



ANNUAL REPORT
2024

CONTENT

01. A Message from the Founding Executive Director	03
02. Our Updated Mission	04
03. Executive Summary	05
04. Our Impact and Accomplishments	06
05. A Legacy of Trust and Impact	07
06. VFAE’s Pioneering Efforts in Three Key Elephant Range States	08
07. West Bengal Chapter	09
08. Odisha Chapter	10
09. Kerala Chapter	11
10. In the Spotlight	12
11. Our Story	13
12. Why Asian Elephants Matter	14
13. Challenges Facing Asian Elephants	15
14. A Mammoth Heartfelt Gratitude	16
15. What Stakeholders Say About VFAE	17



A MESSAGE FROM FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I reflect on 2024, my heart brims with gratitude and reverence for each one of you who stands with us on this incredible journey to save the Asian elephants of India. This year has been a testament to what we can achieve together—unwavering passion, determination, and compassion. It has been a journey of healing, growth, and protecting the gentle giants who rely on us to secure their future.

This year, like those before, has brought its share of trials and triumphs, underscoring the depth of the crisis these gentle giants face and the unyielding spirit of those who champion their cause. The cascading effects of COVID are still lingering, with a significant spike in the number of elephant deaths in 2024. But we will never lose hope, nor stop fighting for these majestic elephants.

Your unwavering belief in our mission serves as the light that guides us through some of the darkest challenges. It's because of you that we've been able to protect elephants, nurture their habitats, and uplift the communities that coexist with these magnificent creatures. While the threats they face are daunting, from habitat destruction to human-wildlife conflict, your support has allowed us to confront these obstacles with innovation, compassion, and resilience.

Thanks to your generosity, we've made strides in restoring crucial ecosystems, employing sustainable practices, and introducing groundbreaking solutions like our robotic elephant and AI-driven EleSense technology. The multiple award-winning documentary *Gods in Shackles*, produced and directed by yours truly, continues to cast a powerful spotlight on the plight of captive elephants, inspiring lawmakers to implement stricter regulations for the treatment of “festival elephants” paraded in cultural events. These advancements save elephants from immediate dangers, while laying the groundwork for a future where elephants can thrive in harmony with humans, thus creating ripples, and fostering hope not just for elephants but for the health of our planet as a whole.

Our progress is a testament to your trust and partnership. Every step forward—whether it's planting life-giving saplings, averting tragic train collisions, or deepening waterholes to sustain elephants through arid seasons—is a shared victory. **Your contributions fuel these initiatives, transforming challenges into opportunities and despair into hope.**

I must also express my heartfelt thanks to our incredible Board of Directors. Nancy Plant, our dynamic and dedicated President, brings boundless energy and vision to our cause. Dr. Sunita Sastry, our compassionate Secretary, and David Ezekiel, our diligent Acting Treasurer, ensure that every decision we make is thoughtful and impactful. Our Tech Support Lead, Luveen Rupchand Wadhvani, has been instrumental in pushing the boundaries of what's possible. Alongside them, our ambassadors and volunteers inspire me daily with their commitment and determination.

Yet, even as we celebrate these achievements, the challenges ahead remain formidable. Every loss—every fallen

elephant—is a stark reminder of the work yet to be done. The encroachment on forests, the relentless march of development, and the devastating impact of human activities weigh heavily on these magnificent creatures. But in the face of these daunting realities, your belief in us strengthens our resolve.

This journey is not just about saving a species—it's about honoring a legacy of coexistence, protecting the delicate balance of our ecosystems, and nurturing a vision of a world where humans and wildlife can thrive together. Asian elephants are more than majestic animals; they are climate warriors, seed dispersers, and vital architects of their environments. By saving them, we are safeguarding our planet's future.

Your support is more than a donation—it's an act of faith, a declaration of hope, and a commitment to a brighter future. You are part of a family united by a shared love for these irreplaceable beings and the ecosystems they sustain. I honor and respect the trust you place in us to carry this mission forward, and I promise to remain steadfast in our collective quest to protect and preserve.

Together, we are proving that change is possible. Together, we are building a legacy that will endure for generations. And together, we are ensuring that the call of the Asian elephant will continue to echo through India's forests for years to come.

From the depths of my heart, thank you for your kindness, your courage, and for being a part of this incredible journey. **On behalf of our VFAE family—both human and elephant—boundless gratitude for your unwavering patronage.** You are the reason this mission to protect the endangered Asian elephants is alive and thriving.

Now, it is my great honor to present the 2024 Annual Report for Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE), a testament to the extraordinary impact we're making in the lives of endangered elephants and the communities who share their world.

With deepest gratitude,
Yours truly,

Sangita Iyer

(B.Sc., M.A., PGD Broadcast Journalism)
Founding Executive Director,
Voices for Asian Elephants



OUR UPDATED MISSION

Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) combines science, storytelling, and technologies like AI, robotics, and GIS to protect endangered Asian elephants, restore and rewild their habitats, and safeguard migration corridors. By partnering with grassroots organizations, and providing tribal communities with resources for vital sustenance, we promote harmonious coexistence to those living alongside these majestic creatures.

Here's what we do to fulfill our mission:

- ❖ **Create elephant corridors and restore lost habitat** to protect Asian elephants by partnering with grassroots organizations and tribal communities.

- ❖ **Mitigate Human-Elephant Conflict** by equipping forest-edge communities with training, resources like flashlights for safe coexistence, and youth programs to foster empathy and inspire conservation efforts.

- ❖ **Install cutting-edge AI-based EleSense technology to prevent train collisions with elephants** and tragedies on the notorious Indian Railways

- ❖ **Implement robotic technology** to replace “live” elephants with robotic elephants so that the rich Indian culture can thrive and elephants don't have to suffer.

- ❖ **Rewild the occupied land on the forest fringes** by planting elephant-friendly saplings and creating waterholes, while employing tribal people and creating economic empowerment.





2024 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Progress and Impact

The year 2024 was a transformative one for Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE), as we left no stone unturned in our mission to protect endangered Asian elephants and foster harmonious coexistence with forest-edge communities. By leveraging cutting-edge technology, we deployed AI-powered EleSense systems, preventing hundreds of train collisions with elephants, and launched the first robotic elephant in the state of Tamil Nadu to combat the exploitation of live elephants in festivals. These efforts were complemented by traditional conservation measures, including the large-scale planting of elephant-friendly saplings, deepening waterholes for drought resilience, and addressing critical threats like habitat encroachment, electrocutions, and deadly diseases through legal and advocacy channels.

