Asian elephant gene study: surprise result

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Scientists at Columbia University have found that one of the few remaining groups of wild Asian elephants in India is genetically distinct.

The study's findings might have far-reaching implications in conservation plans for the endangered elephants, as well as other species on the subcontinent.

Prithiviraj Fernando, a post-doctoral researcher at the Columbia's Center for Environmental Research and Conservation and Don Melnick, executive director of CERC, together with colleagues from the Center for Ecological Science at the Indian Institute of Science, collected dung samples from nearly 300 wild Asian elephants and 30 captive elephants for which reliable capture information existed.

They then examined DNA from the samples and found that, of the distinct populations found in India, the group inhabiting the forests in the northeast of the country is actually composed of two genetically distinct populations separated by the Brahmaputra River.

Despite the low and declining numbers of Asian elephants, relatively little is known about their genetic diversity -- information that's crucial to preserving the species.

The study appears in the current issue of the journal Animal Conservation.