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Nutritional Ecology of Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and Human-Wildlife Interactions

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Conservation Ecology

at Massey University, Albany,
New Zealand.

Raj K. Koirala

2017
Extinction is forever, endangered means we still have time.

Alesander
Reducing human-wildlife conflict has recently been recognised as an important aspect of wildlife management and represents one of the most complex challenges currently facing conservationists worldwide. Conflicts between humans and wild animals arise as a result of the loss, degradation and fragmentation of wildlife habitats through anthropogenic activities such as logging, animal husbandry, agricultural expansion and infrastructure development. Habitat fragmentation results in reduced areas of habitat and increased probability of contact between people and wild animals as the animals move in order to meet their nutritional and other ecological and behavioural requirements. Habitat degradation has led to food-related problems in populations of many species of wildlife, and the Asian elephant (Elephas maximus) is particularly vulnerable because it requires such a large amount of food per day. Large herbivores, such as elephants, are especially likely to suffer during periodic food shortages when they cannot meet their nutritional targets. Understanding the dietary and nutritional needs of elephants is crucial for managing habitats in ways that will ensure their survival, in particular by minimising conflict with humans. However, obtaining information about the dietary requirements of wild animals is difficult.

This thesis investigates the diets and nutritional priorities of captive, domestic and wild elephants through the application of nutritional geometry. Initially, I examined the food intake, food composition and the resultant dietary macronutrient and fibre intake in a captive female Asian elephant. My results showed that the proportions of the elephant’s daily macronutrient and neutral detergent fibre (NDF) intake were different than the
proportions in the daily mixture of provisioned foods and were consistent across days, suggesting that she was selectively feeding on available foods. Results indicated that she prioritised the ratio of protein: non-protein energy in her diet, with the ratio of non-protein macronutrients (fats and non-structural carbohydrates) to digestible fibre (NDF) being varied so as to maintain a more constant proportion of dietary protein. Similar results in which the proportion of dietary energy contributed by protein was prioritised. This was revealed in my study on domesticated elephants, with most elephants maintaining constant proportional protein energy in their diet, but different individuals achieving this by consuming different ratios of non-protein energy (NPE) to neutral detergent fibre (NDF) energy. I also carried out a food preference survey for the wild elephants. I found that 57 species of fodder plants in 28 families were consumed by wild Asian elephants, including 13 species of grasses, five shrubs, two climbers, one herb and 36 trees. The feeding preference index further showed that browse species are preferred during the dry season, while a browse and grass combination is favoured during the rainy season. These findings were used to test the hypothesis that the elephants are selectively feeding against a null hypothesis that feeding is proportional to availability. The difference in the availability and the utilisation supports the alternative hypothesis of selective feeding to obtain the required macronutrient intake. An investigation of human–elephant conflict through a questionnaire survey showed that the depletion of natural forage inside and outside protected areas leads to an increase in elephants raiding crops because the grain-laden cultivated food plants are more palatable and more nutritious than wild browse plants. This study concluded that among the many factors, dietary requirements and selective browsing habits are believed to be the root causes in precipitating destructive behaviour in wild elephants, leading to fatal human-elephant conflict. This study also found that locally in central Nepal, crop
raiding was the main cause of conflict with humans. Respondents believed that human-elephant conflict could be minimised by re-vegetating internal parklands and park boundaries with native elephant food plants. The study also showed that regional conflict intensity as measured per elephant damage was high in western Nepal; however, conflict regarding human and elephant casualties was higher in central and eastern regions.

