

---

## Sri Lanka hopes elephants can revive tourism trade

Thursday, 09 October 2008

Last Updated Thursday, 09 October 2008

by: Mel Gunasekera MINNERIYA, Sri Lanka (AFP) - Asian elephants are renowned as highly social animals and the reservoir meetings demonstrate their complex group dynamics in action. As evening falls, a female elephant and her pink-skinned baby emerge from the jungle for a leafy snack around an ancient artificial lake in Sri Lanka. They are just two of hundreds of wild elephants that gather each evening along the banks of the Minneriya reservoir for food, water, shelter -- and match-making. From July to October, "The Gathering" -- as it is known -- gives humans the chance to observe the elephants feasting and frolicking on the water's edge.

Mothers encourage their off-spring towards the water, making sure that no calf is left stranded. Young males use their trunks to wrestle each other, while adult bulls sniff the air to scent fertile females. Tucked away in the island's north central province, Minneriya provides an ideal venue for hungry elephants during the dry season when waterholes in the forests evaporate into cracked mud patches. A shade-loving animal, the Asian elephant is not blessed with as good a cooling system as its bigger African cousin, which has large ears. So it is only in the cool of dusk that the elephants emerge from the scrub to relax by the lake. During the season, 300 elephants can be found along the Minneriya reservoir, built by Sri Lankan King Mahasen in the third century. The reservoir fills during the north-east monsoon and gradually shrinks when the dry season sets in. But instead of running dry, the receding water leaves behind a fertile, moist soil from which lush, nutritious grass quickly sprouts, said conservationist Srilal Miththapala. The reservoir is also surrounded by scrub jungle which provides good cover to elephants to retreat into quickly if needed, he said. "The atmosphere gives an ideal setting for a world phenomenon, where a high concentration of Asian elephants can be found in one small area," explained Chandra Jayawardene, a naturalist at Hotel Vil Uyana. Sri Lankan wildlife defies conventional wisdom, said Gehan Wijeyeratne, who heads the country's Jetwing Eco Holidays. "Small islands like ours are not supposed to have large animals," Wijeyeratne told AFP. "The gathering is one of the largest concentration of Asian elephants on Earth." Local hoteliers are trying to cash in on the spectacle, as they struggle to fill hotel rooms amid an escalation in the war between government troops and separatist Tamil Tiger rebels. The tropical island was expecting 600,000 visitors this year, up 20 percent from 2007, to boost tourism receipts to 550 million dollars. But Sri Lankan Tourism said such targets would be missed as earnings for January to July 2008 were a disappointing 200 million dollars. "Several bomb blasts around the country have played a major role in the reduction of tourist arrivals," said tourism ministry secretary George Michael. Jayawardene said an increase in the number of foreign visitors would provide much-needed support for the local economy, but the balance between human activity and wildlife has proved hard to achieve. Asian elephants, which live until about the age of 70, are increasingly straying into human settlement in search of food, as people encroach on their territory. And some elephants are thought to have fled their habitats to avoid artillery duels between troops and rebels in the north and east. According to Sri Lanka's wildlife department, 193 elephants died in 2007 and 171 died in 2006. Most of them were either shot, poisoned or electrocuted. The population has now shrunk to 4,500 from 12,000 a century ago. "You can't completely stop the human against elephant conflict," said Jayawardene, who worked for 30 years at the government's wildlife department. "But, with education and money coming into local hands through elephant safaris, we can minimise the damage. Locals will treat the elephants with respect and learn to live alongside them," he said. (Courtesy : Yahoo News )