

Paichit – a Sumatran baby elephant



- 1 Pushing on 400 kilograms, baby Paichit knows when it's feeding time. He lets out an appreciative bellow, a rumbling baby elephant purr from his patch in the Sumatran jungle, as soon as his mahout (keeper) Julkarnaini approaches bucket in hand. "He's getting much healthier," observes Julkarnaini. When he was discovered, Paichit was so malnourished that the shape of his ribs was visible from beneath his sagging skin.
- 2 Paichit is one of a tiny subspecies of the Asian elephant, the Sumatran elephant, which has declined by a devastating 80% in 25 years. At best, there are only 2,800 left. In 2012 the classification of Sumatran elephants was changed from "endangered" to "critically endangered" and the WWF estimates they are not likely to survive in the long term.
- 3 The number one problem is habitat loss as a result of deforestation. The island's elephants end up tramping through villages and plantations, eating the spiky oil palm fruit, unwittingly guzzling up the local community income and causing chaos and destruction. They have lost nearly 70% of their habitat in one generation. Over the past two decades Sumatra's rich rainforests have been decimated to make way for timber and palm oil plantations, and the natural habitat of native species such as Sumatran elephants, tigers and rhinos has been gutted.
- 4 The Indonesians are focusing on ways of dealing with the problem of human-elephant conflicts in Sumatra. In Aceh an elephant conservation response unit (CRU) has been running for several years, where captive

elephants are trained to memorise a series of commands and then employed in the field to chase wild elephants deep into the forest, and out of harm's way. Across Aceh there are seven CRUs and 34 elephant "rangers".

- 5 Could Paichit become an elephant ranger in the long-term? At the moment releasing him back into the wild would be too risky. In the last five years two other baby elephants rescued and treated at the CRU centre failed to make it. Paichit has grown healthier and calmer under Julkarnaini's watchful care, but the centre needs to provide opportunities for him to socialise. Elephants are deeply social creatures, and their emotional well-being is just as important as it is to humans.

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