Sidedoor S7 Ep. 1 Make Way for Elephants Final Transcription

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX, I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: Something is mysteriously moving through China, something big.

Speaker 1: It's not a site you see every day. A herd of elephants leaving their home turf, making their way through Southwestern China.

Speaker 2: They've damaged homes broken into bonds, and even a car dealership rolled around in courtyards and gorged themselves on crops.

Speaker 3: Their road trip started from a nature reserve in the south through towns and fields causing a million dollars damage along the way.

Lizzie Peabody: The way for the past year and a half, a herd of 15 Asian elephants has been eating and drinking its way across China, kind of like a Pachyderm pub crawl. And people are obsessed with these elephants. Chinese news channels have devoted entire shows to the journey, even creating elephant holograms.

Speaker 4: Oh, there's an elephant in our studio. Let me try to pat it. Oh, so sweet. But this is a virtual elephant so I can't pat it. Don't try this at home, as it's dangerous to touch elephants.

Lizzie Peabody: If you haven't seen the footage of these elephants, it's pretty breathtaking, especially the shots of the elephants sleeping in a big pile, like they're spooning each other. And there's this little baby elephant smushed in the middle kind of kicking its mom. It might be the cutest thing I've ever seen.

Peter Leimgruber: You're right. It's really cute. It's beautiful.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Peter Leimgruber. He's one of the world's leading Asian elephant experts and head of conservation ecology at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute. When I asked him what he thought about all the media hypes surrounding the elephants, he said, "We're actually learning a lot from all the cameras following this rogue elephant herd."

Peter Leimgruber: I have no seen a heard of elephants sleep like that. It's very difficult to observe them when you're out in the field, and this drone footage is really exceptional. So that's the first thought. Second thought is, okay. So, there must be dozens of drones flying around these guys and people approaching with cameras. No wonder they're running.

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Lizzie Peabody: Nobody knows why these elephants are running through Chinese cities. Some say they don't really have anywhere else to go. Asian elephants live across the Southeastern part of the continent. From Vietnam to the East, India, to the West and China to the North. But their natural habitat has dwindled to nearly nothing over the past century. Development of more urban areas has led to deforestation and what's left of their forest home is separated by highways, farms and cities. So even though the hype around this particular herd is unusual, it's not uncommon to see elephants in China lumbering through markets, sitting on the occasional car, or even taking a bath in someone's backyard pool. In fact, you could argue it's good news. Asian elephants are edging closer to extinction. So, the fact that they're a nuisance means they're still around.

Peter Leimgruber: In some sense, elephants are a conservation success story because we have three to four-ton animal that feeds on vegetation, coexisting and surviving with people in some of the most populous places in the world in fact. And there's still space left for them to coexist with people.

Lizzie Peabody: But living side by side with elephants is difficult. It can also be deadly. And some people in Asia are fed up with the massive trail of death and destruction these elephants leave behind. So, this time on Sidedoor, we're heading just slightly south of China to India, where the relationship between humans and elephants has reached a breaking point. But there may be a way for humans and elephants to get along as neighbors. And it may be far simpler than we ever imagined. That's coming up, after the break.

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Lizzie Peabody: Hassan is a rural area in the so of India. It's tropical. One of the few places in India where small farmers can still make a living off the land. That is if they can survive the elephants. At night, hungry elephants wander into the farms from nearby forests to munch on rice and bananas. If a farmer tries to protect just crops to chase them off, the elephants might feel threatened and charge, running down the farmer and stomping on him, killing him. And this was happening a lot in Hassan. So, in 2014, people there told the Indian government, "We have had enough. Get these elephants out of here." And the government listened. A local news outlet caught the mass elephant capture are on camera. And just a warning, this audio is disturbing. So, if you're listening with a small child or you don't want to hear an animal in distress, we'll give you a couple seconds to skip ahead a minute. So, in the video forest rangers wrap chains around the legs of a sedated wild elephant lying on its side in the dirt. And they tie a massive rope around its neck. Rangers ride on the backs of trained elephants and they whip them, urging them to prod the wild elephant with their tusks. A crowd of men sprint away as this massive wild elephant slowly climbs to its feet, yanked by the trained elephant. The trained elephant leads the wild elephant by a rope like a dog on a leash. Men are screaming from the sides and chasing behind in trucks and these headlights beamed through the dust stir up by the chaos, which sort of blocks out the sun. A trained elephant headbutts the wild elephant in the side, broadening it to get into a massive cage built on the back of a truck. The trained elephants' tusks are bloody from the struggle. The wild elephant refuses to move any further. But the trained elephant keeps push and pushing as men inside the cage yank the chains wrapped around the wild elephant's legs. Finally, the wild elephant gives up, backs into the cage. Everyone cheers as the doors slide close.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This scene repeated 21 more times over the next six months. Most of the captured elephants were sent to live in captivity. Some may have even been trained to capture other wild elephants.

