KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

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Jumbos might stand a chance

Efforts to keep Bornean elephant a totally protected species bearing fruit

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KOTA KINABALU: The Bornean elephant population in central Sabah has stabilised thanks to various conservation measures despite earlier studies indicating otherwise, says the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia.

Although there was a study entitled "Recent Estimate of Asian Elephants in Borneo Reveals a Smaller" Population published by WWF a few days ago, it is not an indication of a population decline, said WWF-Malaysia elephant conservation manager Dr Cheryl Cheah.

This publication, she added, was done following a previous report "Density and Population Estimation of the Bornean Elephants in Sabah" conducted in 2008.

She said research for both reports was done using different methods, with the previous one having methodological limitations.

"The latest study found that the elephant habitat in central Sabah has remained stable with a substantial increase in the proportion of area allocated for total protection," said Cheah.

The latest report noted that the Bornean elephant population in central Sabah was 387 individuals, with a density of 0.07 individuals per sq km.



Easing man-beast conflict: Road alignments should avoid natural forest habitats and the construction designs must allow for easy elephant movement, says Cheah.

The area surveyed lies within the central Sabah elephant range, and therefore the estimate only includes elephants from the Ulu Segama, Malua, Kuamut, Gunung Rara, Kalabakan, and Sungai Pinangah Forest Reserves.

However, if it were to include the population from other areas of the central Sabah elephant range such as parts of the Sapulut, Ulu Kalumpang and Kalabakan Forest Reserves, the total estimated elephant population in central Sabah is approximately 451 individuals.

If the population of elephants from other parts of Sabah were combined with the numbers in central Sabah, they tally up to what experts have said about the state having between 1,000 and 1,500 elephants.

Cheah said these new estimates strengthen the case for continuing to keep the Bornean elephant a totally protected species.

Any future decisions on population management should now carefully consider how they may impact the long-term viability of elephant populations, she added.

This is also a sign that more data needs to be collected on Bornean elephants in central Sabah, she said.

"Information on other population parameters necessary for monitoring population trends and population management – birth rate, natural death rate, sex ratio, and age structure is unavailable for elephants in that range.

"As population size alone is inadequate to assess the population's long-term viability, it is essential to estimate other key characteristics for inferring population status and developing robust policies and actions for elephant population management," Cheah said.

To help safeguard the elephant sub-population in central Sabah, the study recommends that there should be no further habitat loss, she noted.

Forestry and agriculture plantations should not expand into the most suitable lowland habitats, and the current protected area coverage should not be reduced.

Additionally, concerted measures are needed to address the deaths of elephants related to suspected poisoning and retaliatory killings for crop and property damage, said Cheah.

Dozens of pygmy elephants have been reported dead in part of Sabah over the past few years.

She said the construction of new roads and the expansion of existing ones like the planned Pan Borneo highway in the central Sabah elephant range should ensure that the whole range continues to be available to elephants.

"Road alignment should avoid natural forest habitats and the construction designs must allow for easy elephant movement," said Cheah.

She said there is an urgent need for updated population estimates for the other elephant subpopulations in Sabah – namely the Lower Kinabatangan, Tabin, and North Kinabatangan ranges – for more accurate data.

To this end, she said WWF will be working closely with the Sabah Wildlife Department and Sabah Forestry Department to provide technical assistance and support for conducting population surveys in some of these ranges.