

Agreement of Mutual Cooperation Between Big Plantations, Earthworm Foundation and The University of Nottingham Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, 22 June 2022 – Major plantation organisations, a non-profit and academia have agreed to cooperate in building human-elephant coexistence. The agreement exchange will take place at The Vida Bukit Ceylon, Kuala Lumpur on 22 June 2022. The signatories of this agreement include plantation organisations Sime Darby Plantation, IOI Plantation, Aramijaya Agri and Agro Sdn. Bhd, FGV Holdings Berhad, FELDA, academia University of Nottingham Malaysia and non-profit organisation Earthworm Foundation. Meanwhile, Kulim (Malaysia) Plantation and Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Program have not signed the agreement but are currently working together with the coalition.

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change formalises the “Achieving Coexistence with Elephants” (ACE) Project in the southern landscape of Peninsular Malaysia involving plantations in Johor. This project is significant as it is among the first multi-agency human-elephant coexistence projects in Peninsular Malaysia using a large landscape approach, covering 19 estates with approximately 9000 people. This ceremony was witnessed by the subject matter expert from PERHILITAN, En. Salman Saaban.

The project aims to promote cooperation between agricultural communities, NGOs and academia to conserve wild elephants and increase safety among participating smallholders and plantations. Wild elephants have large home ranges of 200 square kilometres or more. When elephant home ranges overlap with a complex landscape with rapid human development like Johor, then active monitoring and management of the wild elephant population is needed.

En. Salman Saaban, who is also the Director of Protected Areas in the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (PERHILITAN), says, “this is an excellent initiative that provides an active platform for the plantations and conservation groups to collaborate and exchange knowledge, creating a win-win situation for the people (plantations, smallholders, and local communities) and for the conservation of wild elephants. Johor is currently a hotspot for elephant-vehicle collisions. This endangers both human and elephant lives, and results in further cost from vehicle damages.”

One component of the project recognises that habitat fragmentation and roads can impact elephant movements, and looks into securing safe movement passages for elephants. Dato’ Haji Salim bin Aman, the Director of Johor State Forestry Department shared, “We are supporting the National Physical Plan to establish and strengthen the ecological corridor. One of the initiatives taken is through the establishment of Panti Conservation Area, comprising the whole

Panti Forest Reserve. Additionally, the corridor initiatives by the ACE Project will enhance the on-going efforts by the department on the ground to restore ecological linkages in the Central Forest Spine of Peninsular Malaysia.”

By working in a coalition across Segamat, Kluang, Mersing and Kota Tinggi districts, the ACE project is trying to increase the sense of safety for people, support the agriculture sector in mitigating human-elephant conflict responsibly, while at the same time carry out scientific research to study elephants’ roaming behaviour and habitat needs. It is very encouraging that to date, the project has attracted large plantations like Sime Darby Plantation, IOI Plantation, Aramijaya, FGV Holdings Berhad and FELDA to join the coalition.

The plantations here have quickly realised that the conflict situation can pose danger to human lives, and that translocation of elephants is only a temporary solution. The coalition hopes that other plantations in Johor will be willing to follow suit and support the coexistence efforts. En. Rasyhid Redza Anwarudin, the Chief Sustainability Officer from Sime Darby Plantation shared, “We are truly delighted to be part of a coalition of multi-agencies to help achieve human-elephant coexistence. We are sharing our protocols, existing research and experience with other coalition members to ensure the successful implementation of this initiative. In the spirit of continuous improvement, we always believe that working with partners will enable us to further refine our internal operations.”

The agreement for the coalition outlines the roles and responsibilities of the partners, and helps promote knowledge exchanges among the signatories. Using adaptive management, the members will actively monitor human-elephant conflict and the wild elephant population, identify elephant passages, and test out plantation protocols to increase safety and sustainability. The researchers from Management & Ecology of

Malaysian Elephants (MEME), under the University of Nottingham Malaysia, supported the project by conducting studies 2 on elephant behaviour and movement ecology, including the impact of linear infrastructure on elephants. Further efforts to engage with smallholders and villagers on the ground are supported by non-profit organisations such as Earthworm Foundation, as well as the Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Program.

Activities under the coalition entail capacity building, and co-management of human-elephant conflict with the plantations. Informally, the coalition has been conducting meetings since 2020. In March 2022, it carried out a four-day training on human-elephant conflict and coexistence focused on plantation managers and their sustainability teams. FGV Group Chief Executive Officer (GCEO), Encik Nazrul Izam Mansor said, “FGV is supportive towards this effort. We believe this coalition provides a good platform for the major stakeholders operating in the Southern Johor region to share our experiences and challenges faced over the years.” He further added, “in regards to addressing human-elephant conflict and working together in this complex landscape, FGV is fully committed to playing its part”.

The eventual project outcome would enable agricultural communities to autonomously coexist with elephants. Specifically, the ground staff will be competent in managing interactions with elephants, and the use of early-warning systems to increase safety, patrolling efficiency and reduce damage to young palms. The plantations will test out standard operating procedures to increase safety of staff and promote sustainable certification, while harmonising the need for elephant movement passages and feeding grounds.

Dato’ Amiruddin Abdul Satar, one of the signatories from FELDA, extolled, “FELDA has a Sustainability Department that will look into human-elephant coexistence. Although it is challenging for our smallholders to deal with elephant

conflict, through this coalition, we hope to be able to support our FELDA communities and at the same time, help fulfill Malaysia's aspiration to balance development for people with environment and wildlife conservation. FELDA can play a role to support the Central Forest Spine initiative in Peninsular Malaysia together with other partners."

The coalition has identified five potential elephant corridors in the landscape and is currently in the process of selecting two corridors with highest potential for advocacy. The coalition secretariat is continuing their efforts to engage with other plantations in the landscape.

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