

UNVEILING THE CONTRIBUTION OF WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY IN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION INITIATIVES IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The rising number of wild elephant deaths in Sri Lanka owing to human interactions underscores the urgency of their conservation. Wildlife photography, with its compelling imagery, has become a potent tool for shifting public perception and influencing conservation efforts. This study examines the role and impact of wildlife photography on elephant conservation in Sri Lanka from the perspective of wildlife photographers, and addresses a gap in understanding the relationship between these fields. It aims to identify emotionally resonant elephant photographs, the role of photography in raising awareness of elephant behavior, and its contribution to conservation. Seven professional wildlife photographers in Sri Lanka who shared their work on social media were interviewed via semi-structured phone interviews. Data were analyzed using NVivo software to identify themes and relationships, providing insights into photographers' experiences and perspectives on conservation. The study found that photographs of elephant families, baby elephants, and tuskiers evoke empathy, enhanced by narrative captions that convey conservation messages in an empathetic approach. Wildlife photography significantly raises awareness of elephant behaviors, improving public understanding and making "Wild Elephants" a popular and positively viewed topic. It also contributes to conservation efforts by raising awareness, changing perceptions, and promoting proactive involvement, as seen in the "Agbo Wild Elephant" social media campaign. This research highlights the role of wildlife photography in addressing issues like injured elephants and promoting human-elephant coexistence. The study's credibility is bolstered by data triangulation, gathering diverse opinions from photographers. Findings emphasize wildlife photography's potential in conservation, with theoretical implications for visual storytelling in shaping public perception and behaviors, and practical implications for the Department of Wildlife Conservation, practitioners, educational institutions, and policymakers, encouraging cross-disciplinary collaborations and integration of emerging technologies for positive conservation outcomes.

Keywords: Elephant behaviours, emotional attachment, ethical photography, visual storytelling, wildlife conservation