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EARTH HERO



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MAMMALS

(THE ASIAN ELEPHANT)

Elephants are the largest land mammals on earth. These magnificent animals are important to some cultures and religions, and are also being used as a symbol and icon of national treasure. Characterized by their long trunks, huge bodies and wide ears, you can't miss them when you see them at the zoo or roaming wild in their natural habitat. Their long trunks act like how a hand works to humans. Elephants use their trunks in a variety of ways. They use it to store and spray water, drink and also blow air through it to communicate.



Elephants are social animals, they live in groups or herds which are led by the oldest female who is known as the matriarch. The matriarch leads the herd during their seasonal migration to find food and water over a large area. Elephants are herbivores. An adult elephant eats about 150kg worth of food, they consume grasses, fruits, small plants every day. They spend up to 18 hours a day eating to ensure that they have enough food to survive. They also need to drink a huge amount of water. An elephant can drink about 50 gallons (200 liters) of water in a day. That is why they have to stay close to water sources like rivers. Elephants are excellent

swimmers and use their trunks as a snorkel to breathe when swimming in deep waters. This allows them to swim for a long period of time. Despite spending the majority of their time feeding, elephants also need to rest. At night, they sleep both by lying down and standing up. They sleep more often standing up as it would be easier to move by. As they are heavy animals, lying down sometimes may hurt some of their organs. Elephant only sleeps three to four hours a day.



There are 2 species of elephants in this world: African elephant and Asian elephant. These 2 species are distinguished by their physical characteristics, with African elephants being bigger and taller. They can stand up to 4 meters tall and weigh up to 6,000 kilograms. Meanwhile, the Asian elephants only weigh up to 5,000 kilograms and stand at 3.5 meters tall. A male elephant is bigger and taller than the female elephant. You can tell the two species apart by looking at the size of their ears whereby the African elephants have much larger ears compared to Asian elephants, whose ears are smaller and rounder in shape. Elephants flap their ears to dissipate body heat and stay cool during the day. Besides these physical characteristics, African elephants also live in a larger herd than Asian elephants.

Asian elephants are found in Malaysia. Besides Malaysia, they can be found in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and Southern China.

In Peninsular Malaysia, they can be found in the forests of the states of Kelantan, Perak, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor. In East Malaysia, elephants can only be found in the north-east of Sabah. They are part of the subspecies of Asian elephant known as the Borneo pygmy elephant. Besides Sabah, they can also be found in Kalimantan, Indonesian portion of Borneo. The Borneo pygmy elephant is the smallest subspecies of elephant in the world. They are less than 2.5 meters tall, which is slightly smaller than the subspecies of elephants found in Peninsular Malaysia. Being smaller in size, their long tails may brush the ground as they walk. They are usually spotted along the Kinabatangan River, either feeding on grass along the riverbank or bathing in the river during the day.



Elephants play an important role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem and are considered a keystone species because of the impact they have on the environment. They are an excellent seed disperser because they can cover big areas and spread seeds through defecation. Their big footprints will be turned into small puddles after the rain that are used by smaller animals as water source. The movements of the elephant herds also create trails that are later used by other animals.

Unfortunately, elephants are impacted by habitat loss and deforestation. Since 1986, the Asian elephant has been listed as Endangered with their numbers estimated to be around 40,000 to 50,000 in population. Out of this number, less than 1,500 are

the Borneo pygmy elephants. Because of their long gestation period of 22 months, their reproduction is the slowest amongst mammals. This puts them under great pressure from various threats. Their home range becomes smaller to give way to more roads, infrastructure and land conversion for agriculture and palm oil plantations. This has resulted in increased cases of human-elephant conflict, where wild elephants come into contact with humans or their property. There are cases where a herd of elephants feed on villagers' crops like banana and papaya, inflicting big damages to farms and orchards. This puts the elephants in danger of getting caught in the snares set up by the villagers to protect their crops. Elephants that come into contact with humans also face the threat of illegal poaching. Poachers target elephants for their ivory that can be sold at a very high price. Ivory is traded all over the world and is often smuggled to evade seizure by the authorities.



Protecting the elephant populations requires a lot of effort. A few countries like USA, Japan and western Europe have banned the importation of ivory to help protect the wild elephant population. Most importantly, we need to protect the habitats of the remaining elephants by creating and enlarging the wildlife sanctuaries and corridors. These protected areas will provide ample space for the elephants to find food and reproduce. We cannot afford to lose our elephants as there will be no replacement for what they provide to our ecosystems.