

Chendra's Story



Celebrate the opening of Elephant Lands this fall and meet Asian elephant Chendra. This female elephant once lived in Malaysia, a country located in Southeast Asia. The climate in Malaysia is very warm, making it a perfect habitat for elephants. Malaysia also has a great deal of jungle land filled with big trees, beautiful plants, colorful fruits and many animals – including elephants.

Until about 100 years ago, Malaysia was almost entirely covered with jungle. As a result, elephants and people lived closely together. The people lived in villages, usually along a river, and were used to having elephants wander into their communities looking for food and water. Elephants and people learned to accept one another, and to share their habitat.

However, early in the 20th century, Malaysian farmers began converting jungle land into plantations. There, they could grow trees and crops for sale. Developing these plantations often meant cutting down the older trees upon which the elephants used to feed. As a result, the elephants – including Chendra and her herd – began wandering onto the plantations to eat newly planted trees. The farmers weren't too happy about that, since it was ruining their livelihood.

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Usually the farmers would try to scare the elephants away by shining bright lights at them, shouting, or setting off firecrackers. In some cases, none of these measures worked. As a result, the farmers began turning their guns on the elephants, sometimes injuring or killing them.

One day, Chendra's herd ventured onto a plantation and was chased back into the jungle by the plantation owners. No one knows exactly what happened during that confrontation. However, we do know that Chendra somehow lost her mother.

A few days later, Malaysian rangers found Chendra. She was hungry, tired and had an injured leg and eye. When Chendra's mother did not come back for her, the rangers rescued the orphan and took her to live on a wildlife preserve. The rangers took care of the wound on Chendra's leg, but they quickly learned she had become blind in her left eye.

The Malaysian rangers decided it wasn't safe to return Chendra to the jungle. She didn't have a herd anymore. With one blind eye, she might have trouble finding her own food. Chendra needed to live in a place where people could help take care of her.

That's how Chendra came to live at the Oregon Zoo. The zoo is well-known for its research and breeding work with elephants, and was very interested in adding members to its elephant family. The Malaysian government decided that our zoo was the best home for Chendra.

In November 1999, Chendra took a very long airplane and truck ride to her new home in Portland, Oregon. It wasn't long before the elephants at the zoo began to treat Chendra like a member of their family. Today Chendra has been integrated into the Oregon elephant herd, acting as an auntie to Samudra and Lily.

This fall you and your students can observe Chendra and the rest of her family in their new home – Elephant Lands. From hilly corridors and time-released feeders to shade structures and pools, Elephant Lands will create a new benchmark for elephant health and well-being.