Extensive information:

Project Elephants and Nature
(*Elephas maximus maximus*)
Sri Lanka
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Note: Annually the text of this extensive information will be updated in cooperation with the project. Conservation Research is a dynamic process where although the research goals are planned for years in advance the monthly and daily activities to achieve these goals depend on the local situation and can change dramatically.

Join the project with an open mind, and a flexible attitude and you will leave Sri Lanka with unique, special and unforgettable memories!
1. Elephant introduction

The Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*), is one of three recognized subspecies of the Asian elephant. The Sri Lankan elephant population is now largely restricted to the dry zone in the north, east and southeast of Sri Lanka. They are officially classified as an endangered species, as the population has declined by at least 75% over the last three generations. The species is mainly threatened by habitat loss, habitat degradation and fragmentation and due to human-elephant conflicts.

1.1 Description

The Asian elephants have smaller ears than their African relatives, which are not only used for hearing but for aggressive display and temperature regulation as well. They have just one finger at the top of their trunk, which is very mobile and an extension of the nose and allows the elephants to drink and eat without bending down. Their trunks can hold six litres of water and are often used as a flexible shower hose pipe. The tusks of these animals are small and in females are sometimes totally absent. They appear when the elephant is about 2 to 3 years old. Tusks are very useful tools. They are used to dig water, salt and roots, fell or mark trees, as a trunk protector and as a weapon of offence and defence.

The Sri Lankan species is the largest of the Asian elephant genus, and has patches of pigmentation (areas with no skin color) on its ears, face, trunk and belly. This is also the darkest of all Asian elephants.

1.2 Social organisation and behaviour

The elephant is a very social animal. The basic family unit is a mature female, the most recent offspring and older offspring. This unit may number about six. They roam together with other family relatives units and an old male, usually all related, forming a herd. This herd is usually led by an old female called the matriarch.

The males leave the family unit when they reach puberty. They may be solitary or form temporary bull groups. The males may live alone, but near to a herd and will have a brief association with family units when feeding or mating with mature cows of the herd. The herd, led by a dominant matriarch, is close-knit and members both help and protect family units.

The dominant males are ready to breed during the musth period, which is often accompanied by profuse secretion of scented liquid from the temporal glands on the side of the head; normally docile animals become exited and unpredictable. During musth they actively seek females in oestrus to mate. The gestation period is about 22 months, and the female usually will give birth to a single young. When birth occurs, other cows of the herd form a circle around the pregnant cow. She assumes a squatting position while giving birth, which will take around 2 hours. Just two hours after birth the calf is able to stand up.

Young elephants and their mothers have a very close relationship, with weaning occurring approximately 4 years of age. The mother also will choose a ‘helper’ elephant inside the herd. This ‘aunt’ will look after the young elephant as well.
1.3 Diet

In the wild elephants spent about 20 hours a day foraging for food. They are herbivores meaning they eat only vegetation. They eat leaves, grass, shrubs, tree bark and different kinds of fruit. They regularly have to fill up their diet with extra salt, which they will dig out of the salt rich ground with their tusks. They drink as much as 150 litres of water a day. In large herds and in dry seasons, they can be very destructive when foraging for food.

1.4 Endangered species

The latest count places elephant population size in Sri Lanka around 5,000 individuals. Of these, nearly 70% ranges outside the protected areas, which is one of the reasons for the increasing human-elephant conflicts. The captive elephant population has declined to approximately 120 individuals.

The threats facing Sri Lanka's elephants are common to all Asian elephants. Forest clearing for human settlements and agriculture is causing loss and increased fragmentation of elephant habitat in Sri Lanka - the population has fallen by almost 75% since the turn of the 19th century.

As a result of forest clearing, human-elephant conflicts have also increased and led to the death of both humans and elephants, and the destruction of property. The problem is compounded by the elephant's predilection for crops such as rice, sugar cane, corn, bananas and other fruits grown by humans.

From 1991 to 2016, 4279 wild elephants were lost as a result of human-elephant conflict. Current recorded levels of mortality would indicate that about 6% of the animals in the wild are dying annually.
2. The project

One-hundred years ago, more than 20,000 wild Asian elephants inhabited Sri Lanka. Today, the population numbers about 5,000.

