

## Elephants Are Walking Paper Mills

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but you can make wedding invitations out of elephant dung—and save these pachyderms in the process. Papermakers in Sri Lanka and England have devised an unusual but profitable solution to the human-elephant conflict. In Sri Lanka (as in Africa and South Asia), deforestation is pushing elephants into villages in search of food, which often comes from a farmer's sugarcane field or banana crop. Farmers sometimes kill the hungry elephants in retaliation.

The Maximus and Ellie Poo paper companies were created to make elephant “pests” into partners. Using a centuries-old process, elephant dung is mixed with rice pulp (right), then boiled, sanitized, and transformed into beautiful—and odor-free—stationery, notebooks, greeting cards, and office paper. Now, villagers reap jobs and income from pachyderm paper as well as view the elephants favorably.

Elephants have inefficient digestive systems that fail to break down as much as 45 percent of their food. So, elephants must consume 200 to 300 pounds of vegetation a day to extract their required nutrition, and that calls for constant foraging. The end result: heaps and heaps of cellulose-rich dung—a ton per elephant per week.

“The elephant is a walking paper mill,” says Thusitha Ranasinghe, a third-generation printer who conceived the idea of Maximus. Ten years ago, he set up shop across the



SUNREE SUWPLANG/REUTERS

road from an elephant orphanage. He soon realized that the fibrous dung, comprised largely of banana leaves and sugarcane stalks, could be used to create papyrus-like papers that vary in color and texture depending on the animal's diet.

A British partner, Exotic Paper Company, began its Ellie Poo line in 2000. Lynn Hutton, the company's owner, purchases compressed dung sheets from Maximus and offers the papers to a growing worldwide market. According to Hutton, “The product seems to sell itself!”

*Barbara J. Tuttle*

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