Our strategy extended beyond conservation to empowerment. By creating sustainable economic opportunities for indigenous communities, we not only improved human livelihoods but also incentivized local stakeholders to prioritize elephant protection. Education, awareness, and global outreach formed the foundation of our approach, strengthening alliances and fostering a shared commitment to biodiversity. None of this progress would have been possible without the unwavering support of our donors, the dedication of our Board of Directors, and the tireless efforts of our volunteers and ambassadors. Together, we are building a future where the survival of elephants signifies the health of our planet and the prosperity of all who depend on it.





Impact and Accomplishments 2024

Protecting Lives, Preventing Tragedies

Between January 2023 and November 2024, a staggering **1,339 train collisions with elephants** were averted, thanks to our cutting-edge EleSense technology developed in partnership with SNAP Foundation and Nature Mates India. Every life saved is a story of hope—a story of an elephant family walking safely through forests instead of facing devastation. Elephants are more than icons of the wild; they are sentient beings who share deep bonds with their herds. Preventing these collisions means preserving not just lives but also the intricate emotional fabric of these majestic creatures.



Creating Sanctuaries, Securing Their Future

Imagine an elephant calf drinking cool water from a newly replenished waterhole or munching on fresh greenery planted by loving hands. Here's what we did this year:

- ❖ **In collaboration with our partner in Odisha, Paribartan, we planted 30,300 elephant-friendly saplings** in addition to the 20,000 odd saplings we planted last year in Odisha, creating pockets of paradise for elephants to graze and roam freely.
- ❖ **Deepened three of the eight waterholes and repaired/ maintained the other five we've built**, ensuring they can capture more rain during the monsoons. This means elephants have ample water during the dry season—a small act that makes a monumental difference.

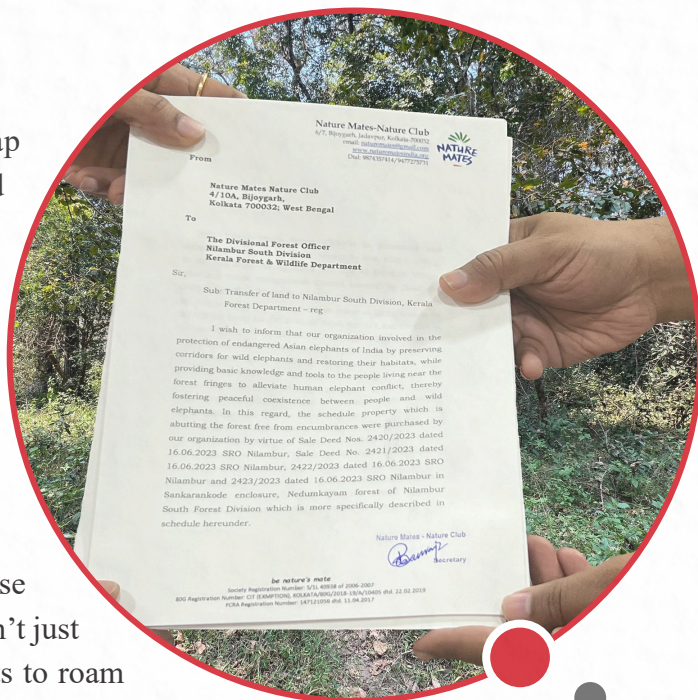
These are not just numbers; they are seeds of hope we've sown for a tomorrow where elephants thrive without fear of hunger or thirst. We proudly share here images of elephant footprint, as herds of elephants visited our waterholes on a regular basis.



Rewilding Efforts: Expanding Safe Spaces

In Kerala, our land rewilding efforts took a giant leap forward. In May 2024, the 4-acre plantation land inside the forest of Kerala that VFAE acquired from a private landowner was officially declared forestland by Kerala's Governor—a victory born of resilience and unity. This barren land that we donated is being transformed into thriving ecosystems, teeming with life.

Inspired by this success, we've now identified a **12-acre plot near Odisha's Angul district** that we plan to purchase and rewild in 2025 in partnership with Paribartan. This isn't just land; it's a sanctuary, a promise of freedom for elephants to roam as nature intended.



A New Era for Captive Elephants

Legal Milestones:

The festival elephants of Kerala have endured unimaginable suffering for generations—chains, hunger, and endless parades under the scorching sun. But VFAE's relentless advocacy, backed by scientific evidence and compassion, has led to a groundbreaking report from India's highest animal welfare authorities.

- ❖ **A Game-Changing Case:** VFAE is on the brink of a historic legal victory for Kerala's "festival elephants." A damning report by the Animal Welfare Board of India and Central Zoo Authority supports VFAE's findings and recommendations, poised to redefine the lives of these elephants.

Some of the sweeping changes include:

- ❖ Providing each elephant with **1.2 acres of free-roaming space.**
- ❖ Introducing **positive reinforcement training.**
- ❖ **Improving diets** for balanced nutrition.
- ❖ **Retiring overworked elephants** to government-run camps.
- ❖ **Building shelters** to protect elephants from harsh elements.



Awaiting Court Ruling: We await the Kerala High Court's decision with bated breath, knowing it could be the beacon of hope captive elephants so desperately need, transforming festival practices forever.

A Documentary's Unrelenting Impact

- ❖ **Judicial Awareness:** *Gods in Shackles* documentary was screened at the Kerala High Court in 2016, galvanizing top judges to crack down on unethical practices by elephant owners and temples.

The Dawn of Robotic Elephants

In February 2024, something magical happened at Devarshola's Shiva Temple in Tamil Nadu. **The state's first-ever robotic elephant**, a lifelike, cruelty-free alternative to live elephants, was unveiled, funded by our cherished supporter, Ganesh Hariharan, in memory of his late father.

- ❖ **Ripple Effect:** This groundbreaking initiative garnered widespread media attention, sparking a revolution and inspiring temples to adopt robotic elephants, potentially ending the cruel exploitation of live elephants.

As we are getting ready to launch our next robotic elephant in Thrissur – the elephant entertainment industry hub – we are filled with hope that this initiative will ultimately spell the end of the exploitation of live elephants in cultural festivals. Thanks to our decade-long supporter, Dolores Whitley, for fully funding our second robotic elephant.