As rural human populations continue to grow and further encroach into wildlife habitat, the interface between wildlife and people grows increasingly diffused, and in some areas is non-existent. Competition with wild elephants for adequate space for agriculture, forestry and other forms of human development creates deadly situations for both humans and elephants.

For Sri Lankans living in the rural countryside, close encounters with elephants during their day-to-day activities are commonplace. Crop raiding by elephants and the harsh retaliatory measures subsequently taken by people whose livelihoods depend on their farm products feeds a vicious cycle of violence. Each year, between 50 and 80 humans and between 150 and 225 elephants are killed due to human elephant conflicts.

The project is an international community-based organization committed to the research, conservation and protection of Sri Lanka's endangered wildlife, communities, and natural habitats and committed to developing a sustainable model for wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka. Their focus is on helping people, elephants and other wildlife to co-exist peacefully.

2.1 How the project works

The project’s goal is to develop a sustainable model for wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka. Their focus is on helping people, elephants and other wildlife co-exist peacefully.

Their unique model involves a fully inclusive conservation strategy. They simultaneously pursue three key strategies to successfully fulfill their mission and achieve the goals and objectives, including:

- Field research
- Applied conservation
- Sustainable economic development

The project is highly committed to developing practical solutions that mitigate wildlife-human conflict, environmental damage, climate change, and biodiversity loss, and that address sustainable livelihoods, land use, and rural poverty issues. All of these issues are intertwined and must be addressed simultaneously to achieve lasting and meaningful conservation.
3. **Volunteers**

The elephant project is in need of almost everything like equipment, personnel and finances. By being a volunteer at this project you will support the projects work in two ways:

1. With your donation you help the project financially, that is needed to continue and running the project
2. By participating in the work you will help the project by the tasks and research that has to be done.

The project is offering you a life enhancing opportunity of direct hands on conservation work in an internationally celebrated conservation project in a unique programme to help protect a highly endangered species. Most volunteers leave with a proud sense of accomplishment and a deep satisfying feeling of having really done something positive.

### 3.1 Period / duration

Volunteers are welcome all year around with a minimum stay of 1 week. You may choose your own arrival date, but arriving in time to start the program on any Monday of the month would be convenient.

### 3.2 Requirements

To participate at the project no skills or previous experience with elephants and conservation are required.

However there are some other requirements for participation at this project:

- Minimum age for participation is 18 years old or 16 years old and having a permission letter from your parents (or younger and accompanied with a participating parent, family volunteering is also possible)
- You must be able to work in a team.
- Be flexible.
- Vaccinations (see medical advice)
3.3 **Costs (including and not including)**

The costs per person to participate at this project are as specified in the Global Spirits’ website.

These costs include:
- Transport from Colombo to the project site
- Accommodation
- 3 meals will be provided and refreshments
- Transportation between project fields, etc.
- A donation to the project
- Orientations and briefings
- Training and supervision
- Administration costs

These costs do not include:
- International and national travel expenses to Colombo including airport taxes
- Passport / visa
- Travel insurance, which is compulsory for all participants and a cancellation insurance
- Personal expenses like: telephone bills, using internet, souvenirs, snacks, etc.
- Any excursions undertaken by the volunteer

3.4 **Accommodation**

Your accommodation consists of a gender-based shared room in the volunteer house, where also the project staff will stay:

The house has 6 bedrooms that can accommodate 30 individuals on shared basis.
Couples can be provided with their own room on first come first serve basis.
Families, depending on the number of individuals, can share a large room.
All rooms are provided with mattresses, pillows, sheets, mosquito nets and electric fans.
Just bring your own towel.

There are 9 modern bathrooms with western flush toilets, showers and sinks.
The bathrooms will be shared by all occupants.
There is only cold water for showering and washing. But the water is at a nice temperature since the pipes have been in the sun most of the day.

The house also has a dining room, kitchen and lounge area.

The facilities in the house are clean and comfortable but will be more basic than you are accustomed to, so please travel with an open mind and a willingness to adapt to local conditions.

