

THE STATUS OF ASIA'S FORGOTTEN ELEPHANTS

November 2025

BACKGROUND OF ASIAN ELEPHANTS AT CITES

At CoP18 in 2019, Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) was adopted, mandating Parties to investigate the illegal trade in Asian elephants and their parts and derivatives.

In 2022, at CoP19, the Decision was renewed, along with the adoption of Decisions 19.107 and 19.108, which directed the Secretariat and the Standing Committee to monitor the implementation of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19).¹

In its report to SC78 in February 2025, the Secretariat recommended the deletion of all three Decisions, suggesting that they had been implemented or that their measures were already found in Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP19) and Resolution Conf. 11.3 (Rev. CoP19).

However, the situation on the ground indicates otherwise and reporting rates have remained consistently low – only five Parties submitted reports to SC74² and just three to SC78.³ Worryingly, only three Asian elephant range States, namely Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand, have ever submitted reports to the Standing Committee.

At SC78, thanks to strong interventions by Kenya and the UK, supported by Senegal and Nigeria, Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19), paragraph (a), was proposed for renewal at CoP20.

In addition, thanks to the leadership of India and the US, the *List of key elements to be considered regarding registering, marking and tracing systems for captive Asian elephants* was revised and then endorsed by the Standing Committee. Asian elephant range States were encouraged to consider inclusion of these elements in their national systems for registering, marking and tracing of captive Asian elephants.

Disappointingly, there was limited engagement by Asian elephant range States in the discussion.

Table 1: Historic reporting on Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) since adoption

MEETING	NUMBER OF REPORTING PARTIES	NOTES
SC73 (2021)	N/A	No Asian elephant agenda item
SC74 (2022)	5	Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, New Zealand, the UK (NB required further Notification)
SC75/76 (2022)	N/A	No Asian elephant agenda item
SC77 (2023)	Unknown	No mention of reporting against the Decision was made in the Secretariat's report
SC78 (2025)	3	Japan, Thailand, the US

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITES COP20

REGARDING DECISION 18.226

- **SUPPORT** renewal of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) paragraph a)
- **PROPOSE** renewal of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) paragraph e)

REGARDING DECISIONS 19.107 AND 19.108

- **RENEW** Decisions 19.107 paragraphs a) and c) and 19.108 with amendments to timeframe to maintain the oversight of the Secretariat and the Standing Committee on the implementation of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19)

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- **AMEND** the registration period for captive elephant birth from one year to one month (element 3 of CoP20 Doc. 76.1 Annex 5)
- **SUPPORT** adoption of draft Decision 20.AA (CoP20 Doc. 76.1 Annex 6)

WHY IS STRONGER ACTION ON ASIAN ELEPHANTS NECESSARY?

LOSS OF OVERSIGHT OF DECISION 18.226 (Rev.CoP19)

The proposed renewal of paragraph a) of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) is key to continuing the monitoring and evaluation of the illegal trade threats facing Asian elephants.

The proposed deletion of Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19) paragraph e), along with Decisions 19.107 and 19.108, would eliminate oversight by removing all reporting obligations from the Parties to the Secretariat and from the Secretariat to the Standing Committee. As a result, accountability would be lost, and Asian elephants would not receive the comprehensive discussion and scrutiny they require at future CITES meetings.

ALLOWING ONE YEAR TO REGISTER BIRTHS IS TOO LONG

The current one-year timeframe for registering the birth of a captive elephant, as outlined in element 3 of Annex 5 of CoP20 Doc. 76.1, is too long and creates a risk of laundering wild-caught elephants into captive facilities.

Registration should be within one month bringing it into line with the timescale for the registration of a death as contained in element 6.v of the Annex 5.

LACK OF FUNDING TO MONITOR MIKE SITES IN ASIA

There are currently 30 MIKE sites in Asia, which represent a quarter of the total Asian elephant population.⁴ Due to lack of funding, no direct support has been provided to MIKE sites in South Asia since 2020, even though 90 per cent of the total population occurs in this region. In the case of South-East Asia, financial support came to an end in October 2024.⁵

Without sustained and functioning capacity to monitor the illegal killing of Asian elephants across their range, it is critical that a reporting mechanism exists and that oversight by CITES is maintained through the existing Decisions to inform policy and decision-making.



ONGOING ILLEGAL TRADE IN PARTS AND DERIVATIVES OF ASIAN ELEPHANTS

Illegal trade in parts and derivatives of Asian elephants, particularly their skin, continues to take place online. According to Resolution Conf. 11.3 (Rev. CoP19) on Compliance and enforcement, wildlife crime linked to the internet is recognised as an increasing concern and it is recommended that Parties investigate and prevent the use of online platforms for illegal wildlife trade.

During 2024-25, EIA conducted online market research into the availability of non-ivory elephant specimens across social media and e-commerce platforms in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and found a consistent year-on-year increase since 2020.