Empowering People, Transforming Lives

Our mission to protect elephants has created ripples of change, uplifting human lives along the way.

- ❖ **In West Bengal:** Indigenous tech experts, including a team of around 20 people, were employed to install our innovative EleSense technology.
- ❖ **In Odisha:** Employed 200+ tribal people in Odisha to plant saplings and dig waterholes, providing critical economic opportunities for communities living alongside wildlife.
- ❖ **In Kerala:** Local tech experts were hired to design the **first-ever robotic elephant we unveiled in Tamil Nadu state in February 2024**, uniting tradition with cutting-edge innovation, while discouraging captivity.

- ❖ **Education & Awareness:** Through innovative programs, we've inspired lasting attitude and behavior shifts, fostering coexistence between people and elephants.
- ❖ **Empowering Communities:** Vulnerable forest-fringe communities in Odisha and West Bengal have been uplifted, ensuring harmony with wildlife.



These efforts demonstrate a profound truth: **when we save elephants, we uplift communities.** Together, we're nurturing a harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife.

Administrative Achievements:

This year, we laid the foundation for systemic changes that will strengthen VFAE's mission and ensure its long-term sustainability. Thanks to a pro-bono **Strategic Planning session by our devout supporter, K.J. McCory**, we expanded our vision and dared to dream bigger than ever before.

For the first time since our inception, we contracted our finances and accounting to a specialized nonprofit accounting organization, ensuring robust bookkeeping, accountability, and transparency.

Exciting leadership changes that reflect our growing momentum:



NANCY PLANT

Nancy Plant, a dynamic corporate lawyer with four years of dedicated service as Secretary, has been elevated to VFAE's President status



DR. SUNITA SASTRY

We warmly welcome Dr. Sunita Sastry, an anesthesiologist at Stanford Medical Center, as our new Secretary



DAVID EZEKIEL

David Ezekiel, a respected International Insurance Business Executive, is our Acting Treasurer



LUVEEN WADHWANI

Our youngest Board of Director, Luveen Wadhvani, a software engineer, harnesses his tech expertise to support our mission

Their combined expertise, passion, and commitment are propelling VFAE into an exciting new chapter.



A LEGACY OF TRUST AND IMPACT: WHAT DONORS SAY ABOUT VFAE



I was involved in the early stages for this charity, the hard work I see evolved and still evolving, also what *Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE)* stands for. How can I ever walk away from a charity that delivers constantly? I have watched VFAE grow. All of their projects are strategic and crucial. Project 101 is vital for the future for education; the EleSense technology is crucial to save lives of these majestic creatures during their natural walk through, via the train track; working with the farmers in harmony regards solar electric fencing and of course if we can change the mindset of the temple owners to change their tac to robotic elephants (for them to realise the real elephant is old fashioned and cruel to move to a more sustainable future).

- Samantha Smith, Business Executive, VFAE U.K. Ambassador



“My association with VFAE has been for a few years now based on my early recognition of an organization that is sincere and committed in its efforts to bring awareness and make a tangible difference in the lives of Asian elephants, in India in particular. I have seen a number of projects being implemented to enhance the welfare of Indian elephants, and the founder and organization have grown from strength to strength in recognition and stature. I will continue to support VFAE, and I am eternally hopeful to end elephant captivity in India, stop the practice of enslaving and using elephants for religious festivals and human entertainment, and finally retire them to a sanctuary where they can spend the remainder of their lives in peace.

- Ganesh Hariharan, Managing Director, Business Transformation



“My love for elephants and my concern for their survival has inspired my desire and commitment to support Sangita and VFAE. I want my grandson to be able to observe wild elephants roaming in healthy, flourishing, ecosystems.

Saving Asian elephants from a life of misery in captivity, providing safe sanctuary, and preventing avoidable accidents and horrific deaths, is the mission of VFAE. The EleSense technology (one example of VFAE’s efforts) saves countless elephants lives, preventing unimaginable suffering resulting from deadly train track collisions. Funds donated to VFAE support the installation of early warning pilot systems alerting the train drivers of elephants crossing tracks ahead. How could one not be compelled to support this incredibly urgent and vital cause?”

- Katherine Flora Treat, Business Owner



“I am proud to continue my support of Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) because you can see actual lives are being improved and saved because of Sangita Iyer’s work. She finds concrete solutions to the tragic problems that elephants face in India. Sangita & her team worked with indigenous tech experts to produce EleSense, which is saving their lives. VFAE has also partnered with local creatives to develop robotic elephants that could, should and will ultimately replace the use and abuse of temple elephants. VFAE also educates people how to live near elephants without conflict and provides employment to many. They are constantly seeking solutions so that elephants can live freely and safely in India where they have been for centuries. That’s the kind of NGOs that I like to support; groups that get things done.”

- Patty Shenker, Animal Rights Activist



“I have witnessed an exemplary individual Sangita Iyer the Founder of Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) who has dedicated her life to make this world a better place for Asian elephants, their habitats and the communities that live alongside them. Her ethics and profound love, compassion and respect for wildlife and the environment is unparalleled.

The organization uses technology and innovative methods to combat elephant endangerment, human wildlife conflict and habitat loss. Every dollar that is donated is used to promote these solutions for elephants living in an ever-shrinking world, because of deforestation, farming and human encroachment. I have supported VFAE for many years and will continue to do so because, Sangita Iyer walks the talk and accomplishes what she sets as her goals to further benefit not only Asian elephants but every elephant in the world. She works tirelessly everyday to achieve this.”

- Sonja Wong, Elephant Advocate



“I first became aware of Voices for Asian Elephants when its Founder, Sangita Iyer, spoke so passionately at one of Action for Elephants’ marches against the ivory trade. It was impossible to ignore her dedication to her cause and the terrible stories she told about what was happening to elephants in India. Indeed, her speech inspired our group to demonstrate outside the Indian High Commission in London against the treatment of Kerala’s temple elephants, which coincided with the visit of PM Modi to the UK. As a result, our event

generated a lot of media coverage both in the UK and in India.

Since then, I have tried to help VFAE, both by raising awareness - and money - for the vital work they are doing for captive and wild elephants. Sangita’s continued fight to improve the lives of India’s beleaguered temple elephants against all the odds is especially motivating to me. I hope to continue doing what I can to help for as long as I am able.”