The accommodation is located on a scenic hill and you will have a great view of the beautiful surrounding areas and lake.
3.5 The work

Volunteers will work hand-in-hand with the local staff and volunteers from all around the globe to carry out essential conservation work, including:

- Tracking and observation of elephants
- Gathering information on elephants and other wildlife and tropical ecosystems.
- Collecting essential environmental and social-economic data to help develop community-based conservation programs.
- Participating in discussions with local villagers to help identify practical solutions to human-elephant conflicts.
- Observing, assessing and documenting human-elephant conflicts.
- Helping to set up remote cameras for a carnivore study project
- Taking care of a butterfly garden
- Setting sand traps to gather information on small animals
- Conducting a bird survey and diversity study
- Teaching environmental education to local school children.
- And much more!

An example of a day of a volunteer:

If there are many volunteers they will be split into 2 teams.

Both Teams:
Early in the morning will go on a sunrise hike to observe birds and other animals and enjoy the amazing scenery as the sun rises in the east.

After breakfast the two teams will leave on two separate transects (Jungle Tracks) to observe and gather data on elephants, help set up remote camera and sand traps, observe various habitats, and visit forests hermitages.

In the afternoon the both teams will leave to observe elephants in the Elephant Corridor and at a Tank (lake or reservoir).

You will not only observe elephants from a truck and on foot, but also from a real tree house, which is in an elephant corridor where you will have a good chance of observing elephants. You will observe the elephants and record information about them and also information on elephants and human-elephant interactions. From the tree house you are also able to experience the most beautiful sun downs.

In the evenings all data concerning the observations will be filled in on the computer.
Besides that you will also learn how to use GPS.

With a video camera you will record animal behavior and also how the local community will handle elephants.

You will also visit local villages to teach them about the importance of wildlife in the surroundings.

All these activities and measures will contribute to the conservation of elephants, leopards and other wildlife. They also help for people and elephants live together by creating a win-win situation for everyone.

You will work 5 or 6 days a week and have at least 1 to 2 days off each week. Days off are generally in the weekend.
3.6 The project staff

The project staff consists of a nice team which consist of an operations and volunteer program manager, ecologist/field project manager, research scientist/volunteer program coordinator, field and logistics assistant, field scouts, field scouts assistant, field house cook, field house housekeeper, field house assistant & cook and security.
4. **Sri Lanka**

4.1 **Geography**

Sri Lanka, formerly called Ceylon, is an island located in the Indian Ocean under the south-east of India. Most of the land is flat and rolling; mountains in the south-central region rise to over 2,438 m.

4.2 **Project Location**

You'll be immersed in the local culture and ecology in the areas located outside the Wasgamuwa National Park where the project is situated. The National Park was established in 1984 and is home to wild Asian elephants, sloth bears, leopards, and many other endangered wildlife in one of the most biodiversity rich areas in Sri Lanka.

In the National Park, elephants can be seen in large herds together. It’s also one of the most important bird areas in Sri Lanka. The park is a home to more than 23 species of mammals. Also the views of mountains, rivers, and plains where the project is located is breathtakingly beautiful. As you are a nature lover this is your place to be!

4.3 **Climate**

Sri Lanka is a year-round destination with two monsoon seasons.

The project is located in the dry zone of Sri Lanka, climatic conditions are largely influenced by the northeast monsoon (The main cultivating season of Sri Lanka called Maha) in October-February. The annual rainfall is 1755mm in the north and 2250mm in the southern parts of Wasgamuwa.

The mean annual temperature is about 27 degrees Celsius.
5. **Travel information**

5.1 **Flight arrangements**

Volunteers have to make their own flight arrangements. We advise you not to make your flight reservation before we confirm the project’s participation, unless you are planning your participation at the project as a part of a bigger journey. If you don’t want to or don’t have the time to arrange this flight by yourself, Global Spirit is able to help you with it. If you would like us to help you, please fill this in on the booking sheet for the elephant project.

5.2 **Passport and visa**

In order to visit Sri Lanka you will need a valid passport, which must be officially valid, after your planned exit date, for at least six months.