In summary, this study substantially advances our knowledge of the nutritional ecology of elephants and makes a significant contribution towards understanding the dietary and nutritional aspects of three different groups of elephants (captive, non-captive domestic and wild), as well as the nutritional drive of human-elephant conflicts. My findings have implications for the management of habitats for the conservation of Asian elephants and the mitigation of human–elephant conflict.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my principal supervisor Dr Weihong Ji for the continuous support that I have received during my PhD study. I would like to thank you for encouraging me in my research and for allowing me to progress as a research scientist. These five years have been a roller coaster; there have been stressful times, but there have been some astounding moments that I will never forget. Thank you for always believing in me and constantly guiding me for my betterment. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with you, and I could not imagine having a better advisor and mentor for my PhD study.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my co-supervisor Professor David Raubenheimer, who has been my mentor from the start. Thank you for believing in me, thinking of me as a capable student and giving me the opportunity to come to New Zealand. Your extensive breadths of knowledge and constant input have made invaluable contributions towards my thesis. Your endless encouragement has always been inspiring. Thank you for being a great mentor and an inspiring role model.

Many thanks to my other co-supervisor Professor Jessica Rothman for all her support and help, which made this PhD research possible.

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I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Dean and the Campus Chief at the Pokhara Campus, Institute of Forestry, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, for granting me the study leave and all the necessary facilities for this project, including laboratory access. I hope to bring my increased knowledge back home to strengthen the Department of Park Recreation and Wildlife Management at the Institute of Forestry, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Thanks to the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation/Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Government of Nepal for granting permission to conduct this research and the National Trust for Nature Conservation and Chitwan National Park office, Sauraha, for the necessary support during my study period.

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their help and support during my research period. Without my family’s support, it 
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# Table of contents

Title Page ....................................................................................................................... i

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... vi

Table of contents .............................................................................................................. ix

List of figures ................................................................................................................... xiii

List of tables ..................................................................................................................... xv

List of abbreviations ......................................................................................................... xvi

Preface .............................................................................................................................. xviii

Thesis outline ................................................................................................................... xxi

Theme 1: Wildlife nutritional ecology and conservation strategies .......... 1

Chapter 1: Understanding the aspects of elephant diet and nutrition relevant to minimising human-Asian elephant conflict .......... 2

  1.1 Abstract ..................................................................................................................... 3
  1.2 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 4
  1.3 The role of nutritional ecology in elephant conservation ........................................... 8
  1.4 Elephant diet and foraging strategies ..................................................................... 10
      1.4.1 Plant selection .................................................................................................. 10
      1.4.2 Macronutrient in the elephant diet ................................................................... 12
      1.4.3 Human-elephant conflict and nutrition .............................................................. 15
  1.5 Frameworks for understanding nutritional ecology .................................................. 16
  1.6 Primary research on animals using geometric modelling .......................................... 19
  1.7 Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 20
  1.8 References ............................................................................................................... 21

Chapter 2: Diet composition and macronutrient prioritization in a captive Asian elephant ......................................................................................................................... 27

  2.1 Abstract ..................................................................................................................... 28
  2.2 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 29
Chapter 3: The effects of age, sex and season on the macronutrient composition of the diet of the domestic Asian elephants

3.1 Abstract .............................................................................................................. 56
3.2 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 57
3.3 Materials and methods ...................................................................................... 58
  3.3.1 Study area ...................................................................................................... 58
  3.3.2 Daily activity and feeding regime of domesticated elephants in the elephant breeding centre ................................................................................................. 60
  3.3.3 Data collection ................................................................................................. 61
  3.3.4 Nutritional analysis ......................................................................................... 63
  3.3.5 Energy intake and balance ............................................................................ 64
3.4 Results .................................................................................................................. 66
  3.4.1 Feeding regime ............................................................................................... 66
  3.4.2 Seasonal differences in the nutritional content of key plants ....................... 68
  3.4.3 Seasonal differences in nutrient intake ....................................................... 70
  3.4.4 Diet digestibility ............................................................................................ 71
  3.4.5 Energy intake and macronutrient balance ................................................... 72
  3.4.6 Geometric analysis ....................................................................................... 73
3.5 Discussion ............................................................................................................. 81
  3.5.1 Adequacy diet ............................................................................................... 81
  3.5.1.1 Seasonal nutrient content and intake .................................................... 81
  3.5.1.2 Dry matter intake (DMI) ........................................................................ 82
  3.5.1.3 Fibre content and digestibility .............................................................. 82
  3.5.1.4 Seasonal variation in macronutrient and fibre intake ......................... 84
3.6 Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 86
3.7 References ........................................................................................................... 87
Chapter 4: Feeding preferences of wild Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Nepal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Abstract</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Background</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Methods</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Elephant feeding data collection</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Elephant dietary analysis from dung samples</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Food availability survey</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Data analysis</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Results</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Elephant foraging patterns</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Dietary analysis from dung samples</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 Regional food availability</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.4 Plant species preferences</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Discussion</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 References</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 2: The status of human-elephant interactions, their causes and recommendations for management**