- Joanne Ibbitson, Elephant Advocate



“Elephants represent the best of nature. They are wise, family oriented, they understand what death is, they make plans. They are better than us. Help save the Asian elephants, and the forgotten elephants of Odisha. Please donate to VFAES.org. I’m thanking you in advance with all my heart.”

- William Shatner, Star Trek series, Hollywood Icon



“As a proud ambassador for VFAE, I would like to stress how important it is to support Sangita and her team for the tireless dedicated work they do for the welfare and safety of the Asian elephants. Her book “Gods in shackles “ opened my eyes. Please support this vital charity. Can you imagine a world without elephants? I can’t !! They are magical, mystical intelligent creatures who deserve our voices.”

- Rula Lenska, British Actress & Model, Renowned for Coronation Street



“I wholeheartedly support Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) because Sangita Iyer’s organization is one of the world’s most effective because it embraces practical solutions and technology. VFAE has led the way, using Elesense AI-based tech to prevent elephant/train collisions, setting up wildlife corridors and building barricades to stop elephants from falling into wells. VFAE gets results and saves lives.”

- Jane Velez-Mitchell, TV Journalist, Founder UnchainedTV



VFAE's PIONEERING EFFORTS in Three Key Elephant Range States

Having implemented approximately 16 projects over the past five years, VFAE has meticulously evaluated the impact of each initiative, enabling us to identify those that deliver the most tangible and immediate outcomes. In a world where time is a critical factor, especially for the endangered Asian elephants teetering on the brink of survival, this focused approach is vital. Rather than dispersing our resources across numerous efforts, we have streamlined our strategy to concentrate on three high-impact projects in as many states. This allows us to channel our time, energy, and resources toward achieving measurable results, ensuring the greatest possible progress in protecting these keystone species and the ecosystems they sustain.

By prioritizing depth over breadth, we are embracing a results-driven approach to conservation that balances urgency with innovation, empowering us to make meaningful strides in the race to save Asia's gentle giants.





WEST BENGAL CHAPTER

Our Signature Project: EleSense, Saving Elephants from Deadly Train Tracks.

Unsustainable development, including railway tracks and roads that cut through core elephant habitats, remains one of the leading causes of elephant deaths. Each year, an estimated 50–75 elephants lose their lives to train collisions in India. While speed restrictions are enforced within protected areas, most accidents occur outside these zones, where such measures are absent. In response, VFAE, in collaboration with SNAP Foundation and Nature Mates India, has pioneered **EleSense**, an early warning system designed to prevent these tragic collisions. The system alerts train drivers to elephant presence and emits sirens to warn elephants, giving both of them time to avoid danger.

Following the outstanding success of Phase 1, during which around 40 devices were installed, EleSense has achieved remarkable results. By detecting height, temperature, movement, and patterns, the system transmits real-time data to railway control rooms via SMS, enabling station masters to warn train pilots in time. With 100% accuracy in identifying elephants, the system averted 1,339 potential collisions between January 2023 and November 2024. This success has laid the groundwork for Phases 2 and 3, which involve installing a set of 30 additional devices each in the Chapramari Wildlife Sanctuary and Buxa Tiger Reserve respectively.

The project's expansion, supported by ALJ Foundation (50% funding), our Secretary, Dr. Sunita Sastry (20%), and generous crowd-sourced donations, underscores the commitment of diverse stakeholders. A joint workshop convened by VFAE brought together Railway and Forest Ministries, local NGOs, police, tea estate associations, and the media to discuss EleSense's functionality and stakeholder responsibilities, ensuring a unified approach to elephant conservation.

We are deeply grateful to our heart-centered donors, grassroots partner Nature Mates India, and technology experts at SNAP Foundation for their unwavering belief in our mission. Together, we are taking significant strides to protect India's precious elephants from preventable tragedies.





ODISHA CHAPTER

Food and Water for Odisha's Distraught Elephants: A Beacon of Hope Amid Crisis

Odisha's forests, once thriving ecosystems brimming with life, are now shadows of their former glory. The relentless march of development has stripped these lands of their natural richness, forcing elephants into perilous journeys across highways and into human settlements in search of food and water. The 2024 Winter Elephant Census offered a sobering snapshot: Odisha's 2,103 elephants face unprecedented challenges, as habitat loss and human-elephant conflict intensify. With electrocution leading the tally of unnatural deaths, and a grim ratio of five births to 48 deaths within six months, the stakes could not be higher for these gentle giants.

In the face of this adversity, Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) has committed to a transformative strategy: addressing the elephants' survival needs directly in their degraded habitats. In 2024 alone, VFAE planted **30,300 elephant-friendly saplings** and **deepened eight critical waterholes** at the trijunction of Balasore, Baripada, and Hardgarh—key habitats where elephants frequently leave their footprints as they seek sustenance. These initiatives offer a lifeline to elephants while reducing the likelihood of fatal encounters with humans.

VFAE's earlier efforts laid the groundwork for these successes. In 2023, our partner organization in India prepared the soil in the Pallahara and Balasore ranges, planting **20,000 saplings** that are now flourishing, thanks to the mid-July rains. These saplings have already begun to enrich the forest landscape, restoring essential forage areas for elephants. Back in 2022, in collaboration with the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), VFAE cultivated and transplanted **11,000 elephant-friendly saplings**, achieving an impressive 90% survival rate.



Through partnerships with Paribartan India and WPSI, and with the steadfast support of generous donors, VFAE is crafting a sustainable future for Odisha's beleaguered elephants.

- ❖ Our historic land purchase for rewilding in Kerala has set the stage for restoring natural habitats in other parts of India.
- ❖ A 12-acre plot near Odisha's Angul district has been identified for rewilding in 2025-26, promising a brighter future for elephants and biodiversity.
- ❖ We will plant **50,000–60,000 seedlings** of native fodder species, such as jackfruit and mango, ensuring a steady food source.
- ❖ These proactive measures, combined with efforts to deepen community engagement and provide economic incentives for conservation, pave the way for harmonious coexistence between humans and elephants.

As climate change exacerbates water shortages, and temperatures soar to 45°C (113°F) during summer, these projects are more critical than ever. By ensuring food and water availability within the forests, elephants can remain safely in their habitats, avoiding dangerous highways and human settlements. VFAE's efforts are a testament to the resilience and compassion of communities and donors united in the mission to protect these majestic animals.

