January 2015.

The survey on human dimension of the human-elephant conflict was completed during these days. Monitoring of breaking of the park fence was continued during the nights.

As a result of the reports submitted by me to the authorities and the petition signed by the villagers under my initiation, mentioning the seriousness of the HEC in the study area and as a result of numerous meetings with the officers of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), the Ceylon electricity board and some political leaders, finally two street lights were installed at Pokunuthenna and one at Dahaiyagala during the 1<sup>st</sup> week of January (plate 1).



Plate 1: street lamps installed at Pokunuthanna and Dahaiyagala

Now the night watchmen (who were also placed as a response to one of my earlier reports to the DWC) are no longer in the darkness and can perform their duties better. Villagers are safer because they can move about at night without the fear of running in to an elephant in the dark.

Interestingly a significant reduction of the number of elephants who entered the village at these lighted spots were noted during this field visit. These spots used to be very popular entry points of the raiding elephants (as much as 10 elephants per night were seen entering the village from these sites during earlier field visits). This is a remarkable achievement from the work done with the support of Rufford small grant. Even though this is not a permanent solution for the HEC in the area as elephants may eventually get used to the lights, villagers and night watchmen feel much safer with lights on.

Furthermore, elephants keep breaking the fence even at Dahaiyagala and Pokunuthenna where no lights were installed and the number of elephants who break the fence at Neraluwa, where no lights were installed was seen to be significantly higher (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Elephants captured by night vision cameras at Pokunuthanna and Neraluwa

12 elephants crossed the fence in one day at Neraluwa which was the highest number of elephants seen coming through the fence during this study. All the elephants were bulls. Therefore the problem has not at all resolved and there is still much more studies to be conducted as well actions to be taken.

The highlight of the month of January 2015 was the unfortunate tragedy of a lady getting killed by an elephant at Dahayyagala (Plate 3).



Plate 3: Funeral of the woman killed by an elephant

In early January 2015, the lady who lived alone was trampled to death by male [155], whom I have mentioned several times in my earlier reports as the most prominent fence breaker in the area. The incident caused much aggression, anger and upheaval among the villagers especially towards the DWC. I visited the funeral and some villagers started behaving aggressively towards me also. Some were planning a protest to persuade the authorities to close down the corridor which was the worst possible solution to the problem. It took great patience, tact, effort and time to calm them down and convince them that it was not the correct path to take. People complained that none of the villagers' lives were safe anymore.

Thus the past years work done with the support of the Rufford Foundation has achieved many targets such as persuading the government to reestablish the duties of night watchmen at Dahayiyagala entrance and to install street lights. Overcoming the people's resistance to studying the HEC in the area was very challenging but it has been achieved too, opening doors too much more advanced projects in the future. Identifying fence breaking elephants with the night vision cameras was a pioneering work in Sri Lanka. I have given an interview to a leading local newspaper regarding my work funded by Rufford, the achievements during the past year as well as the problems faced by people and elephants, which will be published in the near future. It will play a role in educating the authorities and the common public on this issue while giving sound publicity to the Rufford Foundation. This year's work has been an eye opener as to the immense scope of work to be done in the future.