Chapter 5: Dispersal and ranging patterns of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in relation to their interactions with humans in Nepal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Overview of elephant–human conflict in Nepal</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Status of elephant populations in Nepal</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Distribution of human–elephant conflict in Nepal</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Elephant populations and crop raiding</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Conclusions and management recommendations</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 References</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 6: Patterns, perceptions and spatial distribution of human-elephant (*Elephas maximus*) conflict in Nepal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Abstract</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Introduction</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Material and methods</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Data analysis</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7: Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 161
  7.1 Summary, conclusion and management recommendation ........................................ 162
  7.2 Limitations .................................................................................................................. 166
  7.3 References .................................................................................................................. 168

Appendices .......................................................................................................................... 170
List of figures

Figure 2.1: Daily consumption of fresh weight (kg) of major available foods provisioned to Burma in Auckland zoo in forest days (F) and non-forest days (NF).................................37
Figure 2.2: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the percentage contribution to total metabolisable energy from natural detergent fibre (NDF), non-protein macronutrients (i.e. The sum of non-structural carbohydrates (NSC) + crude fat (CF)), and available protein (AP) in foods consumed by Burma in Auckland zoo....... 41
Figure 2.3A: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the percentage of Burma’s daily energy intake from NDF, non-protein macronutrients (NSC + CF), and AP....................43
Figure 2.4A: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the proportional contribution to metabolisable energy intake if Burma fed proportionally to what was available (triangles) versus her actual intake (circles) for days she was restricted to provisioned (i.e. non-forest) foods. Figure B. Equivalent data for forest feeding days.44
Figure 2.5: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the balance of available protein (AP), non-protein macronutrients (CF + NSC), and hemicellulose of plants consumed by Burma...............................................................................................................46
Figure 2.6: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the percentage contribution of fibre components (hemicellulose, cellulose and lignin) relative to total fibre intake (dry matter basis) in Burma’s daily diet. .................................................................................................................................................................46
Figure 3.1: Map of study area (Chitwan National Park) in Nepal..........................................................60
Figure 3.2: Seasonal nutrient content percentages of top ten most important key food items.69
Figure 3.3: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the seasonal balance of crude protein (CP), Neutral detergent fibre (NDF) and non-protein macronutrient energy (CF + NSC)...................................................................................................................74
Figure 3.4: A-D: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the seasonal variation and intake balance of macronutrient and NDF in individual elephants................................77
Figure 3.5: Nutrient balance of different reproductive status of female elephants......................... 78
Figure 3.6: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the comparative percentage of male and female daily energy intake from crude protein (CP), NDF and non-protein macronutrients (NSC + CF)..................................................................................................................79
Figure 3.7: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the comparative percentage of tuberculosis-positive and tuberculosis-negative individuals’ daily energy intake from crude protein (CP), NDF and non-protein macronutrients (NSC + CF).....................80
Figure 3.8: Right-angled mixture triangle (RMT) showing the comparative percentage of the different age group’s daily energy intake from crude protein (CP), NDF and non-protein macronutrients (NSC + CF).........................................................................................80
Figure 4.1: Map of the Parsa Wildlife Reserve (PWR) and Chitwan National Park (CNP) showing locations of plots used for vegetation and feeding sign surveys. ..................97
Figure 4.2: Sample points along a transect with the nearest trees in each quarter indicated by dash lines and a grass of 1 m × 1 m near each sample points. ........................................100
Figure 4.3: Preference indices (PI) for the most prevalent plant species found in the diet of wild Asian elephants in the Chitwan National Park (CNP) and the Parsa Wildlife reserve (PWR) in both the rainy and dry seasons.................................................................104
Figure 5.1: Distribution of Asian elephant populations in Nepal (IUCN 2008).........................119
Figure 5.2: The distribution of resident elephant population number........................................120
Figure 6.1: Study areas. Blue circles are the spatial position of the household surveyed in the buffer zones of Chitwan national park and Parsa wildlife reserve. .........................138
Figure 6.2: Respondents view on the trend of types of human-elephant conflict in the buffer zones of Chitwan National Park and Parsa Wildlife Reserve........................................143
Figure 6.3: Distribution of respondents’ views on the trend of human-elephant conflict from 2002 to 2012.................................................................................................................144
Figure 6.4: Types and Trend of damage caused by bulls and family herd................................146
Figure 6.5: Conflict intensity with increasing distance from the periphery of the parks........147
Figure 6.6: Spatial distribution of elephant population.................................................................148
Figure 6.7: Frequency of elephant visitation over time...............................................................150
Figure 6.8: Responses to the question as to what was the primary cause for the increased human-elephant conflict.........................................................................................151
Figure 6.9: Responses to the question as to what was on the primary cause elephant move to human habitation........................................................................................................151
Figure 6.10: Mitigation measures suggested by villagers during the questionnaire survey.... 152
List of tables

