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THE ELEPHANTS OF INTERVIEW ISLAND

by Romulus Whitaker

The Andaman Islands (India) are a forest-clad island chain in the Bay of Bengal. When serious colonizing started there in the early 1950s a large Bengali timber contractor, P.C. Ray, leased part of the 200-sq-km Interview Island off the west coast of North Andaman, which is separated from the main island by a few kms of shallow reefs and channels. He started an ambitious timber extraction operation complete with trolleys, his own ships, and about 50 working elephants. In the early 60s Ray went bankrupt and died soon after. The labourers received no pay and walked off, the mahouts included, after freeing the elephants in the lofty Interview forests. Fifteen years later (June, 1977) we were on Interview Island on herpetological survey work, trying to avoid elephants. We found plenty of old signs and fresh dung and tracks of one small family group of perhaps 4 adult females, 2 half grown animals, 1 or 2 yearlings. There is very little open land on Interview and from brief observations we made of the elephants' browsing habits we determined that in June a good part of their diet consists of the fronds of several species of (some very thorny) palms (Phoenix paludosa, Nipa fruticans, Cryotamitis sp. and Licuala peltata are common) and selected plants, including even the well-armed fronds of cane (Calamus sp.) and the bark and pith of soft ficus trees (possibly Ficus nervosa) which are torn by tusks and tushes sometimes till they snap and fall.

There are estimated to be 30 to 50 feral elephants on this 20 km long island. The only humans on the island are the dozen police outpost personnel on the northwest coast and occasional wild boar and deer hunting parties from Mayabandar (the nearest settlement large enough to be called a town). Several of the tuskers are reported to have been shot for their tusks. At least one was killed in self-defense. Some of these elephants are reputed to "chase on sight" and the island is legally off limits without the permission of the subinspector of police of North Andaman.

The Forest Department is interested in capturing Interview elephants for departmental logging work. One contract given to Burmese catchers ended in the death of one adult male elephant. There have been no successful attempts. Since work elephants from the mainland are indeed costly and difficult to transport, it is logical that some animals could be gleaned from the breeding feral herd on Interview. But how well is it breeding? Is it a viable population? How many elephants are there? It is suggested that one of the Elephant Group Members in Asia organize a preliminary study of the feral elephants on Interview Island (there are 4 more wandering the forests of the North Andaman island) at the earliest instant, prior to any drastic developments there which might adversely affect these animals. Interview Island may someday be the Forest Department's regular source for elephants and a good tourist attraction as well.