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# Elephant Days and Nights: Ten Years with the Indian Elephant

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# Book Review

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## Elephant Days and Nights: Ten Years with the Indian Elephant

**Author:** Raman Sukumar, with Foreword by George B. Schaller

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-563821-2

**Pages:** 200 pages

Review by Robert H.I. Dale

This book is an abbreviated cousin to Dr. Sukumar's (1989) technical book, *The Asian Elephant: Ecology and Management*, which was reviewed earlier in *JEMA* (vol. 8, no. 1, p. 94). It is a combination of a discussion of the current status of Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) and the author's memoirs. As Dr. Schaller writes in the foreword, the text is Dr. Sukumar's "personal covenant to help the species."

The less-detailed technical descriptions of such topics as plant distribution and population density make this book much easier to read than the previous one. The current book also contains more recent data than the 1989 book, advice on elephant observing from Dr. Sukumar and his colleagues, and describes the personal context of Dr. Sukumar's work. The book contains many instructive black-and-white and color photographs depicting the individual elephants and incidents described in the text.

The book is organized by topic, starting with a justification of the research on elephant/human conflicts, crop raiding, poaching, and elephant conservation. Dr. Sukumar goes on to describe the terrain of the study area, elephant identification, reproduction, diet and seasonal foraging patterns, crop raiding, social structures and calf development, the ivory trade, and the history of Asian elephant/human interactions.

He finishes with a discussion of the future possibilities for the remaining 37,000–57,000 wild Asian elephants and the 15,000 captive ones. Dr. Sukumar places the dilemma of Asian elephants in the broader context of the great 20th Century extinction, with the loss of thousands of species due to human mismanagement of the environment and natural resources. For Dr. Sukumar, the survival of the elephant will require a restructuring of human societies and a revision of human priorities.

The text presents practical advice on observing wild elephants, such as "it is always better to mistake a rock for an elephant than an elephant for a rock" (p. 4), and the capacity of the camera (still or video) to capture information missed by live observation. The personal context describes the joy of field research and the tedium of manuscript preparation.

There are some interesting descriptions of the social and physical development of calves, and of the social structure of the elephant population (including comparisons with African elephants). For instance, it has been known, at least since 1878, that elephant herds are headed by females; in addition, although Katherine Payne demonstrated the infrasound communication in Asian elephants at the Washington Park Zoo in 1984, an Indian naturalist named M. Krishnan had suggested the phenomenon in 1972 (but did not have the instruments to verify his claim).

Dr. Sukumar suggests experimentation with infrasounds and pheromones to contain elephants in preserves or, at least, protect crops, and he recommends much more research on population genetics, with both wild and captive animals. He worries that, because of the continued fragmentation of the elephant habitat and the consequent reductions in population sizes, artificially maintaining genetic diversity in elephant populations may be the key to the elephant's survival. He makes it very clear that if we are serious about the elephant's survival, we must act now.