Table 2.1: Total fresh and dry weight of each food available and eaten by Burma and the mean dry weight of each food consumed/day with the number of days each supplied.................................................................36

Table 2.2: Percentage dry matter and nutritional content (% of dry matter) of foods consumed by Burma in Auckland Zoo. See * for key to column headings. * DM, dry matter; EE, ether extract; CF, crude fat; CP, crude protein; AP, available protein; NDF, neutral detergent fibre; ADF, acid detergent fibre; ADL, acid detergent lignin; Ash; NSC, non-structural carbohydrates..................................................................................................................39

Table 3.1: Name, Age, sex and season surveyed of different domestic Asian elephants in elephant breeding centre Chitwan Nepal...............................................................................................................62

Table 3.2: List of Natural and provisioned food (browse, grass and pellet) eaten by elephants in different seasons of the year.....................................................................................................................67

Table 3.3: Comparative digestibility of different nutrient in Asian elephant........................................72
List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADIN</td>
<td>acid detergent insoluble nitrogen</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOAC</td>
<td>association of official analytical chemists</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>available protein</td>
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<td>ADF</td>
<td>acid-detergent fibre</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADL</td>
<td>acid-detergent lignin</td>
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<td>BW</td>
<td>body weight</td>
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<tr>
<td>CF</td>
<td>crude fat</td>
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<tr>
<td>CINE</td>
<td>classical insect nutritional ecology</td>
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<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>conflict intensity</td>
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<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>crude protein</td>
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<td>CV</td>
<td>coefficient of variation</td>
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<td>DE</td>
<td>digestible energy</td>
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</tr>
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<td>DMI</td>
<td>dry matter intake</td>
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<tr>
<td>Item</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<td>EE</td>
<td>ether extract</td>
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<td>ES</td>
<td>ecological stoichiometry</td>
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<td>GF</td>
<td>geometric framework</td>
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<td>IVI</td>
<td>important value index</td>
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<td>ME</td>
<td>metabolised energy</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>nitrogen</td>
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<td>NDF</td>
<td>neutral detergent fibre</td>
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<td>NG</td>
<td>nutritional geometry</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
<td>non-structural carbohydrates</td>
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<td>OFT</td>
<td>optimal foraging theory</td>
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<td>preference index</td>
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<td>r</td>
<td>correlation coefficient</td>
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<td>RMT</td>
<td>right-angled mixture triangle</td>
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<td>TB</td>
<td>tuberculosis</td>
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<td>VDC</td>
<td>village development committee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Human-wildlife conflict has recently become a fundamental aspect of wildlife management. It represents the most complex challenge currently faced by conservationists worldwide. Conflict arises mainly because of the loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitats through human activities such as logging, animal husbandry, agricultural expansion and infrastructure development projects (Fernando et al. 2005). When habitat becomes fragmented, smaller wilderness areas allow greater contact and therefore conflict with humans as wild animals seek to fulfil their nutritional, ecological and behavioural needs (Sukumar 1990).

