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Tenth Anniversary of the Elephant Interest Group

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TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ELEPHANT INTEREST GROUP

by Kenneth C. Wylie

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Historians are supposed to be impartial and impersonal but I think readers of Elephant will forgive a personal note, since my memories of the beginnings of the Elephant Interest Group (EIG) are so vivid. Ten years have passed all too quickly, and things have changed. I remember the deep concern that drew me to the group literally as it was being conceived by Jeheskel "Hezy" Shoshani in 1977. Beginning my own (much postponed) research into the history of the ivory trade and its environmental impact, I found myself in contact with concerned people outside my own specialized field of history exchanging correspondence with mammalogists, ethologists, ecologists, wildlife management experts, zoo directors, and economists. I soon discovered that despite their widely divergent backgrounds, virtually all of these people shared an overriding concern: the deepening knowledge that a crisis was at hand. Elephants, like so many other species, though not immediately threatened with extinction, would be increasingly, and perhaps irrevocably, jeopardized as the juggernaut of human encroachment continued.

In 1977 it was overwhelmingly obvious that the Asian elephant was threatened throughout its ancient habitat. Its survivability in the wild to the end of this century seemed problematic. African elephants survived in far greater numbers, but perhaps nowhere on earth was the degradation of habitat more dramatic and striking than within Africa's vast reserves; nowhere was the decline in elephant numbers more strikingly linked to the illegal trade in ivory. For this writer at least, research into the past, however remote, demanded a commitment in the present. Statistics and patterns, however significant, could not substitute for a direct sense of involvement; for an historian this required something more than casual links with those who were actually doing something.

Some things occur within discernible and chronological patterns and one can see the antecedents in documented events. Before 1977 various national and world-wide funds already existed whose primary purpose was to protect endangered forms of life in general. For years there had been localized groups whose major purpose was to protect a particular threatened or endangered species (e.g., whales, harp seals, eagles, whooping cranes), but rarely did one hear of coordinated efforts to gather intelligence and information across the disciplines regarding the largest land mammals on earth, those awesome survivors from the Pleistocene, the elephants. I was myself present during that first small gathering held at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Mammologists when Hezy Shoshani first suggested that some kind of interest group, some kind of loosely organized clearing house for information, be set up. I heard about this gathering through a zoologist friend who saw a note on the bulletin board at Michigan

THERE WILL BE AN INFORMAL MEETING OF THE



Elephant

Interest Group

DATE: TUESDAY June 21, 1977
 PLACE: NORTH CASE HALL, Room 342
 TIME: ~9⁰⁰ p.m. → ?

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN OBTAINING FUTURE INFORMATION
 ABOUT THE ACTIVITY OF THIS GROUP, PLEASE PRINT YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS BELOW.

NAME	ADDRESS/INSTITUTION	TELEPHONE #
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John F. Eisenberg	National Zoological Park Washington, D.C.	202-381-7291
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Larissa and William Prychodko	Biology Wayne State Detroit, MI	(313) 577-2888
Mary Jo Szuba	No. 1 Shady Hollow Dearborn, Michigan 48124	(313) 565-6892
Jeheskel (Hezy) Shoshani	Biology Wayne State Univ.	(313) 577-2904
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Dr. George A. Sicbrowicz	108 Delroine Ave. Toronto, Ont. Canada	
Paul Sherman	Museum of Vertebrate Zoology Univ. of California, Berkeley	94720
Jim Allaway	Fernov Hall, Cornell Univ. Ithaca NY 14853	607 256-3191
SABU	INDIAN ELEPHANT RES INST TRU. 2	
Tom Butynski	Dept. of Wildlife	M.S.U. 353-9478
Sarah Fisher, Dept. of Biology	Cal. State U., Northridge, CA	

Figure 1. A copy of the original announcement and the list of participants (written by them) in the first meeting of the Elephant Interest Group during the 57th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA, on June 21, 1977. Names above the line are of people that were present at the meeting, and those below the line were written on the sheets placed on bulletin boards but did not attend the meeting.

Tentative Agendafor the **Elephant** Interest Group (*)

- * Introduction.
- * Rationale for establishment of this group.
- * Objectives.
- * Other speaker(s).
- * Slide presentation.
- * Discussion.
- * Future plans.
- * Continuing discussion at Dooley's.