Vinod Krishnan: It is quite painful for the elephant, both physically and psychologically.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Vinod Krishnan.

Vinod Krishnan: You do have cases of elephant suffering due to stress, PTSD because they are extremely intelligent and social animals.

Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan is a project coordinator with the Nature Conservation Foundation in India. He came to the Hassan region six months after these mass captures with a single goal, don't let this happen again. Because while many people in Hassan cheered these mass captures as the solution to their elephant problem, they could not have been more wrong.

Vinod Krishnan: It did not work. Yes, six or seven months after the capture, I started to see about 20, 25 elephants in these areas.

Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan actually found more elephants after the mass captures. Removing one herd created a vacuum that other nearby elephants gladly lumped right into. From the elephants' perspective, why would an elephant leave a quiet forest, say like on the fringes of Hassan and come into the farmlands and cities where people are shouting at them and throwing firecrackers. And they're intelligent so you would think that they would pick up on the fact that they're not wanted there. So, what's motivating them?

Vinod Krishnan: Currently only 20% of India's geographical area is forests. And out of the 20% is just probably five or 6%, which is completely exclusively dedicated for animals.

Lizzie Peabody: In other words, Asian elephants have nowhere to go. With so much of their native forests cut down elephants find themselves living next to massive fields of corn and rice, and fruit. It's like a gigantic.

Peter Leimgruber: And so, they love eating that. It's like the cookie jar.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah. Cookie jar is an even better analogy.This is Smithsonian’s Peter Leimgruber again.

Peter Leimgruber: Even if there were enough habitat, if they're close to that, they would come and prefer that as a food. So, for example, if you put a pineapple plantation next to a nature reserve with elephants, you're going to lose your crop to elephants. That is almost unavoidable.

Lizzie Peabody: Peter and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute are at the forefront of saving Asian elephants from extinction. He works with researchers like Vinod Krishnan and countries across Southeast Asia to understand the biggest threats elephants are facing like poaching, for example.

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Peter Leimgruber: Poaching happens and it reduces elephant herds. But the biggest issue really is conflict, which unfortunately, the end effect often is that elephants get killed or are pushed out of their habitat in a better case scenario. So, it's the biggest threat to the species.

Lizzie Peabody: So, what do you do when there simply isn't enough space for elephants and people to live apart, when the very existence of humans is the threat to elephants, when the choice boils down to us or them? How do you think the elephants would tell this story?

Peter Leimgruber: They would not be happy. I mean, elephants would basically feel that they've been trampled upon.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, how ironic.

Peter Leimgruber: They're constantly losing. They're constantly losing. And there isn't really much good in the story for them. Yeah. Like most wildlife.

Lizzie Peabody: Back in Hassan, it felt like everyone was losing. The elephants and the people. This was really clear Vinod Krishnan when he arrived. But what wasn't clear was how to fix it. Capturing elephants doesn't solve the problem if more, just come to take their place. And sometimes the captured elephants will even come back from wherever they've been dropped off.

Peter Leimgruber: We have done some research on elephants in Sri Lanka that were relocated. And many of the elephants returned to the place where they were captured even after they were moved over a hundred kilometers.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, wow. Okay. So, what about taking elephants to a nature preserve or a park and releasing them there? Turns out Peter's done research on that as well.

Peter Leimgruber: They're relocated into a park and within the day or two, they come to the boundary of the park, they break through and they're back in agriculture. So, they're not bothering the people in the first place anymore, but in another place. So instead of relocating the elephant, you have relocated the problem.

Lizzie Peabody: So maybe you just need better barriers around the nature preserves. Right? Well, the forest department tried that. Building huge concrete trenches around the reserves.

Anand Kumar: These trenches don't work. Elephants actually mud in to their trenches and the crossover.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Anand Kumar. He studied elephant human interactions for the past two decades. He says the elephants will push mud into the trenches and make themselves a nice little bridge so they can walk right over. You can watch it on YouTube. It's pretty amazing. Okay. So, what about electric fences?