To enter Sri Lanka you will need a valid visa. The project advises that you enter the country using a **tourist visa** since volunteering is considered a leisure activity and any other type of visa is not necessary and is also more expensive and complicated to obtain.

Apply at least a month in advance.

Also check with the Visa Counsel of the Sri Lanka Embassy in your country.

You can also apply for a visa extension almost as soon as you enter the country. Please note that you will need to travel to Colombo in order to process your visa extension. The most current costs of visas can be found in the Sri Lanka Immigration Department website at: http://www.immigration.gov.lk. Make sure the correct date and length of stay is entered onto your visa when filling your visa application.

You should make sure that your passport is valid for at least 6 months after your planned exit date.

**Passport and visa requirements are liable to change at short notice. All volunteers are advised to check their entry requirements with their own embassy or consulate!**

Please note that visas are the responsibility of the volunteer, and that Global Spirit will not be held responsible for clients being denied entry, should they not be in the possession of the relevant visas.

5.3 **Insurances**

Every volunteer is required to have a travel insurance to cover extra medical costs, accidents and repatriation costs. Otherwise you will not be permitted to work at this elephant project. Cancellation insurance is highly recommended. Global Spirit can help you arrange travel- and/or cancellation insurances (if you are living in The Netherlands, Belgium or Germany). If you would like to take out one or both of these insurances with us, you can request it on the booking sheet. If you already have these insurance(s) with another company or you are a participant outside the Netherlands, Belgium or Germany, we ask you to send a copy of the policy (’s) of the (e) insurance(s) to Global Spirit.
5.4 Arrival and departure in Sri Lanka

Arrival:

You will be responsible for arranging your own transport to Colombo, Sri Lanka.

All volunteers need to arrive one day earlier in Colombo and stay the night in a hotel in Colombo to acclimate since the next day it is about 7 – 9 hours travel to the project site.

The taxi fare from the airport to the hotel and the first night hotel cost is not covered by the participation fees.

We recommend the Hotel Shalimar, a 3 star hotel with reasonable pricing: an A/C room cost under $50. The Shalimar Hotel offers air-conditioned rooms with free Wi-Fi. Aside from a 24-hour front desk, it also has a restaurant and bar. Rooms feature wooden furnishings and tiled flooring. All rooms have cable TV. En suite bathrooms have hot shower facilities. This Hotel is 20 km from Colombo International Airport and 2 km from the main bus terminal and railway station. For guests’ convenience, laundry and dry cleaning services are also provided. The hotel’s restaurant serves local and international dishes, as well as a daily breakfast. Drinks can be enjoyed at the bar. You can make reservations via www.agoda.com or www.tripadvisor.com. For more information about the hotel please visit www.shalimarhotel.com.

Of course you can also check into any hotel of your choice in Colombo. Please make sure your accommodations are in Colombo. You can use the following two links for example: www.agoda.com or www.tripadvisor.com

The next day, volunteers will be met at the hotel by one of the project’s associates, who will transfer them to the Fort Railway Station and make sure that they are safely aboard the right train to Kandy. The train and bus fares, meals and refreshments provided during the trip are covered by the program.

Volunteers will travel on the 7 am Colombo Kandy Intercity Express and will arrive in the cultural capital city of Kandy around 10 am. They will have about an hour before breakfast and to visit around and take in some of the sights of Kandy before catching the connecting bus to the project site.

In Kandy they will be met by one of the project’s staff and will have breakfast and then accompanied by the project’s staff person they’ll board the bus to go to the project site.

Volunteers also have the option of ordering a private vehicle transfer from the airport or hotel to the field site but this will be at additional costs.
Departure:

At the end of your placement you will be transferred back to a hotel or directly to the airport in Colombo. Please note that the project cannot be held responsible for missed travel connections. You may want to allow a day or two after your participation end date before arranging onward travel. If you plan to travel in Sri Lanka after your program ends the project staff will drop you to the nearest start point of your onward travels.

