

Wildlife groups boycott Sri Lankan elephant census

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(AP) -- Wildlife groups will boycott Sri Lanka's first census of elephants because they fear the count is a "smoke screen" for capturing and domesticating the animals.

The Wildlife Department said it will go ahead with the count starting Thursday aimed at gathering information on the population and helping prepare conservation policies.

About 20 wildlife groups had agreed to deploy about 200 volunteers to help the department count the animals. But they announced Tuesday they were withdrawing their support after Wildlife Minister S.M. Chandransena was quoted as saying 300 young elephants will be captured and handed over to Buddhist temples after the census.

"This is actually a smoke screen to capture wild elephants when they are young, specially tuskors and basically take in them for domestication," said Rukshan Jayawardene, chairman of [Wildlife Conservation](#) Forum.

He feared that most of these animals will not end up in temples, but "will end up in private residences working long hours."

Costumed and decorated pachyderms are used in Buddhist ceremonies as they parade through streets carrying the sacred relics of the Lord Buddha. They are also ridden by tourists and used to carry heavy weights, such as in the logging industry.

Chandrasena could not be reached for comment. But the head of the Wildlife Department H.D. Ratnayake denied plans of capturing and taming wild elephants and said the department will go ahead with the census.

Elephants will be counted for three days as they come to drink from water holes, [reservoirs](#) and tanks. The population is believed to be between 5,000 and 6,000, about half the numbers of the last count a century ago.

More recent counts were limited because of the quarter-century civil war that ended in 2009.

Elephants are endangered in Sri Lanka. They are increasingly entering villages in search of food, and around 250 are killed every year, mostly by farmers protecting people or their [crops](#).

About 50 people die in elephant attacks each year, too.

Activists fear that capturing and removing more elephants from their habitat would further reduce elephant population.

Most tamed [elephants](#) die early due to lack of proper food, loss of habitat and working very hard, said Shantha Jayaweera, another wildlife activist.

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