A TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

ELEPHANTS

THE
CEYLON PRESS

In a Word or Two

Elephants are hard wired into Sri Lankan DNA, more so even than religion, language, or politics. Historically, they reach further back into the country's deep past than any of those things – and perhaps deeper even than humans too. At every key or inconsequential moment of island history, you see them. You cannot miss them, for there they are: present. at home; unmistakable.

Not for nothing, do they crowd the iconic boards and flags of Sinhalese and Tamils heraldry, their effortless symbolism catapulting them also onto every colonial emblem, flag, and coat of arms. In prehistoric times they roamed the entire island, unhindered by the spare populations of hunter gathers. From the time of the first Vijayan kings, the island gained fame as a centre of elephant commerce. No elephant? No status. Simple. No eminent temple-monastery gilded noble or wannbe king was ever so reckless as too under invest in their elephant stables, and in the trappings worn by their elephants in public, all of which of course reflected on them, much as a Rolls Royce Silver Ghost did on the millionaire aristocrats

who drove them in the roaring Twenties.

They have been the cause of innumerable local wars; and helped kick off a major conflict with the invading Dutch. By late medieval times their numbers soared from around 5,000 to 9,000 in response to shifting climatic conditions - but in the colonial period, they were assiduously hunted. And of course put to work. As the percentage of island land devoted to agriculture grew exponentially from the eighteen century onwards, so too did the use of elephants in supporting such work.

This of course helped legitimize the notion that elephants were similar to horses or cows, or even dogs: they could be domesticated, trained to work hand in hand with man. This earnestly meritorious view, whilst of obvious value to those few remaining institutions that still own elephants – mostly temples – is now increasingly under siege.

Elephants, claim most environments, are wild animals and must be treated as such and respected for their wild status.

This has come as inconvenient if not just plain bad news to elephant owners and such controversial institutions as the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage. But still worse is the very serious argument that is finally catching fire around elephants numbers.

Here the Sri Lankan government itself is in the dock, facing lawsuits for failing to implement a long agreed national plan for elephants; for failing to have any reliable figures since 2011 on elephant numbers; for doing little to stop trafficking, shootings, poisoning, electrocution, deadly jaw bombs, and elephant/train collisions. And most of all for complacency.

Despite no figures or data to back up its claim, the state Wildlife Department suggests elephant number are around 6,000. The Agriculture Ministry says it more likely to be 7,000.

But the much more credible Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the World Wildlife Fund, puts the population at between 2,500 - 4,000 individuals. If this is correct, then

elephants, symbol of the country is so many ways since before recorded history, would have to be classed as an Endangered Species. A species on the way out – unless firm and immediate steps are taken to stop the drift to extinction.

David Attenborough put it most starkly: "The question is, are we happy to suppose that our grandchildren may never be able to see an elephant except in a picture book?"

1

THE CEYLON ELEPHANT

Once elephants were widespread across the island; today they are mostly to be found in the dry parts of the north, east and south east – especially in such wildlife parks as Udawalawe, Yala, Lunugamvehera, Wilpattu and Minneriya but they also live outside protected areas.

Although Sri Lanka has the highest density of elephants in Asia, as roads, villages, farms, plantations, and towns grow, they come into ever closer contact with humans – always to their extreme disadvantage.

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Unsurprisingly, the numbers of the Sri Lankan elephant, which goes by the beautiful Latin name of Elephas maximus maximus, are falling fast.

The WWF put their total at between two and a half to four thousand, and although killing one carries the death penalty, habitat erosion and human-elephant conflict has pushed this largest of beasts into ever smaller areas. The threat the face is increasing existential. In 2023, 470 elephants were killed, a figure almost three times as high as the number of humans killed by elephants in the same year.

Smart, sociable, gregarious, and emotionally intelligent, it is unconscionable how widespread is the cruelty they face – heavily chained and marshalled to be more accessible for visitors. Unwilling parade dolls of the tourist trade, they are also victims of religious devotion. Owning an elephant brings with it immense prestige and the more ambitious temples are as eager as tourist sites to host their own animal.