Vinod Krishnan: They can break any sort of fence. If there's a tree bordering the fence, they just break the tree and the tree falls on the fence and just cross over. So, they have this ability to

solve problems, complex problems. And if the elephant decides that I have to go this way, they will.

Lizzie Peabody: They'll find a way.

Vinod Krishnan: They'll definitely find a way.

Lizzie Peabody: And if an older elephant is impatient, or just can't find a tree, they've been known to push a younger elephant through an electric fence. Don't worry. It's just a minor shock. I think the biggest injury is probably to the relationship. “I thought we were friends Spike.”

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, India's solutions for containing elephants so far have always failed. And Anand Kumar says there's actually a pretty simple reason for that.

Anand Kumar: It just because there's a lack of understanding about human-elephant relationships. That's what I strongly feel.

Lizzie Peabody: Luckily for us, we have some human-elephant relationships at work right here in Washington, DC. So, I headed to the Smithsonian’s National Zoo. This is where elephant keeper, Ashley Fortner Fortner introduced me to elephants Ronnie and Bossy. Oh my gosh, here she comes.

Ashley Fortner: Let me see. You show me foot. Ronnie, foot. Good girl.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh. She's putting her foot up on the wall. Her toenails are as big as my head. Did you touch her? No. Can I?

Ashley Fortner: Yeah. Let me...

Lizzie Peabody: Just like this?

Ashley Fortner: Steady, steady.

Lizzie Peabody: She's like leathery and-

Ashley Fortner: You're welcome.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). That was a face full of air.

Ashley Fortner: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: So first off, elephants are massive and a little snotty to be honest. They're also a lot smarter than most people realize. Five Asian elephants live at the national zoo, and zookeeper regularly give them intelligence tests.

Marie Galloway: Shanthi is the most intelligent elephant I have ever known.

Lizzie Peabody: Marie Galloway is the elephant manager at the zoo. She's been here for over 30 years and worked with Shanthi.

Marie Galloway: So, they were supposed to get food out of a toy that they couldn't just reach in and get it. And they tried all kinds of different ways. Shaking it, turning it upside down, breaking it. Shanthi filled it with water and made the food float to the top.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Marie Galloway: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: That is incredible. I don't think I would've thought of that. Elephants are also one of the few animals that can identify themselves in a mirror. Most dogs can't do this. And they're really curious tinkerers. Take Kamala, for example.

Ashley Fortner: She's our resident and doer of things. For a lack of a better term. So like clevis and locks, she always messes with them. She can unscrew things and open things herself. She actually is our most problem solver in that sense.

Lizzie Peabody: So, she could unscrew a jar of jam or something.

Ashley Fortner: Oh yeah, probably. I would not put it past her.

Lizzie Peabody: Elephants are also extremely social and they each have unique personalities or elephantalities. And these are shaped by their elephant social circles. Like Ronnie, for example, she's a elephant who blew snot in my face.

Ashley Fortner: She is our resident drama queen.

Lizzie Peabody: When Ronnie was born, she was the only child in the group of adult elephants. And she's very much an only child.

Marie Galloway: She was treated very much like a princess by the other elephants and got to do whatever she wanted. And she's still kind of a princess and rules the roost. So, the socialization amongst their family can have a great effect on who they are and how they develop.

Lizzie Peabody: And just like an elephant social circle will shape its character. It also shapes its behavior. Marie says baby elephants are a lot like little humans. They'll copy whatever they see other elephants doing like big time. Marie says one of the best examples of this happened a few years ago. A young elephant had just arrived at the zoo. It didn't have any of the physical therapy training that the other elephants have like stretching their legs or climbing on rocks to get exercise. So, for the first few days, they just let her hang out by herself while zookeepers let the other elephants through their daily exercises.

Marie Galloway: And they would do all these different behaviors and we'd turn around and look behind us. And the untrained elephant would be doing the behaviors behind us. So, she would climb up onto a rock after we got them on a rock and took them back off, she would lay down after we got them up and moved them on, she would just do the same behaviors.

Lizzie Peabody: And just like elephants can learn to climb a rock or build a mud bridge. They can learn to not tear down a fence or step on a motorcycle. And it's this understanding of how elephants learn that Vinod Krishnan says could be a key to easing elephant-human relations back in India. More on that, after the break.