Destruction of human assets brought about by the wild elephant is the most inescapable conflict because of this megaherbivore’s wide-ranging behaviour, fidelity to its home range, large appetite and propensity and ability to destroy human property. Among the many factors precipitating wild elephants’ destructive behaviour, dietary needs are believed to be the root cause. Indeed, crop raiding sometimes leads to fatal human-elephant conflicts. The wild elephant is a selective herbivore which is attracted to crops, purportedly because cultivated plant foods are palatable and nutritious and have lower secondary defences than wild browse plants (Sukumar 1990).

In Nepal, remote village communities with inadequate resources frequently fall victim to conflicts with wildlife (WWF Nepal 2007). Habitat degradation due to the increasing human population in Nepal has given rise to food-related problems in wildlife populations, and the Asian elephant is particularly vulnerable because it requires an
average of 150 kg per day to survive (WWF 2016). Large herbivores like elephants are therefore more likely to fall victim to periodic food shortages. This food deficit triggers the dispersal of elephants, and they raid crops and create havoc around outlying human settlements when they cannot meet their nutritional targets (Parker et al. 2007).

Understanding wild elephants’ dietary needs are crucial for mapping the conservation ecology of elephants and for managing habitats in ways that will ensure their survival by minimising conflicts with humans. However, obtaining information about the dietary needs of wild animals is difficult. Thus, I started my study of wild elephants by investigating the diets of captive and domestic elephants. My captive/domestic elephant studies provided an opportunity—in a controlled situation—to validate key research methods before using lower-resolution measures to study wild populations. In addition, my initial studies of captive and non-captive domestic elephants allowed us to gather important information on the management of elephants’ dietary needs and husbandry practices under captive conditions.

This thesis investigates the dietary and nutritional aspects of three different groups of elephants (captive, non-captive domestic and wild), ranging patterns of the Asian elephants and the human factors in the human-elephant conflicts and elephant conservation. It provides important baseline information for addressing further questions around the role of nutrition in human-elephant conflict, developing predictive models for managing human-wildlife conflict and to help formulate strategies for balancing the elephant’s needs and human survival.

This dissertation is original and consists published and unpublished chapters, independent work by the author, Koirala RK. The data collection for chapter 2 was
permitted by the Auckland Zoo’s animal ethics committee (AEC) on 7th August 2012. The fieldwork for Chapters 3, 4 and 6 was permitted by DNPWC (Department of the national park and wildlife conservation) government of Nepal (ref numbers 3300, Chitwan national park; and 873, Parsa wildlife reserve, whose status is recently upgraded to the national park) respectively. The permission covers both biological and social data collection as well as animal and human ethics.

I was the lead investigator for the projects covered by Chapters 1, 2, 3 6 and 7 where I was responsible for forming research questions, data collection and analysis, as well as the majority of the manuscript composition.

A version of Chapter 4 has been published [Koirala RK, Ji W, Aryal A, Pathak ML, Raubenheimer D. 2016]. Feeding preferences of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in Nepal. BMC Ecology. 16:54. I was the lead investigator, responsible for all forming research questions, data collection and analysis, as well as manuscript composition. Aryal A and Pathak ML were involved in the early stages of data collection and contributed to manuscript edits. Ji W and Raubenheimer D were the supervisory authors on this project and was involved throughout the project in all aspects.

