

# EL PASO ZOO'S ELEPHANT CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Helping to Protect One of the Most Important  
Rainforest Ecosystems in the World

By Rick LoBello



At the El Paso Zoo, Juno and Savannah, our Asian elephants, are helping people to understand and appreciate the natural world in a very special way. Most who have come to see elephants at the Zoo over the past 56 years, best appreciate the fascination and joy expressed by the millions of children seeing their first elephants.

Asian elephants are a keystone species playing a critical role in the health of their associated ecosystems. Their role within the Southeast Asia ecosystem consists of path making, tree felling, soil aeration and seed dispersal, as well as creating and maintaining water holes. They play a crucial role in maintaining links in the food chain and are the architects of the rainforest, opening up dense woodlands for generations of plants on the forest floor. Such vegetation provides a food supply and hospitable environment for thousands of other wildlife species including large herbivores such as Malayan tapir, Sumatran rhino, forest antelope, and bush pig. These in turn represent a potential food supply for large carnivores such as clouded

leopards and Sumatran tigers. Elephants also deposit waste that results in the transfer of nutrients and increased productivity in the ecosystem.

### HOTSPOTS

The island of Sumatra is part of the greater Sundaland region, one of the biologically richest hotspots on Earth with about 25,000 species of plants – 15,000 of which are found nowhere else. Protecting Sumatra's biodiversity needs to be a major concern of people everywhere. How does a place thousand of miles away affect people in the U.S.? Few of us are aware of how much we depend on wild organisms for medicine and it's very possible that cures for yet to be discovered human diseases and pandemics may be discovered in Sumatran rainforests.

Our Zoo elephants – Juno and Savannah are helping to protect this critically significant landscape as key players in the El Paso Zoo's Elephants Helping Elephants Conservation Education Program. Over the past five years, the Zoo's education program has focused on the last remaining herd of about 60 Sumatran elephants living in Tesso Nilo National Park. Every day Zoo visitors learn about the herd and efforts to save them during the Zoo's daily noon-time elephant program. To help protect this ecologically strategic herd and their rainforest habitat, we encourage visitors to recycle their cell phones at the Zoo and to contribute to the Zoo's conservation fund. Money earned from our cell phone program is used to support Lisa, Rahman, Ria and Indro World Wildlife Fund's Flying Squad and overall protection of Tesso Nilo National Park.

The Flying Squad is a small group of domesticated elephants that human handlers called mahouts lead into farming areas near the park where wild elephants come into conflict with peo-



ple. Over the past year their efforts have helped to decrease the number of conflicts which is essential to the protection of the elephants. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the program in 2006 has helped to reduce crop damage in one village by 99 percent. (<http://worldwildlife.org/elephants/results/flyingSquads.cfm>).

The El Paso Zoo Elephant Festival was inspired by Mona the Asian elephant. For over 50 years Mona fascinated millions of children at the El Paso Zoo. Today, Juno and Savannah continue El Paso's proud tradition of helping people of all ages to appreciate and understand the world's largest land animal. Over the past five years the Zoo's Elephant Festival has helped to celebrate humanity's more than 5,000-year relationship with elephants around the world. Unfortunately for elephants, both Asian and African species are endangered. Here in El Paso Juno and Savannah are conservation ambassadors for elephants everywhere. Their presence here in our city is very important to worldwide efforts to save elephants.

The El Paso Zoo is a regional international wildlife conservation center. Millions of people have visited the Zoo and its elephants over the past 56 years.

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RICK LOBELLO IS EDUCATION CURATOR AT THE EL PASO ZOO