For future information, contact:

Jeheskel (Hezy) Shoshani
 Department of Biology
 Wayne State University
 Detroit, Michigan 48202

Telephone: (313) 577-2924



(*) For time and place, please check at the registration desk

Figure 2. A copy of the original "Tentative Agenda" which was provided to participants at the first meeting of the Elephant Interest Group on June 21, 1977.

State University (Figs.1 and 2). I was at once interested when Hezy explained the background to his idea: namely that such a study group should (and would) be open to all interested parties, despite its obvious and necessary association with the mammalogists, and that its main function would be to provide information about elephants; elephant research, elephant conservation, the status of elephants both in the wild and in captivity, what was going on with the trade in ivory; indeed anything and everything that might be of value. What most attracted me, of course, was the "interest group" concept, whereby members and interested people could exchange knowledge and information both formally and informally, whereby regular or annual meetings could be organized to bring people together from the several disciplines, and whereby relevant information, published or unpublished, could be coordinated.

Obviously, the idea was a good one. Obviously, there have been setbacks and hurdles, but just as obviously the need will continue. The scientific basis of the interest group, its non-profit and apolitical status, its dedication to education, research, and conservation, and its exceptional wide range of memberships (from zoologists to zookeepers, artists to freelance writers) ought to attract continued participation. It is my view that the Elephant Interest Group (despite some of the problems outlined below) has been a success during these ten years. It has been a success first because it has survived. When a group has only the most peripheral of institutional supports (although some might claim that this is a source of strength), ten years is a long time. Those whose interest is merely self-serving, or linked to profes-

sional advancement, tend to fall away; those whose interest is real tend to stay.

A second reason for its success, in my view, is the voluntary nature of the group. In the early stages this provided for a broad base of membership; with hundreds of people, amateur and professionals alike, making use of information that might not otherwise be available except in the more arcane professional publications. It is, however, ironic that this very strength (the essentially voluntary nature of the EIG) could in time become a weakness. Volunteerism may serve to separate the wheat from the chaff, but the sustained growth that is possible from adequate funding is another matter. In the decade to come this problem must be creatively dealt with, through increased raising of funds and with the help of many dedicated members.

Finally, another initial strength, the small and close-knit administrative structure, has also served the EIG well. It has certainly done much to protect against institutional pressures from above, so the group and its publication might feel no need to adhere to fashions of the moment, so that it might go its own way. But this also means that with limited funds and resources, the web remains small. Publications are difficult to produce on a periodic basis, and such vital things as meetings and seminars are difficult to sustain over time. It is impossible to record here all the symposia, seminars, film presentations, and meetings (formal and informal) that have been successfully carried out by the EIG through this last decade [see "A note from the editor(s)" in Elephant, especially in Vol. 2, No. 4; and Lash, S.S. 1983. "Almost everything you wanted to know about the Elephant Interest Group - or what is EIG?" pages 2-5, in Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Elephant Workshop held at Kansas City, Missouri, October 14-16, 1983]. Suffice it to say that many experts on elephants, from zoo-specialists to far-flung field ethologists, consider EIG membership a must, and they contribute regularly to Elephant, the periodic publication. Furthermore, it is no small thing, in my opinion, to communicate effectively across the spectrum from school children to research scientists in the field. It is a rare thing when an undergraduate at a small college in Delaware knows that his request for detailed information on elephant reproduction (to write a seminar paper) or a child's request from Texas for general information on elephants will be given as much attention as a formal letter from a renowned elephant expert who needs information on the feeding behavior of elephants in desert regions [see Elephant, 2(1):187-188, and RECENT CORRESPONDENCE in this issue].

It is a tribute to Hezy and Sandra Shoshani, and the others who have made this first decade a success, that the group has survived and even thrived for a busy and interesting first phase. The needs in the second decade, as the great elephants face relentless pressures and loss of habitat, as conservation groups find themselves forced from one priority to another as other species face extinction, as zoos become increasingly important as refuges-of-the-last-resort, will be far greater. As a writer and historian, without the specialized knowledge that the research zoologist takes for granted, I am sure I speak for many present members (and hopefully future ones) who have found the Elephant Interest Group and its publications and letters to be both informative and vital. I look forward to the next decade.