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Elephant Culture Matter for China’s Asian Elephants Conservation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: 28 June 2020
Accepted: 31 July 2020
Published Online: 19 August 2020

Keywords:
Asian elephant
Elephant cultures
Ethnecology
Conservation Biology

ABSTRACT

Traditional anthropogenic impacts such as hunting, using as war-elephant, trading of ivory, paying tribute to the imperial court and so on, were once thought to be directly responsible for the rapid decline of Asian elephants in China. But in Yunnan Province, China, a unique human factor such as the traditional elephant culture of local ethnic minorities, is an important factor in the conservation of Asian elephants. In these areas, we investigated by means of village interviews, field surveys and data collection, the results show that the elephant culture of ethnic minorities has a great impact on people’s thoughts and behaviors, these traditional culture and belief (that mean taking elephant as the God, holding elephant as a belief, worshipping elephant and praise it) urges people to actively protect elephants and avoid more human-elephant conflicts. To enhance the public awareness of Asian elephant conservation, the Chinese Government or international environmental organizations should give higher attention and support to these elephant cultures.

1. Introduction

Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus* L.) is one of endangered (EN) species listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and one of the first class state protected species in China [1]. Historically, Asian elephants once distributed widely in China [2]. Due to some reasons, such as hunting, using as war-elephant, trading of ivory, paying tribute to the imperial court [2-3], natural vegetation being massively occupied by agriculture and so on [4]. As a result, both population of Asian elephant and their habitats have been reduced drastically, even disappeared regionally in most parts of China [2].

And now, about 300 individuals of China’s Asian elephants merely survive in Xishuangbanna, Pu’er and Lincang in Yunnan Province [4-5], where are also main living places of two ethnic minorities named Dai and Wa people in China [6,7]. Co-existing with Asian elephants, Dai and Wa people have been developing characteristic elephant culture (that is, cultural products and customs are made of elephant as a core), they all take elephant as the God, hold elephant as a belief, worship elephant and praise it [7]. Since 1989, during the 30 years of research on the ecology of Asian elephants, we have been conducting field surveys in these distribution areas of Asian elephants in China - Xishuangbanna, Pu’er and Lincang in Yunnan...
Province, China. During our work, we have come into contact with many friends of the local ethnic minorities and naturally come into contact with their rich and unique production, life and culture. We are curious about these splendid minority cultures, especially the myths, legends and stories about the Asian elephant, such as these various Asian elephant sculptures in streets, decorations with elephant elements in the architecture, the solemn riding elephant parade during the festival, the lively elephant foot drum dance. A great deal of information and data on the culture of the Asian elephant has also been collected with consultation. We found that elephant culture has ultimately slowed down the extinction of China’s Asian elephants, and it played a vital role in protection of Asian elephants. To promote the development of elephant cultures for conservation of China’s Asian elephants in the future, some suggestions have been given in this paper.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Area

The study area is mainly located in Nangunhe National Nature Reserve (with total area 50887 hm$^2$) in Cangyuan County, Lincang, Yunnan Province, and it is a national nature reserve with Asian elephants and their habitats as its main tasks. The surrounding communities of the reserve involve 9 towns, 40 villages committees, 271 villages, inhabited by 23 ethnic groups, such as Wa, Dai, Lahu, Han, Lisu, Yi, Jingpo, Bai, Blang, Tu and De’ang and so on, with a total population of 265,479. Among them, 179,925 are ethnic minorities, accounting for 67.8% of the total population. Dai is the largest and Wa is second, accounting for 30.4% and 19.2% respectively. In addition to the primitive worship of the ethnic, the community residents also believe in other four religions: Theravāda Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Taoism, most of them believe in Theravāda Buddhism.

2.2 Methods

How does elephant culture motivate people to be more active in protecting elephants, we conducted interviews with community residents in the designated study area. These people we interviewed were mainly staffs of the local reserve administration and the elderly from ethnic minorities who are familiar with their cultural traditions, and also many young people. These interviews were focused on what elephants meant to them and whether they were willing to actively protect elephants, we finally collected a total of 30 valid questionnaires.

3. Result

Among these 30 people, only one is not an ethnic minority, the others include 27 Wa and 2 Dai. And the results of the survey showed that only one Wa teenagers was not concerned about elephant conservation, and all of the others were willing to protect elephants voluntarily, we also found that attitudes toward elephant conservation had nothing to do with the education of the people we interviewed.

Figure 1. Map of the study area is mainly located in Nangunhe National Nature Reserve (noted as Nangunhe) and is a national nature reserve with Asian elephants and their habitats as its main tasks. The surrounding communities of the reserve involve 9 towns, 40 villages committees, 271 villages, inhabited by 23 ethnic groups, such as Wa, Dai, Lahu, Han, Lisu, Yi, Jingpo, Bai, Blang, Tu and De’ang and so on, with a total population of 265,479. Among them, 179,925 are ethnic minorities, accounting for 67.8% of the total population. Dai is the largest and Wa is second, accounting for 30.4% and 19.2% respectively. In addition to the primitive worship of the ethnic, the community residents also believe in other four religions: Theravāda Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Taoism, most of them believe in Theravāda Buddhism.

Figure 2. The Wa people pray for the blessing of elephants during the “Elephant Worshipping Festival”.
During the “Elephant Worshipping Festival”, people push the white elephant through the streets.

Earlier studies have shown that human-elephant conflict results from human’s actively harmed elephants [13], and that these injuries involve a large proportion of non-native minority populations, in addition, in recent years, non-native minorities have been hurt more by elephants. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the awareness of elephant protection by minority elephant culture may be one feasible way to solve human-elephant conflicts in the future.

To enhance the public awareness of Asian elephant conservation, the Chinese Government or international environmental organizations should give higher attention and support to the elephant culture. For example, the Chinese Government could make more totems and other cultural products of elephant in Xishuangbanna, Pu’er and Lincang. Especially, organizers of “Water-splashing Festival”, “Elephant Worshipping Festival” or “Elephant Day” may add more elements of elephant culture in these annual festivities, as well as increase the number of participants and villagers. It is urgent to promote people-to-people exchanges, develop elephant culture and strengthen cooperation among government, NGOs and local people in elephant conservation.

Acknowledgments
This article is funded by The National Natural Science Foundation of China “Influence mechanism and regulation of Land use/cover change (LUCC) on Chinese Asian elephant habitat” (No. 41971239), and “2016 Nangunhe Asian Elephant Save the Conservation Project” (Research Phase II) (NGH-YD-20180301). The advice and revisions by Professor Mingyong Chen have guided this article. We also further acknowledge Deming Chen, Yongxiang Li, Zhisheng Wang, Chunlian Li from Nangunhe National Nature Reserve and countless people who have regularly provided invaluable support and aid during our field expeditions.
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