This is not just about saving a species but preserving an entire ecosystem that elephants sustain through their keystone role in biodiversity. Every sapling planted, every waterhole deepened, and every elephant saved is a step closer to ensuring that these magnificent creatures—and the delicate balance of life they represent—endure for generations to come.





KERALA CHAPTER

Revolutionizing Tradition: A Humane Solution for Kerala's Captive Elephants

Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) is proud to unveil a groundbreaking initiative that merges innovation with compassion: the introduction of lifelike robotic elephants to Kerala's grand temple processions. Following the remarkable success of our first robotic elephant in early 2024, this inspiring initiative is transforming the way traditions are upheld—preserving Kerala's rich cultural heritage while ending the suffering of captive elephants.

For centuries, live elephants have been integral to Kerala's temple festivals, symbolizing grandeur and spirituality. However, the reality for these majestic animals tells a different story. Captive elephants in Kerala endure severe physical and psychological distress, from grueling work schedules under harsh conditions to the risks of injury or death in chaotic environments. The situation is dire, with alarming statistics showing that between 2018 and 2024, nearly 33 percent of the state's recorded captive elephants (160 out of 509) have died, raising serious concerns over their welfare and survival.

The suffering extends beyond the elephants. Between 2023 and early 2024, there have been hundreds of cases of stampedes caused by frightened or distressed elephants. These incidents led to the deaths of multiple handlers, injuries to dozens more, and posed significant safety risks for the public. Robotic elephants offer a groundbreaking, humane alternative, eliminating these dangers while honoring the grandeur of temple traditions.

Fully lifelike and majestic, these robotic elephants have been enthusiastically embraced by temple authorities and devotees alike. They seamlessly replace live elephants in rituals, ensuring the safety of attendees and restoring dignity to the cultural practices they represent. The temple community has expressed a growing acknowledgment that this compassionate alternative aligns with their values and long-term goals.

This is not merely a technological innovation but a compassionate revolution. With the generous support of visionary donors, VFAE is leading the charge to alleviate the suffering of captive elephants while safeguarding the lives of elephant handlers and devotees. Together, we are setting a precedent for other temples across Kerala and beyond, paving the way for a future where tradition and humanity coexist in harmony.

In February 2024, our pilot robotic elephant was launched at Sree Sankaran Kovil in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, fully funded by Ganesh Hariharan in honor of his late father. This initiative inspired Dolores Whitley to sponsor our second robotic elephant, which will be unveiled in February 2025 at a temple in Thrissur, Kerala. These visionary contributions demonstrate how innovation and compassion can preserve cherished traditions while ensuring the well-being of elephants and the communities that revere them.



Justice Matters – A Case That Could Transform the Lives of Kerala’s Festival Elephants

In the sacred grounds of the Guruvayur Temple, where the principles of Hinduism — love, compassion, and *ahimsa* (nonviolence) — are meant to reign supreme, a darker reality unfolds. Beneath the spiritual veneer lies a heartbreaking contradiction. Elephants, symbols of wisdom and strength in Indian culture, endure unthinkable suffering within this revered institution.

VFAE launched a public interest litigation (PIL) in 2022, exposing the plight of captive elephants at Punnathur Kotta, managed by Guruvayur Temple authorities. Prompted by our PIL, India’s highest authorities, the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), and the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) launched an investigation, not only substantiating our documentary evidence, but also endorsing our recommendations. The scathing report, underscores systemic failures in upholding legal protections, including violations of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Kerala Captive Elephants (Management and Maintenance) Rules, 2012. This landmark case has the potential to catalyze monumental changes in elephant welfare, fostering a humane and lawful approach to their care and management.

The AWBI and CZA Recommendations That Herald Change:

01. Creating Space for Elephants to Breathe

- ❖ The overcrowded Guruvayur temple must relocate some of its 39 elephants to ensure each one has space to roam, in alignment with CZA guidelines – a vital step that will significantly improve their living conditions.

02. A Step Toward Freedom: Space and Dignity for Captive Elephants

- ❖ Ensure all elephants at the Guruvayur Captive Elephant Sanctuary are given a minimum of 1.2 acres each to roam chain-free when not paraded, fostering freedom and dignity.

03. Establishing Dedicated Veterinary Care

- ❖ A specialized hospital for elephants in Thrissur is proposed, promising advanced, targeted medical care for these gentle giants.

04. Routine Health Monitoring

- ❖ Regular health checks, including hemoglobin, protein levels, and tests for diseases like tuberculosis and herpes, are mandated to safeguard the elephants’ well-being.

05. Gentle Handling Through Positive Reinforcement

- ❖ The elephants’ daily routines will now emphasize positive reinforcement over fear-based training, reducing their stress and ensuring better mental health.



PHOTO: SANGITA IYER, GODS IN SHA

PHOTO: SANGITA IYER

06. Prioritizing Foot Care

- ❖ Regular foot treatments and nail trimming will alleviate pain and improve mobility, addressing a long-overlooked need.

07. Round-the-Clock Care by Compassionate Handlers

- ❖ Well-trained mahouts (handlers) will now be available 24/7, and the inhumane use of bullhooks has been explicitly banned.

08. Detailed Health Records

- ❖ Veterinarians will maintain comprehensive records of the elephants' treatments and diets, ensuring accountability and consistent care.

09. Halting Overcrowding with No New Elephants

- ❖ Overburdened facilities will stop acquiring new elephants, prioritizing better conditions for the existing population.

10. Replacing Chains with Cotton Ropes

- ❖ The cruel iron chains will give way to softer, gentler cotton ropes, except during the musth period when safety precautions necessitate sturdier restraints.

11. Separating Elephants from Visitors Safely

- ❖ Secure fencing will protect both elephants and visitors, creating a peaceful environment free from constant disturbances.

These recommendations represent a seismic shift in how captive elephants are cared for, ensuring dignity, safety, and well-being for the first time. However, the journey is far from over.

Now, we await the Kerala High Court's ruling in the coming weeks, a decision that could solidify these changes into actionable mandates. The compliance of the Guruvayur Temple, one of Kerala's most revered cultural institutions, is crucial to setting a precedent for humane treatment across the state and beyond.

