Animals Asia Position Paper

Elephants in tourism

Animals Asia believes that the use of elephants in direct contact tourism can lead to their unnecessary suffering and supports a transition to observational tourism experiences where elephants are provided with opportunities to express their natural behaviours without being restrained by direct contact activities.

Animals Asia believe the direct contact activities subject some individuals to unnecessary suffering when forced into providing public 'experiences' such as riding, bathing, and performing, and deprive many individuals of socialising and foraging opportunities essential for their welfare.

Welfare issues

The sheer number of tourism camps offering elephant experiences across South-East Asia coupled with the varied management methods used and the skills and resources available, make it difficult to generalise on issues of welfare across all elephant based tourism camps. Elephants are also individualistic and their response to differing management styles will impact upon their individual welfare. It is therefore acknowledged that welfare states for individual elephants will vary considerably both between and within camps, making generalisations on elephant welfare within the elephant-based tourism industry challenging.

This said there is evidence to suggest that some elephants are experiencing poor welfare outcomes due to the regimes in which they are managed, and the details documented below provide evidence as to where elephant welfare in tourism camps is compromised.

Elephants are a non-domesticated species and young individuals, either born into captivity or in some extreme cases[1] captured from the wild, may be subjected to periods of brutal treatment, deprived of food and water, tied up and in some cases beaten to force them into complying with instructions. Thankfully, such abusive management regimes are known to occur less frequently than in previous decades with many elephant owners now using positive reinforcement / combined reinforcement[2] techniques to encourage individuals to perform unnatural behaviours such as allowing close contact interactions.

Despite this change abuse continues to be documented within some elephant tourism camps[3] with adult elephants as well as infants subjected to such abusive treatment. In order for tourists to have a 'safe' contact experience with an elephant, a mahout must keep their elephants under their control. Where negative reinforcement has been used as the dominant training technique, this is achieved via a bullhook or a sharpen tool used to 'guide' elephants into the places and positions that the mahout desires. No matter how gently the tool may be applied to certain pressure points particularly during public interactions, at some point it had to be established as a negative reinforcer in

[1] TRAFFIC (2014). An Assessment of the live elephant trade in Thailand, a report by TRAFFIC. https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/an-assessment-of-the-live-elephant-trade-in-thailand/

[2] https://h-elp.org/the-h-elp-elephant-training-technique

[3] https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/tourism-sites-in-central-vietnam-accused-of-abusing-elephants-4425900.html

order to be effective. That means causing enough pain and discomfort that the animal remembers, and seeks to avoid that experience by complying with the instruction being given.

A smaller handheld jab-stick may also be used to jab the elephant in sensitive places, this is designed to be less obvious than a larger tool whilst ensuring that an elephant complies with the instructions from the mahout.

The use of such instruments provide a degree of control to the mahout which in turn provides a degree of safety for both tourists directly interacting with elephants and for the elephants themselves, but they also remove an elephant's choice and control over its immediate environment and actions, forcing it to comply with the wishes of the mahout regardless of whether or not the action it is being asked to perform is in the best interest of the elephant.

A number of elephants at tourism camps are also forced to endure the indignity and in many cases physical pain of being made to perform circus tricks, such as standing on their heads, spinning in circles whilst standing on one leg and walking on top of rolling barrels. Forcing animals to perform unnatural tricks portrays them to the public in a humiliating manner, instead of showing their natural grace and beauty and thereby promoting empathy and respect. The development of lameness is common in elephants which are forced into performing circus tricks.[4] and joint problems as well as hernias are thought to result from circus elephants repeatedly assuming unnatural positions during performances.[5]

Many tourism facilities chain elephants on hard surfaces, such as concrete and tarmac. This practice is likely to lead to the development and/or aggravation of foot and joint problems with nail splitting and arthritis being the most common health issues seen in captive asian elephants.[6] Nail splitting is also aggravated by poor diet[7], and elephants displaying stereotypic weaving behaviours where the weight on individual feet is being continually transferred.[8] Performing stereotypic behaviour may cause uneven and excess wear [9] and/or abnormal pressure on the lateral toes of the front feet[10] where most foot pathologies are situated.[11] The trauma from performing repetitive actions also contributes to the development of osteoarthritis.[12]