One such unfortunate beast – Raja – even has his own museum dedicated to him, next to Kandy's temple of the Tooth. For decades he has the responsibility for carrying the sacred casket at the Kandy Perehera, until his death in 1988, a day which promoted the then government to declare National Morning, and have the luckless beast stuffed and displayed for all time.

More recently, one of the leading elephant of the renowned Kandy Perehera was found to be suffering from such severe malnourishment, that it later died.

Veterinarians International, a global charity, has built the country's first bespoke elephant hospital and, like others, is doing much to reverse the institutionalized abuse they suffer. Even so, the scales are tipped heavily away from a happy outcome. Laws – and more importantly – the enforcement of laws protecting elephants remains frontier territory, and the creatures are seen less as living wild animals and more as cute commodities, to be petted, prodded, tamed, photographed, and then forgotten.

2

THE CEYLON MARSH ELEPHANT

A noted sub species of Sri Lanka's endemic elephant, Elephas Maximus Maximus, the Ceylon Marsh (Elephas Maximus Vil-Aliya) is a still rarer beast, barely seen outside the flood plains of the Mahaweli Basin. It is a vast animal, its size and habitat preference marking it out more than anything else from its cousin.

Image courtsey of The Partying Traveler.

3-5

THE EXCTINCT CEYLON ELEPHANTS

The current and endangered Sri Lankan Elephant is considered to be a subspecies of Elephas Maximus Sinhaleyus, an elephant now extinct in Sri Lanka, Its treasured fossils, unearthed in Kuruwita, indicates that it last lived 100,000 years ago. Its similarity to the present-day elephant is likely to have made it all but impossible to tell them apart, the difference lying in such things as smaller molars and a wider spout.

A scant dusting of other fossils reveal the existence of two further elephant sub species that may have called Sri Lanka home before becoming extinct: Hypselephus Hysundricus Sinhaleyus and

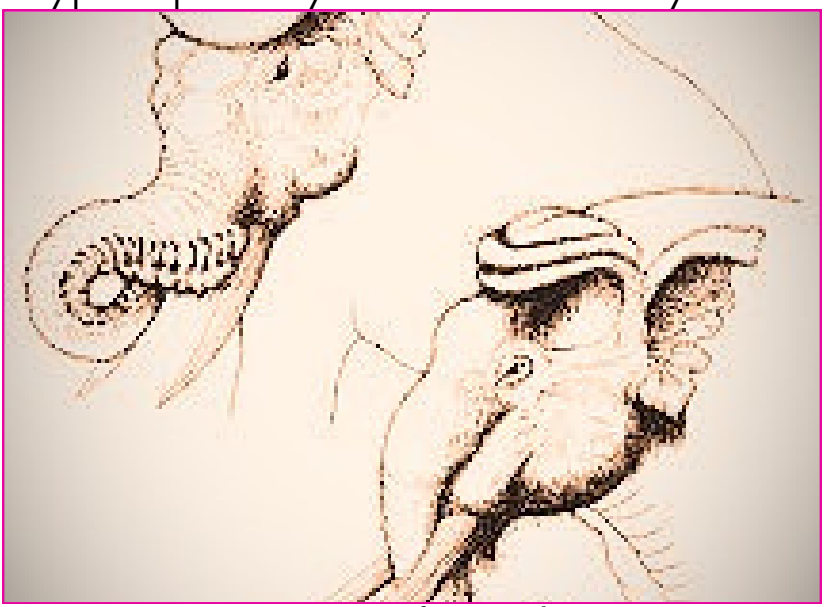


Image courtsey of Deraniyagala.

6

THE PYGMY ELEPHANT

Almost as rare as the dodo, the Sri Lankan pygmy elephant was first recorded in 2012 in the Uda Walawe National Park. Standing barely two metres tall, it was the first confirmed case of disproportionate dwarfism in a fully-grown wild Asian elephant. When filmed he was busy attacking (and winning) a duel with a rival twice his size.

