

Sri Lanka's latest status symbol, a baby elephant

July 1 2016, by Amal Jayasinghe



Elephants perform a routine at the zoo in Dehiwala near Colombo, Sri Lanka, where an illegal trade in baby elephants is being fed by a wealthy elite wanting to keep them as a status symbol

Expensive and high-maintenance, baby elephants have become the ultimate status symbol for Sri Lanka's wealthy elite—a trend that has horrified conservationists and prompted a government crackdown.

Elephants are venerated in mainly Buddhist Sri Lanka and capturing them is illegal.

Yet authorities say more than 40 have been stolen from national parks over the last decade and are being kept as pets.

"The new rich wannabes want an elephant at home for prestige," said Asian elephant expert Jayantha Jayewardene, recalling an old Sri Lankan aristocratic tradition of keeping herds of the wild beasts.

"This is for social climbing."

Earlier this year, the gift of a baby elephant to the visiting New Zealand Prime Minister John Key sparked anger from animal rights activists who said it was cruel to separate her from her family, and the incident has not been repeated.

Worse, Jayewardene says elephants are almost certainly dying to fuel the illegal trade.

"The maternal instinct in elephants is very, very strong," he said.

"Poachers can't get at a baby without the mother putting up a fight, and it usually ends with the death of the mother."

Guns are used to scare off the mothers, and sometimes to kill them, Jayewardene told AFP.



Elephants are considered sacred and are protected by law in Sri Lanka, but a Buddhist monk and a judge are among dozens under investigation for poaching baby jumbos, often after killing their mothers

Elephant calves have also been known to be killed by the tranquiliser drugs used to make them more docile for capture.

Pubudu Weerarathna, the head of the Species Conservation Centre wildlife group, has been involved in a number of rescues and remembers one young elephant succumbing to an overdose of tranquilisers.

Another story had a happier ending—in 2014 he confronted a group of men transporting a baby elephant on the back of a tractor trailer near a wildlife park. The calf had been sedated, but it made a good recovery.

Intentionally killing an elephant is considered such a serious crime in Sri

Lanka it is punishable by death—though no one has been prosecuted in decades.

Two years ago a group of activists reported catching rustlers red-handed with a baby elephant, but no action was ever taken.

In 2013, wildlife activists raised suspicions of a cover-up by some in the administration of former leader Mahinda Rajapakse after a registry of domesticated elephants disappeared.

The document later re-appeared with entries doctored—the case is being investigated by police.



Sri Lankan authorities say more than 40 baby elephants, often the mother is killed in the process, have been stolen from national parks over the past decade and are being kept as pets

Temple tradition

Rustlers are prepared to take such risks because of the huge sums involved—the Species Conservation Centre says baby elephants sell for as much as \$125,000.

Some of the country's most powerful have been implicated. Last month, judge Thilina Gamage was arrested following intense pressure from wildlife activists, who accused him of illegally keeping a [baby elephant](#) as a pet.

He is now on bail awaiting trial, and has been suspended by the Judicial Service Commission.

That followed the arrest in March of Buddhist monk Uduwe Dhammaloka for keeping a two-year-old elephant at his temple in Colombo, though he says he was unaware he was acting illegally.

"I did not capture the elephant, it was left at my temple," he told the court during a preliminary hearing.

"I treated it like any cat or dog people leave at temples when they can't afford to feed those pets."

Now out on bail, Dhammaloka faces charges of stealing state property, which carries a possible jail sentence of three years.



Suspended Sri Lankan judge Thilina Gamage (R) walks out of the High Court in Colombo on June 21, 2016, after being granted bail over charges of owning a baby elephant without holding a licence

Wildlife minister Gamini Jayawickrama Perera has told parliament he is determined stop the illegal trade.

The government has stopped the tradition of gifting animals from its elephant orphanage in Pinnawala to Buddhist temples after activists raised concerns.

But it faces pressure from the country's top Buddhist temple, which says the crackdown on keeping the animals has created a shortage of tame elephants for its annual religious pageant.

The chief custodian of the Temple of the Tooth Nilanga Dela told AFP

that at least 80 elephants were required for the event in the historic city of Kandy, in which relics said to be from the Buddha are paraded on the animals' backs.

"We are facing a crisis situation," said Dela, who put the number of domesticated elephants at fewer than 125—though wildlife officials say the number is closer to 200.

"We may not get the [elephants](#) we need."

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