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Elephants devastate The Abode – but we rebuild it!

The Abode House at the top of the remote valley in the Knuckles Mountains near Kandy, had suffered minor damage from a previous elephant threat in June, but was again attacked in November 2008. Luckily, no one was hurt as the villagers were in the bottom valley at the time.

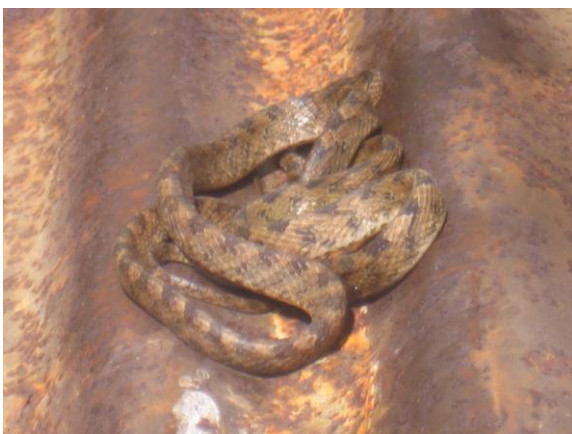
Elephants, due to changing conditions on Sri Lanka, are at certain times of year in direct competition with villagers for food and the result, occasionally, is conflict between them. Elephants smell rice in village homes, where it is traditionally stored in sacks and if they are hungry enough, bulldoze through stockades and walls to get to it. The impact on The Abode house can be seen below.



Faced with the extensive damage, Sid and the elderly grandparents whose house it is, together with the villagers, started the urgent and heart breaking work of clearing the rubble, the snakes off the roof, finding their belongings which were scattered around the mountainside and had to decide whether it was worth rescuing and rebuilding the house.

Against them was the fragility of the building. The kitchen of the wattle and daub home had taken the brunt of the heavy attack by elephants as they charged into the central store room where the rice was held. The roof had collapsed and the walls on three sides were hanging by threads. The monsoon was raging and would be for months but visitors to The Abode were expected in January 2009. Something had to be done.

Snake on the roof



So, a great community effort saw The Abode restored. Sid tells how they did it and shows the huge personal toll on all who gave their time and energy:

“To relate this story I don't know where to begin. What was in front of me when I first saw the damage was the grief stricken grandparents, disoriented villagers alarmed by what might happen to their village homes and ever innocent Agara willing to throw all his weight behind our work.

What was left of the kitchen



After much discussion, we took a collective decision to rebuild The Abode, and with very little money, set the wheel of fortune in motion.

The first idea was only to plaster the damaged room walls and completely shut off the kitchen. But The Abode needed her charm, her grace that she has pampered all our guests with. I believe it's the kitchen and the open fire where so many have sat, talked and wondered that weave their magic. So come what may, we started to rebuild after taking vow's from the gods of the jungle.

The Abode was wet with the leaking roof and a bitter cold chilled us. Agara and I were the only inhabitants that night after the elephant attack. Yet it filled my heart to be in that home.

For days, then weeks we toiled, taking off the rubble, looking for any material that could be used for rebuilding and getting the roofing sheets. One of our trusted friends Wasantha (a fruit seller)

offered to help us to get hold of sturdy corrugated sheets from his ancestral home 20 kms on the opposite mountain overlooking Midland estate. The hired van eased into these wooded areas and his brother with another villager loaded ten bulging sheets on this battered vehicle. That day monsoons took a break so we safely transported the sheets and tucked ourselves to bed early ahead of the nerve racking work on the morrow. Then came the rains, relentless and torrents lashed on us from that day until we had finished most of the rebuilding work many weeks later.



Left – the rebuilt kitchen wall

By the 2nd of December we reached a milestone in our quest for rebuilding The Abode. The house work was done but now we had to plaster the mud walls with clay extracted from a termite pit ravaged by the brute elephant. Grandma carried pot and pots on her delicate head whilst Agara plastered it mixing with water. Our helpers were busy placing stones and reinforcing the outside walls and Kirimathaya (grandma's youngest daughter's husband) put all his masonry skills to work to give The Abode the respect she deserves.

On the 12th of December we raised the firewood shed that had been resting on its haunches and cleared the garden of all weeds and shrubs. The last lap was colour washing the floors and walls and erecting the perimeter fence.....

But we all developed infections on our feet and soles due to the muddy conditions made worse by elephant dung, urine and fertiliser after the kitchen wall collapsed. By then it was time to go back home and the grandparents badly needed a rest. It had taken a heavy physical toll on all of us who worked day and night labouring for breath in the final days as we finished the work the last week in December.....”

Right Grandma wattle and daubs



But by February 2009, The Abode looked like this!



Since then, more work has been done, some with the help of visitors from Bradford on Avon in England who helped with the roofing. Agora now acts as a watchman for The Abode, sleeping there several nights a week armed with flash bangs – like fireworks – which he sets off each night to scare any elephants there might be away.



Agora, Sid, Vije at the Wildlife Department

We have also consulted with the Wildlife Department who sent their elephant specialists to The Abode to see for themselves the impact of hungry elephants. They have advised the villagers and The Abode on non violent means of protection from the animals and promised their support.

The stockade has been rebuilt around The Abode and we are considering the various eco friendly remedies to deter elephants such as using chili paste on the fencing – as elephants don't like the smell – keeping beehives – as elephants don't like the sound or effect of bee stings – and the more beautiful suggestions such as planting thorny bushes and bougainvillea – which elephants again don't like the smell of!

So we are confident The Abode will be safe for the villagers and our visitors. Certainly, I have my next trip booked there already for July/August!