A Victory for Elephants

This is more than a win—it's a revolution. These recommendations validate years of advocacy by Voices for Asian Elephants and mark a pivotal moment in the fight for the rights of captive elephants.

With vigilance and continued efforts, a compassionate future for these magnificent creatures feels closer than ever. The world is watching, and the elephants are waiting.





IN THE SPOTLIGHT

21 Stories That Inspired Unprecedented Media Coverage of Elephants

Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) has had a monumental year, with its impactful initiatives covered by 21 national and international media outlets. From groundbreaking technology to innovative conservation projects, VFAE has firmly established itself as a global leader in elephant welfare. Highlights include ringing the NASDAQ closing bell on World Elephant Day, introducing India's first robotic elephant to replace live ones in temples, purchasing land for rewilding efforts in Kerala, and planting over 30,500 elephant-friendly saplings in Odisha. These projects symbolize our organization's relentless commitment to the coexistence of humans and elephants.

Here are direct quotes from some of the most inspiring news features in 2024:

01. NASDAQ Closing Bell Ceremony:

- ❖ Highlighting VFAE's global influence, Nasdaq commended their efforts during the World Elephant Day celebration: "Ringing the bell today isn't just symbolic; it echoes the urgent call to protect Asian elephants and their habitats."

02. Robotic Elephant in Tamil Nadu:

- ❖ *The Hindu* celebrated this historic move, stating, "For the first time, a robotic elephant now stands in Tamil Nadu's temple, signaling the end of cruelty while preserving rituals."

03. Land Purchase for Rewilding in Kerala:

- ❖ VFAE's Kerala initiative drew praise from *The New Indian Express*: "This land acquisition for rewilding is not just about space; it's a lifeline for elephants who can now live as nature intended."

04. Odisha's Saplings and Waterholes Project:

- ❖ Addressing habitat restoration, *The Times of India* noted, "With 30,500 saplings and innovative waterholes, VFAE is creating sanctuaries that bridge the gap between conservation and sustainability."

These milestones are testaments to VFAE's dedication to creating a future where compassion and conservation walk hand in hand. Together, they exemplify what meaningful change looks like in the fight to save Asian elephants.

[Click Here To Read More](#)

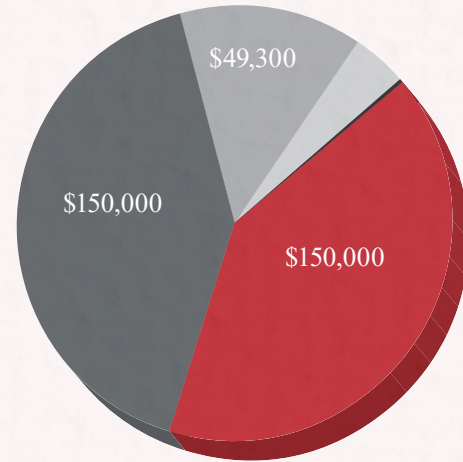




2024 FINANCIALS

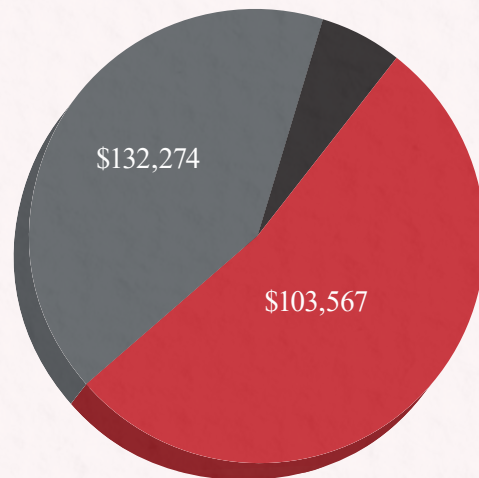
REVENUE SOURCES 2024

- Global Giving & Partners Donations - 41.09%
- Direct Foundation Grants Forecast - 41.09%
- Total Other Contributions - 13.5%
- Total Fundraisers & Events - 4.24%
- Total Merchandise Sales - 0.07%



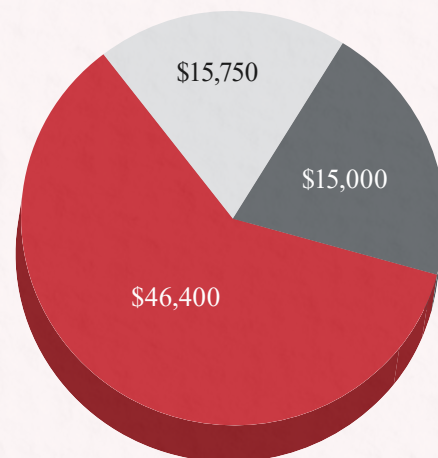
PROJECTS 2024

- Robotic Elephant Expenses - 5.9%
- Saving WB Elephants from Deadly Train Tracks - 41.2%
- Creating Sanctuary and Rewilding for Odisha Elephants - 52.7%



PROJECTS 2024

- Direct Expenses - Projects - 19.4%
- Project Management Costs - 60.1%
- Total Indirect Expenditure - 20.4%





OUR STORY

Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) was born from a deep, personal bond that Sangita Iyer felt for the majestic elephants she encountered as a child in Palakkad, Kerala. At just three years old, Sangita's heart was captured by a bull elephant, and this moment ignited a lifelong love and curiosity that would evolve into an unshakable mission. As she grew, so did her questions—about the chains that bound the elephant she adored, about the suffering they endured. These questions became the spark for her unwavering commitment to free elephants from captivity and pain.

In 2016, while producing *Gods in Shackles*, Sangita realized that awareness alone would not be enough to create the change these elephants desperately needed. It was then that VFAE was born, with a dual purpose: to raise awareness and take bold, direct action to change the lives of endangered Asian elephants. Sangita's journey—transforming from a curious child into a biologist, filmmaker, and passionate advocate—has culminated into the creation of this organization, where science and storytelling converge to inspire hearts and ignite change.

Soon after the release of *Gods in Shackles*, Sangita realized that the plight of India's wild elephants was just as dire. With 80% of their natural habitat occupied by humans, these majestic creatures are left homeless and desperate, wandering into human settlements in search of food and shelter. This often leads to deadly confrontations, with tragic consequences for both elephants and humans. Electrocution, a cruel and preventable cause of death, has become a scourge, while countless elephants are killed on railway tracks, victims of reckless development and encroaching infrastructure. The devastating loss of their home range and the escalating human-elephant conflict highlight the urgent need for conservation efforts that not only protect elephants but also address the root causes of their suffering.