A version of Chapter 5 has been published [Koirala RK, Ji W, Aryal A, Rothman J, Raubenheimer D. 2015]. Dispersal and ranging patterns of the Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in relation to their interactions with humans in Nepal, Ethology Ecology & Evolution 28:221-31. I have conceptualised the project, reviewed literature and drafted the manuscript. Raubenheimer D, Ji W, Rothman J, was the supervisory authors on this project and was involved throughout the project in manuscript edits. Aryal A contributed in manuscript edits including figures and map preparation.
References


http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/elephants/.
The primary aim of this thesis is to understand whether the human-wildlife conflict is driven by food preferences and nutritional needs. Such knowledge is important for conservation management of elephant populations, their habitat and mitigation of human-elephant conflict.

This thesis includes two themes: 1) Diet and nutritional ecology of Asian elephants, and 2) human-wildlife interaction. Exploration of these themes leads to recommendations for developing strategies to balance wildlife conservation and human needs.

Theme one of this thesis documents the pattern of diet preference of the wild Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in the Terai region of Nepal and evaluation of nutritional values of food plants selected by captive and domestic Asian elephants. Such information is vital for understanding elephant–habitat interactions, especially in the wild. **Chapters 1-4** are included under the first theme.

Theme two covers aspects on the distribution and movement patterns of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and the nature and status of human-elephant interactions in the Terai region of Nepal and documents the causes and extent of damage by wild elephants in central Nepal.
The aim is to understand general human-elephant conflict issues in order to more effectively manage elephant habitats and reduce human-elephant conflicts. Theme two contains Chapters 5–7.

Each chapter was written as a stand-alone paper for publication in a scientific journal. Chapter 4 has been published in BMC Ecology and Chapter 5 in Ethology, Ecology and Evolution. Chapter 2 and 6 are submitted to the journals. The published chapters follow respective journal format.

Below are details of each chapters.

**Theme 1: Wildlife nutritional ecology and conservation strategies**

**Chapter 1** Understanding the aspects of elephant diet and nutrition relevant to minimising human-Asian elephant conflict.

This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature on the diet and nutritional aspects of the Asian elephant and introduces the different frameworks to explain nutritional ecology concepts. The chapter highlights the nutrient balance hypothesis that may influence food selection and the “nutritional geometry” analytical framework and its application to the foraging ecologies of elephants. I further review human-elephant conflict and its potential link to habitat loss and consequent effects on elephants’ foraging abilities.
Chapter 2 Diet composition and macronutrient prioritisation in a captive Asian elephant.

This chapter investigates the relationship between macronutrient composition of food provisioned to a captive Asian elephant and food eaten, as an approach to test for macronutrient-specific selective feeding. This study was a pilot exploration of the composition of the typical elephant diet in situations where the animal was under the care of humans.

Chapter 3 The effects of age, sex and season on the macronutrient composition of the diet of the domestic Asian elephants.

This chapter examines the effects of age, sex class and season on the nutrient composition of food intake by 16 domesticated Asian elephants. I tested whether the domestic elephants selected a diet with the similar nutritional composition to that of their wild counterparts and whether they faced constraints in reaching their nutritional goal due to qualitative or quantitative restrictions on food availability.

Chapter 4 Feeding preferences of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in Nepal.

This chapter explores the feeding preferences and dietary requirements of wild Asian elephants based on feeding sign and dung analysis. I also investigated food availability by conducting a survey using point-centred quarter methods. This chapter has been published in BMC Ecology.
Theme 2: The status of human-elephant interactions, their causes and recommendations for management

Chapter 5 Dispersal and ranging patterns of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in relation to their interactions with humans in Nepal.

This chapter reviews the past and present population distribution of Asian elephants in Nepal, the spatial and temporal patterns of elephant movements (migration), the history of human-elephant conflict and mitigation measures. This chapter has been published in Ethology Ecology and Evolution.

Chapter 6 Patterns, perceptions and spatial distribution of human-elephant (*Elephas maximus*) conflict in Nepal.

In this chapter, based on the findings of chapter 5, I evaluate local human-elephant conflict in the central region of Nepal through household surveys and secondary analysis of published data.

Chapter 7 Conclusions.

This chapter summarises findings of this research and concludes that macronutrient balance is important for the management of captive and domestic Asian elephants. Plants utilised by wild populations as important food sources should be taken into account in elephant habitat management.