On the day of your departure you will be boarded to the bus to Kandy. The bus fare is covered by the program fees. From Kandy it is your responsibility to plan your onward transportation based on whether you are going to Colombo, to the airport, or plan to travel to other parts of Sri Lanka. Volunteers have the option of requesting a private vehicle transfer from the project site to whatever their next destination, but this will cost additional. Please inquire for cost.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** If you are leaving directly to the airport from the project site then please notify and discuss your departure plans a few days ahead with the staff, so that they can arrange your departure to get you to the airport on time.
6. Medical advise

6.1 Advise

As Global Spirit is not a professional medical service, we advise you to go to a local clinic, medical authority or consult your general physician in your own country for the appropriate medical advice. This document is provided for information purposes only.

We advise you not to visit your local clinic or medical authority any later than six weeks before departure.

Safety

Elephants are generally very gentle that are not hostile or aggressive. They are, however, wild animals and their behaviour can be unpredictable. They live to approximately the same age as humans and you should note that the youngsters are similar to those of our species in that they love to play. Obviously they are very strong and they may become boisterous if annoyed. The same applies to elephants of all ages. You must be careful when around them and follow the instructions of the staff at all times.

As a participant at this project you are responsible for your own actions. The elephant project and Global Spirit are not held responsible/liable for any unexpected casualties.

6.2 Required vaccinations

There are no vaccinations required for working at this project.

6.3 Recommended vaccinations

You are recommended to be vaccinated against:
- DTP
- Hepatitis A
- Typhoid

These vaccinations are not compulsory, but are still very important.

For more information on this matter, you should consult your primary care provider for advice on what precautions to take.

Sri Lanka is no more a malaria risk country.
In 2016, The World Health Organisation certified that Sri Lanka is a malaria-free nation.

6.4 Medical service

A change of environment, climate, food and lifestyle often results in minor, and occasionally more serious, illness. Please inform staff if you feel unwell at any time.

The nearest emergency medical facilities are located about 20 minutes drive from the project base, and there is also a local doctor for initial medical support and treatment of minor illnesses & injuries.
There are small regional hospitals at Hettipola, Mahiyangana and Matale, which are respectively 20 minutes, one hour and two hours away by vehicle, and for a serious emergency the closest large hospital is in Kandy, which is about 3 hours away.

Staff is trained to follow Emergency Action Plans and volunteers are also briefed on safety procedures and hazards during their orientation. Safety briefings are given every day before heading out to the field.

Please note that project staff cannot provide specific medical advice. Please consult your primary care provider (doctor, GP, etc.) or visit a travel clinic for further information.
7. **Personal equipment**

We advise you to bring as little as possible. The most important clothing required for working at the project is light, cotton clothes and strong shoes.

7.1 **Essential items**

Some essential items, which you should bring with you, are:
- Valid passport (and Visa)
- A flask or canteen to carry water into the field
- T-shirts for work
- Long trousers
- Shorts
- Extra socks
- Comfortable closed shoes
- Flip flops or sandals
- Sun hat
- Warm jumper or sweater
- Insect/mosquito repellent
- Alarm clock
- A torch and spare batteries
- Towel
- Small towel
- Basic toiletries like soap and toothbrush
- Sunscreen (it’s recommended to use for at least SPF 15)
- First-aid kit with for example plasters, disinfectant, bandages, cotton buds, etc.
- Rain gear (raining season May – October)
- Warm clothing for evenings during winter season (November – February)

7.2 **Optional items**

Some optional items, which you may choose to bring with you, are:
- A camera (and photographic materials)
- Bathing/swimming suit
- Sun glasses
- Pocket knife
- Binoculars
- A water bottle
- Books or magazines
- Snacks

- Vitamin B (which is anti mosquito)
- Imodium in case you have diarrhoea
- Something against dehydration like ORS (we advise you to drink a lot of water)
- A notebook
- A compass
- Mosquito net

7.3 **Presents/Donations**

Donations such as pens and paper for local village children or funds to purchase orange plants are always welcome.
8. General information

8.1 Food and refreshments

All meals are included in the participation fee;
Meals are prepared for you at the volunteer house. Food is prepared in the local style, with milder spices if preferred and with western embellishments. Most meals will be vegetarian, with egg, fish, chicken and soy for protein.