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Vinod Krishnan: He's a gentleman. I don't think any human being can be as patient as him.

Lizzie Peabody: Except Tom Hanks. Vinod says everyone in his sun knows and loves Bheema. He's the biggest wild elephant around. So, it's easy to spot him. He's usually just hanging around town by himself, maybe strolling down the road or yes, snacking on some crops.

Vinod Krishnan: Just like people don't seem to mind.

Lizzie Peabody: That's because Bheema walks on the pads when he strolls through a farm. He doesn't trample the crops and he doesn't linger. He just walks on through, scoops up some rice with his trunk and carries on leaving little trace that a six-ton eating machine just swept through the area.

Vinod Krishnan: I think somewhere he realizes that if I keep my common composure, people will accept me.

Lizzie Peabody: And Bheema might be onto something.

Vinod Krishnan: People clearly have told the forest department that we will not allow you to capture Bheema under any circumstances.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Vinod Krishnan: So that is something that I find it hard to believe because given a choice, people always don't want the elephants to be around. But Bheema enjoys this really celebrity status where has...

Lizzie Peabody: He's a celebrity. Vinod Krishnan says that not only is Bheema a gentleman, gentle-phant, other elephants are calmer when he's around and he's teaching younger elephants how to be gentlep-hants as well.

Vinod Krishnan: There's another elephant who would spend a lot of time with Bheema. And now after two years of watching him now has become more confident. And when people approach him, he just keeps his composure.

Lizzie Peabody: And this composure is hugely important when it comes to elephant-human relations. Bheema's soft diplomacy is helping to convince people in Hassan that elephants can peacefully live among them. Vinod Krishnan says this takes pressure off the forest service to remove elephants. But even more importantly, human deaths happen when elephants lose their composure. When they get surprised or spooked and charged. And when elephants kill humans, that's when humans kill elephants.

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Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan mentor Anand Kumar puts it this way. The best way to save elephant lives is to save human lives first.

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Lizzie Peabody: Ananda learned this back in 2002. Between a span of five years, elephants had killed around 150 people in Northern India and humans had killed 200 elephants in retaliation. So, the government reached out to Ananda and said, "People are getting killed, can you help us out?" And Ananda says…

Anand Kumar: Absolutely, absolutely.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Ananda did what researchers do. He gathered data. He looked at the 48 most recent human deaths to understand when and how people were being killed.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And he noticed a pattern. First, the most people were being killed on roads.

Anand Kumar: 29 of 48, which is 60% of the deaths occurred on roads.

Lizzie Peabody: Second, most deaths happened during a three-month span of the year, between December and February.

Anand Kumar: The reason for this is that that is the time that a lot of elephant movement that you would see the rainy season stops here there's a lot of people move around.

Lizzie Peabody: So, most deaths happened during the dry months of the year festival season when people are out late, maybe having a few drinks. It's also a busy time for elephant migration. So, you've got more people and elephants on the road at the same time. And then Ananda found something that gave him his aha moment. Nearly everyone killed, had no idea elephants were even in the area.

Anand Kumar: So, if these people had known that there were elephants in their surroundings, all these people would've been alive today.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Ananda figured why can't we just tell people if there are elephants in the area. This was 2004 and smartphones weren't a thing yet. So, he turned to local television.

Anand Kumar: We started displaying elephant location information as a scroll, as a text message on a television screen.

Lizzie Peabody: Elephant alert, elephant spotted near the market, stay clear, kind of like that. But then people started watching satellite TV and Ananda couldn't reach them. So, he slid into

their DMS and started texting folks. But this was an impoverished area of India where a lot of people couldn't read. So, he began sending prerecorded voice messages in the local language Tamil. And he also installed about 35 flashing lights on roadways, where elephants were known to roam. If elephants were around, the lights would flash. And between the elephant alert messages and the flashing lights, the result was clear.

Anand Kumar: 31 lives were saved.

Lizzie Peabody: Human deaths dropped 80% and that stopped the backlash against elephants, making it easier for people like Ananda to protect them.

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Lizzie Peabody: But 300 miles away in Hassan, the situation was still tense. Even after the mass captures protests to remove Hassan's remaining elephants continued.

Speaker 12: They all want the permanent solution. That one, everyone's demanding, but nobody knows what the solution is. All they've been saying is you remove the elephants from here. We are facing too many problems here. So, they're protesting against the department.

Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan wondered if Ananda's elephant alert system could be used to prevent another round of mass captures. He knew he didn't have much time to ease the tension. So, he got to work putting an on system in place, but he quickly found out it's pretty hard to get thousands of people to sign up for your mysterious text alert.

Vinod Krishnan: Initially, people would ask me like, why do you need this information? What are you going to do about this? Are you going to come and chase the elephants? So, what's in it for you?

Lizzie Peabody: People were a little suspicious.

Vinod Krishnan: Yeah, they were. The initial few years was very difficult.

Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan slowly built trust with local people by sharing his research and showing that he was there to protect them as well as the elephants. After spending day after day, talking with people on the streets, Vinod Krishnan gather more than 5,000 phone numbers. These people have become his network of informants calling him and telling him where they've seen elephants. He's sort of Hassan's elephant guy.

Vinod Krishnan: There are days when I am answering phone calls throughout on a busy day. If there are elephants scattered across the study area, you will have phones coming in from different parts of the study area.

Lizzie Peabody: After all this hard work, Vinod Krishnan waited to see if it would pay off. Before the alert, five people a year were killed by elephants in Hassan. Could he shave that down even just a little bit? So, when Vinod Krishnan saw how many people died from elephant attacks in Hassan in 2018, he couldn't believe it. One, okay. This is a good start, but maybe it's a fluke, Vinod Krishnan thought. So, in 2019, he looked at the new numbers. Zero deaths. Wow. Okay.

So maybe we're onto something. The true test would be the 2020 numbers. And when he saw those, he was shocked, zero.

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Lizzie Peabody: Vinod Krishnan believes he and Ananda have found a way for elephants and humans to live together, somewhat peacefully he might add. And it doesn't take cages or trucks, barbed wire, and electrified fences, trained elephants or concrete trenches. The solution is something as simple as a text message and some warning lights. And most importantly, a shift in how people view their relationship with their elephant neighbors.

Vinod Krishnan: I would say that it is possible to coexist. It may not be very, very utopian like perfect harmony. There will always be this uneasy calm that will prevail. But elephants are willing to coexist. It's the people who don't see the other side.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And it's easy for us to sit in America and think, “gosh, glad we don't have an elephant problem. “But in North America we have our own elephants and they look like gray wolves, cougars, and grizzly bears that we want to stop from going extinct. Peter Leimgruber says, "Living with these wild animals will never be 100 on human terms. If we really want to protect these endangered animals, we have to accept a hard truth, they can kill us. Just like car accidents, we can try to reduce the risks, but there's no escaping that some death is unavoidable."

Peter Leimgruber: Yeah. It's a difficult part to talk about because we are talking about human lives. I mean, who would want to be flip about that. Of course, we want to prevent any human casualties, but we also want for nature to exist. And I think if we accept ourselves as part of nature, then we have to accept the fact that nature sometimes will kill us.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. That's a really striking statement to me because I do think that in many ways, especially we city dwellers think of ourselves as being outside of nature in a sense. Nature is something you go seek out selectively on a weekend with your hiking backpack.

Peter Leimgruber: Yeah. But I think that's what we're seeing now with all this global change and climate change is there's a limit to that. We are not outside of nature. We cannot exist without nature. It's coming to terms what that relationship needs to be so that we have a healthy earth and a good life on earth.

Lizzie Peabody: It's just like Vinod Krishnan says. Elephants are ready to coexist. Are we?

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to see some pretty amazing elephant photos from our visit to the national zoo, including one of me with our resident drama queen, Ronnie, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. We'll also share a list of things you can do to protect Asian elephants like avoiding palm oil in food products.

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Lizzie Peabody: For helping with this episode, we want to give a special thanks to Peter Leimgruber, Vinod Krishnan, Anand Kumar, Marie Galloway, Ashley Fortner, and Pamela Baker-Masson.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tareq Fuda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

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Lizzie Peabody: I love your tattoo.

Marie Galloway: Myself, my daughter and my husband all got three elephants tattoos. Each one is different, but they all represent us. And for me, they also represent Shanthi, Andika and Kumari, our first cat. And so part of the reason my daughter exists today is because I had Kumari first.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh.

Marie Galloway: Matter of fact her middle name is Kumari.

Lizzie Peabody: Really? That's amazing.