Recognizing this crisis, VFAE expanded its mission to safeguard both captive and wild elephants, working to restore their habitats, prevent conflicts, and create a future where these magnificent creatures can thrive in the wild once more.





WHY ASIAN ELEPHANTS **MATTER**

Asian elephants are keystones of biodiversity, essential for the survival and balance of forest ecosystems. These gentle giants play a critical role in seed dispersal, air purification, and carbon sequestration, making them vital allies in mitigating climate change. Their presence supports the growth of carbon-absorbing hardwood trees and promotes the regeneration of forests, which are natural reservoirs of biodiversity and climate stabilizers.

However, the mounting pressures of extreme weather events, rising greenhouse gas emissions, and rampant habitat destruction are wreaking havoc on both human and ecological health. These interconnected crises are escalating physical, mental, and emotional strain on humans, other species, and the planet. Elephants, as natural climate allies, stand at the forefront of reversing these damaging trends. Through their seed-dispersing dung, they help grow forests and absorb the greenhouse gases driving global warming.

Elephants are irreplaceable “gardeners of the planet,” shaping ecosystems that sustain countless other species, including humans. The future of these majestic beings is directly tied to the health of forests and the survival of life on Earth. Protecting Asian elephants is not just about conservation—it is about securing a shared future for all.





CHALLENGES FACING ASIAN ELEPHANTS

Despite the strides we've made, the challenges facing Asian elephants are monumental. With India's population surging to 1.45 billion—19% of the global total—the competition for space has reached a critical level. The relentless encroachment into wildlife habitats has seen 80% of forests overtaken by human activity, leaving elephants with ever-shrinking sanctuaries. Habitat destruction, driven by unchecked development and urban sprawl, is accelerating at an alarming rate. Each day, elephants confront the stark reality of disappearing forests and an expanding human footprint, edging them closer to extinction.

With fewer than 40,000 Asian elephants remaining globally—around 20,000 of them in India—these gentle giants are under siege. Habitat loss has forced elephants into human settlements and farmland, areas that were once their migratory corridors and home to thriving herds. Their instinctual pathways, deeply etched into their memories, are now obstructed by reckless development, mining operations, railways, and roadways cutting through their habitats. These intrusions make fatal encounters between humans and elephants unavoidable, leading to devastating losses on both sides. The crisis is further compounded by the poaching of male elephants for their tusks, threatening the very survival of the species. Yet, amidst these dire circumstances, we persist, knowing that the urgency to act has never been more profound. Our efforts are crucial to ensuring these magnificent beings endure for generations to come.

Given that VFAE's projects are mainly based in the states of Odisha, West Bengal and Kerala, this report focuses only on those three Indian states. But the truth is, there are 13 additional states where elephants are facing similar, if not graver threats, caused by reckless development to sustain the burgeoning human population in India.

In 2024, the staggering number of wild elephant deaths across Odisha, West Bengal, and Kerala is a wake-up call for people around the world, as the demise of the endangered Asian elephants will most certainly have a cascading effect.

- ❖ **As of December 2024, Odisha alone reported 88 elephant deaths** – 56 of them in a span of six months – due to various threats, including train collisions and electrocutions.
- ❖ In the southern Indian state of Kerala, the elephant population has been declining, with **the number of wild elephants dropping from 1,920 in May 2023 to 1,793 in 2024 – an astounding 127 elephant deaths in just one year.** The death rate for elephants has also been increasing, with the highest mortality rate among elephants under 10 years old. The main reasons for the decline in the elephant population include: Climate change, Human-elephant conflict, and Elephant Endotheliotropic Herpesviruses (EEHVs).

- ❖ In under six years, **140 “festival elephants” have endured miserable lives and deaths** in Kerala – 21 dead in 2023, and 24 elephants dead in 2024. The year 2018 was the worst year, with 32 captive elephants dying – the highest on record.
- ❖ In West Bengal, **elephant mortality has been particularly severe in areas like the Chapramari Wildlife Sanctuary and the Buxa Tiger Reserve**, which have seen repeated incidents of train collisions, though an exact figure for the year isn't yet confirmed.

Sources: *The New Indian Express; India Today; Hindustan Times*

The grim statistics highlight the urgent need for systemic solutions, such as replacing live captive elephants with life-size robotic elephants, and expanding AI-based projects like EleSense, alongside tackling electrocutions and other anthropogenic threats. These tragic losses underscore the critical importance of bolstering conservation efforts to ensure the survival of the endangered Asian elephants.

You, our staunch allies, make it possible for us to save elephants, restore habitats, and empower communities. From preventing deadly train collisions to launching groundbreaking initiatives like our robotic elephant, your support has created waves of hope. Together, we are making an indelible impact, weaving a tapestry of compassion, resilience, and hope for generations to come, while ensuring a future where elephants can roam free, so that the world remains enriched by their presence.





A MAMMOTH HEARTFELT GRATITUDE

We are deeply grateful for the unwavering support of our amazing donors, volunteers, and ambassadors. Your generosity and dedication are the heartbeat of Voices for Asian Elephants. Without you, none of the critical work we do for these magnificent yet vulnerable creatures would be possible. Every donation, every hour of volunteer work, and every advocacy effort you make strengthens our mission to protect and uplift the lives of endangered Asian elephants. Your belief in our cause inspires us every day, and we are humbled by your commitment to join us in this journey.

A special thank you goes to our monthly donors. Your consistent and loyal support allows us to plan and act with confidence, knowing that we have a foundation on which to build meaningful, long-term change. To our volunteers and supporters, your dedication to our cause is nothing short of extraordinary—whether it’s hosting a summer gala, organizing clothing sales, or orchestrating online auctions, you go above and beyond to create a better world for these elephants. Your tireless efforts are an essential part of this movement, and we are forever grateful.