JUNE 2019 – SEPTEMBER 2024

- **1,179 advertisements** in four languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Laotian) selling non-ivory products across 11 social media and e-commerce platforms
- **75 per cent** (892) of advertisements were selling elephant skin, either raw or processed. Other parts include elephant bone, hair, tail, tooth, semen, toe, placenta, penis and trunk.
- **388 sellers**
- **WeChat** and **Facebook** were the most common platforms used for sales
- Most frequently mentioned locations include Shandong, China (96 ads); Nghe An, Vietnam (64 ads); Maymyo, Myanmar (41 ads); and Jiangsu, China (37 ads)

SEPTEMBER 2024 – JUNE 2025

- **732 advertisements** in Chinese and Vietnamese selling non-ivory products across **eight social media and e-commerce platforms**
- **Elephant skin** remained the most advertised non-ivory elephant product (404 ads)
- **119 sellers**
- **WeChat** hosted the highest number of advertisements (349 ads), followed by Facebook (196 ads)
- **Myanmar** was the most frequently listed country (114 ads), followed by China (88 ads), Vietnam (70 ads), Laos (23 ads) and Thailand (10 ads)

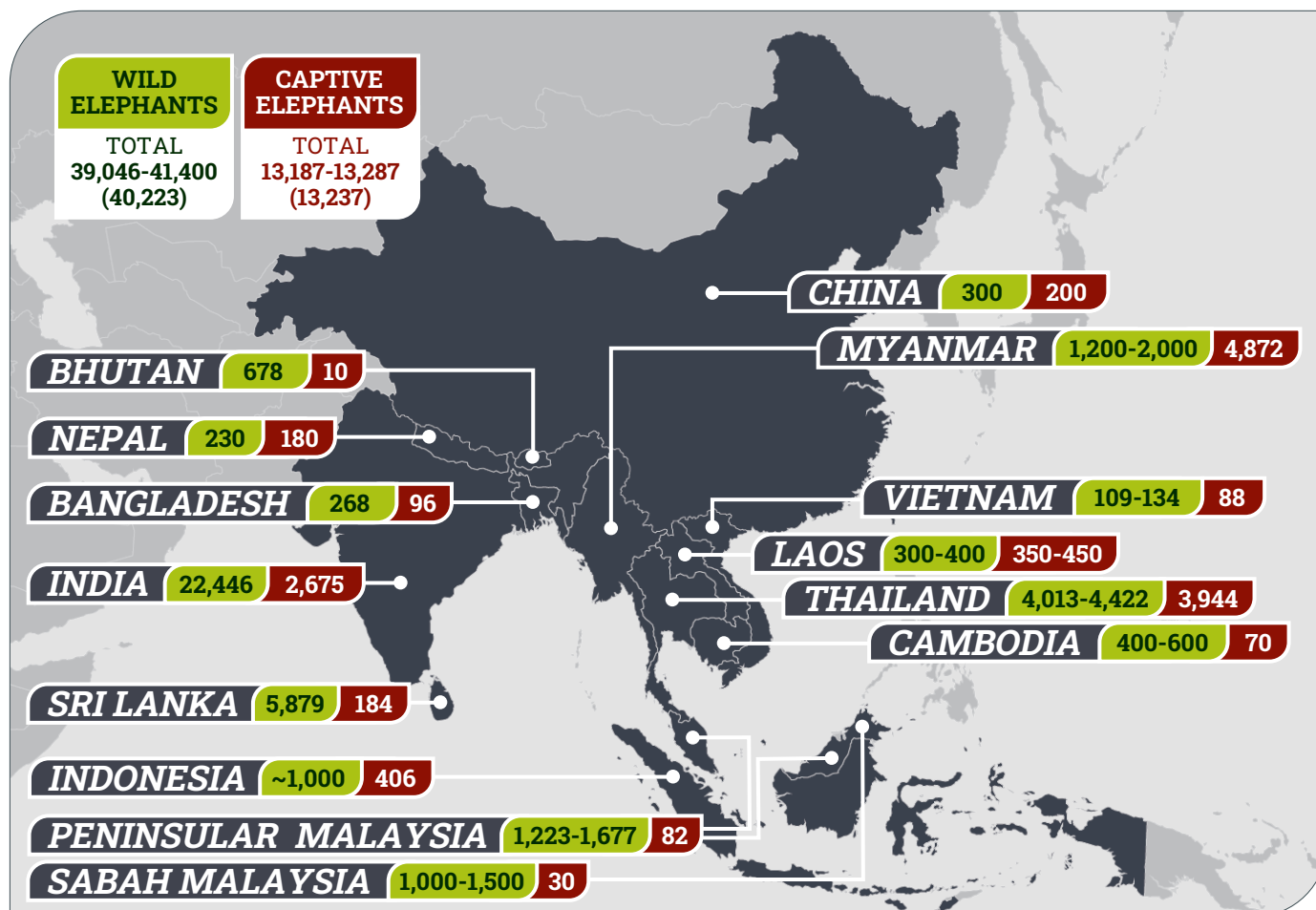
DISTRIBUTION OF ASIAN ELEPHANTS

Ranging across 13 Asian countries, the current estimated total population of wild Asian elephants is approximately 40,000 individuals, representing a 15 per cent decrease from previous surveys.^{6,7,8}

This decline is primarily due to the reduction in the wild elephant population of India. According to the latest survey published in 2025, India's estimated population stands at 22,446, down from 29,964 in 2017.

There are approximately 13,000 captive elephants, the majority of which are found in India, Myanmar and Thailand.

Figure 1: Current populations of Asian wild and captive elephants across 13 range States



References

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