Image courtsey of Brad Abbott.

Departed Friends

7

THE SRI LANKAN HIPPOPOTAMUS

Dating back between 800,00 to 100,000 years ago, the fossilised remains of a hippopotamus's jawbone, showing the presence of a couple more teeth than exist in the current living hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), are all that is left to prove the once lively presence on Sri Lanka's rivers of this great land mammal, the largest after the elephant. Hexaprotodon Sinhaleyus, a distinct sub species, probably fell afoul of early climate change when rainfall become significantly less heavy, so putting pressure on their preferred habitat.

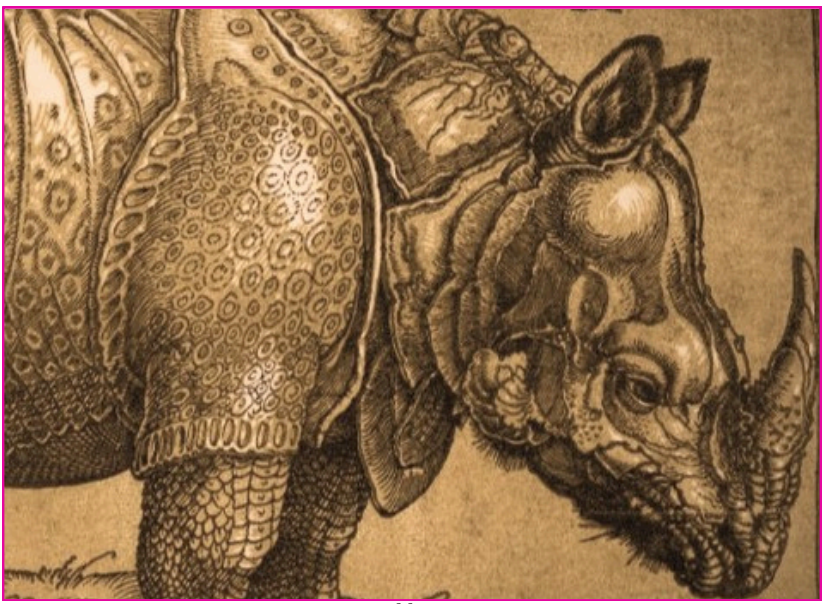
Image courtsey of Kemonofriends.

8

THE SRI LANKAN RHINOCEROS

The Indian Rhinoceros, or Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros, (Rhinoceros Unicornis) once roamed Asia from Pakistan to China. But now they can be counted in every lower numbers, confined to a few protected locations in Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal. The range that their relatives once encompassed extended to Sri Lanka.

Fossilized remains dating back eighty thousand years found near Ratnapura by Dr. P.E.P. Deraniyagala indicate the now ghostly existence of two distinct sub species: Rhinocerus Sinhaleyus, and Rhinocerus Kagavena, their marginally different teeth all that remains to tell them apart.



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THE CEYLON PRESS

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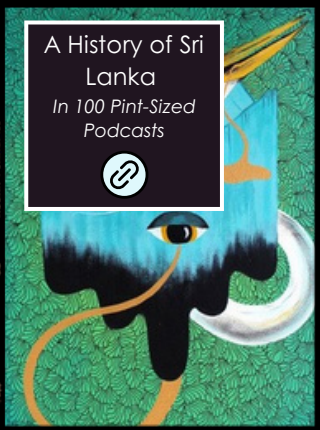

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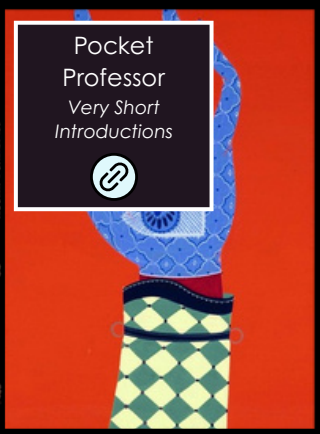

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