And to our largest supporters, thank you for your extraordinary generosity. Your contributions make an immeasurable impact on the lives of these elephants, and we are deeply appreciative of the trust and faith you have placed in us. You’ve not only helped fund critical initiatives, but you’ve also helped raise awareness and spread hope. From all of us at VFAE, and from the elephants whose lives you’re transforming, we thank you for being such a vital part of this mission. Your continued support will help us go even further, ensuring that these majestic creatures are protected and thrive for generations to come. Together, we’re making the world a kinder, safer place for elephants, and we couldn’t do it without you.

Charitable Partners

ALJ Foundation - *VFAE Diamond Sponsor, Supporting VFAE efforts for the past five years.*

- ◆ Future for Elephants
- ◆ Action for Elephants U.K.
- ◆ Animal Defense Partnership
- ◆ Officiency, Inc.
- ◆ Saving Wild Tigers

Individual Diamond Sponsors:

Dr. Sunita Sastry - *Our Diamond Sponsor Sponsoring land for rewilding in Odisha*

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- ◆ Dolores Whitley

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- ◆ Lou LaChat
- ◆ Patricia Shenker
- ◆ Kavitha & Anand Easwaran
- ◆ Kathy Flora Treat
- ◆ Rosemary & Paul Conder
- ◆ Monica Kelley

Volunteers of the Year:

- ◆ Samantha Smith
- ◆ Joanne Ibbitson



WHAT STAKEHOLDERS SAY ABOUT VFAE

“We support 10 projects in Asia and Africa to save elephants. Asia’s largest elephant population in India is threatened by habitat loss and human-elephant conflicts. Therefore, we have been supporting Voices for Asian Elephants since 2019 to implement cost-effective conservation solutions. Successful EleSense project prevented over 1300 train collisions with elephants between January 2023 and November 2024. Robotic elephants in temples end the suffering of live elephants; we recommend the film *‘Gods in Shackles’* to raise awareness of the issue. If you have a heart for Indian elephants and are also tired and shocked seeing suffering and dead elephants, please consider supporting VFAE! Thank you so much!”

- Heike Henderson-Altenstein and Brigitte Gaschnitz, Future for Elephants

“The work of Voices for Asian Elephants is inspiring. They have been a loud voice for temple elephants, never wavering in the commitment to fight for better lives and care for these elephants. Every penny donated goes to their many projects to protect wild and captive elephants, raising awareness and also helping the communities to coexist with these majestic giants. Action for Elephants UK have had the privilege of working with VFAE and fully endorse the great work they do.”

- Maria Mossman, Founder, Action for Elephants UK

“Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) has truly inspired me with their innovative approaches to ensuring the survival of elephants in India. Their work addresses the heartbreaking reality of human-elephant conflict, and their efforts give me hope for a future where both can coexist. What touches my heart the most is, they are not only saving lives today but also ensuring that future generations of elephants can thrive in their native environments.

I have immense admiration for Sangita, the Executive Director of VFAE, whose integrity and compassion, along with the direct impact of VFAE’s efforts, give me confidence that my support is helping save lives and protect these majestic creatures from extinction. Without VFAE, the future of elephants in India would be in jeopardy. I am honored to be part of a movement that is truly making a difference.”

- K. J. McCorry, Founder, Officency, Inc.

“Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) stands as a steadfast advocate for India’s majestic and ancient Asian elephants, a species facing threats from all directions. Thanks to VFAE’s dedication, acres of vital elephant habitat have been protected from development, preserved indefinitely, and restored with over 50,000 food sources to support these gentle and intelligent animals. Although India may be far from my home in the U.S., I feel deeply connected to the elephants whose lives are being saved through VFAE’s tireless, skillful, and determined efforts.”

- Nancy Plant, Corporate Lawyer, VFAE President

“Growing up in India I have had a passion for these magnificent creatures from an early age. I have been a donor for some years so joining the VFAE Board last year , and helping slow or reverse the extinction of Asian Elephants so that future generations can enjoy them and benefit from their presence, has been important for me.”

- David Ezekiel, Business Executive, VFAE Acting Treasurer

“My involvement with Voices for Asian Elephants (VFAE) began as a donor, motivated by concerns about the impact of overpopulation and resource scarcity on elephants in India. After meeting Sangita Iyer, the founder of VFAE, I was inspired to become more actively involved, using my network to raise awareness and support. I transitioned from being a donor to an advocate, demonstrating how individual passion and strategic action can create meaningful change. I am honoured to be invited to join the VFAE Board of Directors, as I proudly witness the remarkable progress VFAE continues to make.”

- Dr. Sunita Sastry, Stanford Medical Center, VFAE Secretary

“VFAE is doing critical work to sustain India’s cultural and natural heritage by protecting our beautiful elephants. Working across both human and wild environments, we have made great strides in safeguarding elephant rights, habitats, corridors, and futures. I am proud of our continued work to sunset the trade in temple elephants, collaborating with the finest creative minds to replace them with robotic elephants.”

- Luveen Rupchand Wadwani, VFAE Board of Director

“On behalf of PARIBARTAN, I would like to express our sincere gratitude for the generous support of VFAE towards protection and conservation of Asian elephants and their habitat. The financial aid has played an instrumental role in advancing our mission to protect and conserve elephants, and we are truly appreciative of your commitment to this vital cause. With your guidance, we have been able to implement critical conservation strategies including, plantation with elephant friendly fruits bearing plants, waterholes adjacent to corridor /habitat for enabling elephants to have access to water, habitat protection activities with community participation. Your support has not only made a significant impact on the protecting and ensuring rights of elephants but has also helped to raise awareness and foster a sense of shared responsibility within local communities and beyond”.

- Subhransu Swain, Executive Director, PARIBARTAN

“It has been an incredible journey working with VFAE. Over the last four years, your unwavering support for our cause and your dedication to the survival of the Asiatic Elephant have been truly commendable. Your timely and generous financial assistance has played a vital role in enabling us to continue and strengthen our on-ground efforts toward conserving these majestic creatures. Your partnership has been instrumental in driving meaningful change, and we deeply value the impact we’ve been able to create together.”

- Koustav Choudhury, Executive Director, SNAP Foundation

“It’s been a wonderful journey with VFAE. In the last five years the way you have supported our cause and helped us in doing what is needed for the survival of Asiatic Elephants is highly appreciated. The timely arrangements of funds has helped us to pursue and sustain our ground effort towards the conservation of the Elephants.”

- Rishin Basu Roy, Nature Mates Nature Club, Secretary



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Photo Credit: Sangita Iyer (all elephant images)