Overall protection of Asian elephants in China

The long-distance northward migration of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) population originating from Xishuangbanna has aroused considerable public attention. Recently, Campos-Arceiz et al. (2021) addressed the causes and conservation implications. We aim to provide additional supplementary key information on this issue.

The migration search to find suitable habitats for survival and reproduction are important natural selection and dispersal processes in any elephant’s life history. Previous reports of elephant migration have been documented over the past few decades (Wu et al., 1999). Migration is not abnormal; there are potentially suitable habitats for elephants outside the reserve and distribution area (Lin et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2016). However, long-distance migration is not regularly undertaken and the biological mechanisms involved in the northern oriented migration remains unclear. With the increasing protection of wildlife in China, long-distance northward migration may become normal, making ascertaining the causes highly urgent for us to formulate targeted policies and effective management strategies.

For the migrating elephants, we should aim to understand their living status and ban artificial feeding. The intention of artificial feeding might help to avoid conflicts between elephants and humans, but the food provided is not the elephants’ natural food source, which can disturb and undermine the elephants’ ability to search for food and suitable habitats, and can even change their natural behaviors and habits. The appropriate way to protect migrating elephants is to allow them to migrate by themselves without human interference.

Furthermore, we need to track the migration direction and route of the elephants. Artificially inducing and/or persuading them to return home is undesirable. Returning the elephants to their original habitat may assist us to manage them but the natural activity space and distribution range of elephants is not fixed, they should not be restricted to a limited area. Increased efforts should be made to identify potential habitats on their migration routes so that we can effectively plan and undertake the necessary protection measures.

Effective elephant protection should not overemphasize boundaries (such as nature reserves) but involve protecting potential habitats, including forests, shrubs, grasslands, and wilderness outside the nature reserve. Furthermore, the development of the surrounding communities should also be fully considered. This concept is consistent with China’s ongoing national park program, which emphasizes the overall protection and systematic restoration of natural ecosystems. The national park system in China is perfectly aligned to assist in implementing an effective elephant management strategy.

China has established an initial set of national parks. Asian elephants and their habitats were not included in the first national parks. To manage and protect this rare large animal in China, it is necessary to plan and build an Asian elephant national park. Based on protecting the habitat of the current distribution area, the planned national park should focus on the corridors and key habitat patches outside the distribution area (Liu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2015), as well as potential human–elephant conflict areas in order to provide a more expansive space for elephants.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Junqing Li conceived the paper. Dongwei Kang wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Dongwei Kang and Junqing Li revised the manuscript together.

**DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT**

This paper has no associated data.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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