

# Sri Lankan elephant numbers are 'healthy': survey

September 2 2011, by Amal Jayasinghe

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Wildlife officials said Sri Lanka has 7,379 [elephants](#). Of that number, some 5,879 wild elephants are living near wildlife parks and sanctuaries while another 1,500 were estimated to be in other areas.

"We have an elephant population which is in good health and its [population growth](#) is also very good," Wildlife Conservation Department director H.D. Ratnayake told reporters in Colombo.

Before the count, the department said it believed the [elephant population](#) totalled just 5,350. The country boasted 12,000 elephants in 1900.

The survey counted 1,107 baby elephants, Ratnayake added.

It is the first count since Sri Lanka's military crushed Tamil Tiger separatist rebels in May 2009, making wildlife sanctuaries and jungles more accessible to officials.

About 3,500 people took part in the four-day survey, checking watering holes, ancient irrigation tanks and lakes commonly used by elephants, Ratnayake said, adding that they had set up 1,553 counting posts.

[Migratory patterns](#) suggest elephants may have moved out of the island's embattled northern region during the conflict and moved to neighbouring areas to avoid the fighting, officials said.

Wildlife authorities have treated elephants who stepped on anti-personnel mines or been shot during the decades-long separatist war.

But the count carried out last month was marked by controversy.

Hundreds of conservationists did not take part because of worries the survey would be used to seize elephants and send them to temples for use in religious ceremonies.

Elephants are treated as sacred animals in Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka and domesticated pachyderms are paraded during temple ceremonies as well as at cultural events.

Wildlife Minister S. M. Chandrasena denied on Friday media reports quoting him as saying that the survey was to identify wild animals to be domesticated.

He told reporters that there would be no move to capture elephants.

"Not a single wild elephant will be captured. It is illegal to capture wild animals," the minister said.

However, he said baby elephants at two orphanages run by the government may be given to temples on a case-by-case basis.

Wildlife Conservation Department director Ratnayake said the survey numbers were especially encouraging as the count was carried out at a time when the conflict between humans and elephants has increased sharply.

Nearly 200 elephants are being killed each year by villagers as the animals stray into agricultural areas and some 50 people also are killed each year by marauding jumbos, officials say.

The authorities hope the survey results will be used to better target conservation efforts and minimise clashes with farmers.

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Citation: Sri Lankan elephant numbers are 'healthy': survey (2011, September 2) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-09-sri-lankan-elephant-healthy-survey.html>

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