Breakfast could be dhal, rice and curry, with toast, butter, jam, bananas and other seasonal fresh fruit, while lunch is typically a light meal, and a typical evening meal may include many of the same dishes served at lunchtime. Food is always freshly cooked.

Tea is available from a tea station throughout the day.
So is filtered bottled water.

Drinking of un-boiled water is not to be recommended. Drink only bottled water from bottles with a crown cork.

8.2 Shopping

There are very limited opportunities to spend money whilst on the project.
Local shops sell some basic items, but you should make sure you have everything you need before travelling to the project.

8.3 Laundry service

There is no laundry service available on site.
You can do laundry by hand. Biodegradable soap is recommended.

8.4 Telephone

There is mobile phone coverage (cell phone with local service) in the volunteer house, which you may use at additional costs.

Participants typically use calling cards or you can get a local prepaid SIM for your phone to keep in touch.

Most mobile phones can be used, but we advise you to contact your phone company or phone service in your own country before departure.
8.5 Internet access

In the volunteer house you are able to use Internet and Wifi at additional costs.

8.6 Electricity

There is main electricity in the volunteer house 220 Volt (50 Hertz).
Please ensure that you have the correct adaptors for personal electrical items. You can check this out in a specialised shop in your own country. (Sockets: SA style is most common).

8.7 Transport

You will be based a short walk from the a village, (approximately 3hrs drive to the City of Kandy in the Matale District) and working in the countryside and communities located in the southern part of Wasgamuwa National Park.

Travelling around the local area is mostly done on foot, bicycles or by 4WD vehicle. To travel to other towns inquire from the field staff. It is best done using public buses or a rental car. Cheap and reliable bus services are available between all major towns.

8.8 Excursion suggestions

You are free at least one day per week.
You could ask for suggestions to do things in the limited time off, daytrips, etc.
There is a Land Cruiser Jeep in the Field House which you can hire for the day or two days trips. It will cost around US$0.50 per kilometer.

Some examples of trips:

- **Dambana and Mahiyangana**
  It takes 2 hours to get to Mahiyangana and the trip costs approximately 300 rupees by bus.
  You can hire a van from Hettipola or Handungumuwa for 9000 rupees (US$90) and make the extra 30 minute trip to Dambana, where you can visit the Veddha Village and Sorabora Lake area as well as the ancient Mahiyangana Temple.

- **Knuckles Mountains Range**
  Riverston/World’s End and Knuckles conservation area is about 1-2 hours away and has lots of areas to hike at an altitude of up to 3000 feet. An excellent area to cool-off by having a refreshing dip in a mountain stream. You can get there by van, and it costs 7500 rupees (US$75)

- **The Ancient Cities**
  You can arrange a private minibus or take general public transport to visit the ancient cities of **Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy and Sigiriya**

  **Sigirya/Polonnaruwa**
  It costs 300 rupees (US$3) to get there by non air conditioned bus, and takes around 5 hours.
  You can also go on the intercity air conditioned bus for 700 rupees (US$7). The route is: Pussellayaya - Hettipola - Mahiyangana - Polonnaruwa. Or Pussellayaya - Hettipolla - Elehara - Naula - (change bus) - Dambulla - Sigiriya.

- **Kandy**
  It takes 5-7 hours to get here by bus and costs 300 (US$2) rupees.
  If you’d like to travel with minimum hassle, the project staff can help you organize a private van, which can be hired for around 9000 rupees (US$90) per day, with fuel and driver.
8.9 Currency

The monetary unit of Sri Lanka is the Rupee.

Participants typically spend approximately USD100 per month for extra luxuries such as snacks, drinks, etc., and tips for staff. If you are spending time in Sri Lanka before or after the program you will need extra money to cover this. We recommend that you travel with cash as your main source of funds, although having a credit/debit card as a backup is wise.

ATMs are available in major towns.
Please note that it is very difficult to get cash/exchange money once you are at the volunteer house.

You can find the closest bank(s) with ATMs in about 20 minutes from the field house.

The banks are open from Monday – Friday from 08:30 am until 15:30 pm.