



THE MAN WHO LOVED ELEPHANTS AND STUDENTS: a tribute to Dr. Charles Santiapillai (1944–2014)

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Dr. Charles Santiapillai © S. Wijeyamohan

He was a man who tirelessly worked to save elephants; He was a man who truly loved his profession, students and fellow colleagues; He was a man who has provided a great role model for budding scientists with continuous guidance and encouragement. More importantly, he was a kind and honest human being, who always tried to help and cheer fellow human beings.

Dr. Charles Santiapillai, a world-renowned conservation biologist, passed away on the 29th October, 2014 peacefully amongst family at home in Kandy, Sri Lanka. He is a pioneering wildlife biologist who worked for the conservation of Asian elephants. His monumental work “The Asian Elephant: An Action Plan for its Conservation” (Santiapillai & Jackson, 1990) captures his lifelong dedication for elephant conservation and sets the path not only for conservation of Asian elephants, but also for all large mammals in the brink of extinction.

Born on May 12, 1944 in Karampon, Kyats, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, as the eldest of four sons of the late Mr. S. F. Santiapillai & Mrs. D. Santiapillai, Charles started his lifelong career in wildlife biology as a student majoring in zoology at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Upon graduating with his BSc. (Hons) degree in Zoology in 1969, he was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer to the Department of Zoology at the University of Peradeniya. In 1972, he started pursuing his PhD. at the University of Southampton, UK on population variation and systematics of the brush-furred mice genus *Lophuromys* Peters, 1874 (see Santiapillai, 1975). On his return, Dr. Santiapillai rejoined the University of Peradeniya as a lecturer.

Dr. Santiapillai's active research program in regional conservation of mammals led him to resign from the University of Peradeniya in 1984 and joined the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) based in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, as senior scientific officer. This very demanding job kept him busy until 1992 and upon completion of his task with WWF, he rejoined the University of Peradeniya again as a Senior Lecturer. He taught courses and mentored numerous students at the Department of Zoology until his 2009 retirement as an Associate Professor of Zoology.

There cannot be any doubt that Dr. Santiapillai has enjoyed his profession by heart and enjoyed every aspect of it until his last day. He often said that "I am being paid to do my hobby" and his passion led him to conduct field research in conservation of wildlife focusing on endangered species such as elephants, bears, tigers, leopards, rhinoceros and crocodiles. His dedicated research produced numerous scientific publications including 47 research papers in peer-reviewed journals, and 85 more popular science articles in various journals around the globe. Dr. Santiapillai served as the editor of "Gajah" (1987–2006), the journal of IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group, where he played an active role also as Deputy Chairman (1998–2006).

Upon retirement, Dr. Santiapillai still enjoyed being active in the wildlife conservation community working as a consultant for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, and worked as the country coordinator for a joint Rajarata University and Centre for Elephant Conservation USA program. He played a pivotal role in setting up this program and also established a short-term Study Away Program in collaboration with Missouri State University USA, providing opportunities for foreign students to learn about the culture and human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. Both local and international institutions recognized Dr. Santiapillai's work by honoring him with many awards including the Sri Lankan Presidential Award for Research (3 times), "prominent environmentalist" recognition by WWF's *De Wereld van het Natuur Fonds* and the Gold Medal from HRH Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands for Conservation.

Dr. Santiapillai will be missed. He will be missed by the colleagues he inspired, by the students he nurtured, by the elephants he tried to save and by all of the many human beings whose lives, especially ours, he touched so deeply.

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