[4] Lindau, K.-H. (1970) Lameness in circus elephants – a result of training? Verhandlungsberichte des 12 Internationalen Symposiums über die Erkrankungen der Zootiere: 129-131
[5] Kuntze, A. (1989) Work-related illness: Hernia perinealis, Bursitis praepatellaris and Tyloma olecrani in female circus elephants (Elephas maximus). Verh. Ber. Erkrg. Zootiere 31: 185-187
[6] Fowler ME 2001a An overview of foot conditions in Asian and African elephants. In: Csuti B, Sargent EL and Bechert US (eds) The Elephant's Foot: Prevention and Care of Foot Conditions in Captive Asian and African Elephants pp 3-7. Iowa State University Press: Ames, USA
[7] Buckley, C. (2001). Captive elephant foot care: natural-habitat husbandry techniques. The Elephant's Foot. Csuti, B., Sargent, E. L. & Bechert, U. S. (Eds.). Iowa State University Press, Ames: 53-55.
[8] Fowler ME 2006 Foot disorders. In: Fowler ME and Mikota SK (eds) Biology, Medicine, and Surgery of Elephants pp 217-261. Blackwell Publishing: Ames, USA. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9780470344484.ch20
[9] Veasey, J. 2006. Concepts in the care and welfare of captive elephants. International zoo Yearbook 40: 63-79. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-1090.2006.00063.x
[10] Roocroft, A, and Oosterhuis J. 2001 Foot Care for captive elephants In: Csuti. B. Sargent BL, Bechert US (eds) The Elephant's Foot: Prevention and Care of Foot Conditions in Captive Asian and African Elephants pp 21-52. Iowa State University Press: Ames, USA
[11] Panagiotopoulou O, Pataky TC, Hill Z and Hutchinson JR 2012 Statistical parametric mapping of the regional distribution and ontogenetic scaling of foot pressures during walking in Asian elephants (Elephas maximus). The Journal of Experimental Biology 215: 1584-1593. http://dx.doi.org/10.1242/jeb.065862
[12] Fowler ME 2006 Foot disorders. In: Fowler ME and Mikota SK (eds) Biology, Medicine, and Surgery of Elephants pp 217-261.Blackwell Publishing: Ames, USA. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9780470344484.ch20

A 2019 study[13] involving 638 observations of 122 elephants in 15 tourist camps in Thailand, recorded 61% nail cracks (mostly minor), and 23% wounds (mostly abrasions related to hook use). The authors' assessment of a high wound score decreased by 70% when hooks were not used.

Captive elephants used to provide tourists with rides are fitted with a saddle known as a 'howdah'. The howdah may be left on an elephant throughout the day even when they are not providing rides. This can be very uncomfortable and in some cases the straps holding the saddle in place rub against the elephant's skin, leading to the development of pressure sores. Among observations of elephants for riding, the 2019 study found that 5% of elephants presented with ulcers on the back and chest associated with saddle use.

In poorly managed tourism camps, elephants may be overworked[14], forced to work in environmentally taxing conditions in the heat of the day and in direct sun, often with little access to food and water and with few opportunities to rest.

Riding an elephant in and of itself may not be responsible for significant welfare problems depending on the conditions in which the riding is allowed, it may even provide essential exercise and stimulation[15] for individuals that would otherwise lack such opportunities. But this does not negate the welfare issues identified for elephants outside of the riding periods.

During the times when the elephants are not being used to provide rides or perform tricks, they may be chained for extensive periods. A 2015 study[16] concluded that of 1422 captive elephants at 88 venues in Thailand, 86% were kept on short chains when not being used for tourist activities, 25.6% on a concrete floor, and 34.2% were not allowed direct social contact with other elephants. Elephants are highly social animals with females, calves and youngsters living in close, stable family groups. Deprivation of social contact is likely to cause a significant amount of stress, which can result in the manifestation of behavioural abnormalities.

Stereotypies tend to increase in frequency with increasing restraint of movement and with more barren environments. A survey of 627 elephants at 33 camps in Northern Thailand, using mahout interviews to assess behaviour, found that 25% of animals exhibited stereotypic repetitive movement activities, although the authors interpret that this is likely an underestimate.[17] A 2018 study found that of 53 Asian elephants previously used for riding, street begging, logging, and/or circus-type shows, 74%

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[13] Bansiddhi, P., Nganvongpanit, K., Brown, J.L., Punyapornwithaya, V., Pongsopawijit, P. and Thitaram, C. (2019) Management factors affecting physical health and welfare of tourist camp elephants in Thailand. PeerJ, 7: e6756.

[14] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/destinations/overwork-and-exhaustion-claims-life-of-a-young-elephant-in-sri-lanka/articleshow/71949535.cms#:~:text=the%20travel%20industry.-,In%20a%20recent%20incident%2C%20a%20teenage%20elephant%20named%20Kanakota%20died,renowned%20for%20its%20historic%20monuments.

[15] Bansiddhi P, Brown JL, Khonmee J, Norkaew T, Nganvongpanit K, Punyapornwithaya V, et al. (2019) Management factors affecting adrenal glucocorticoid activity of tourist camp elephants in Thailand and implications for elephant welfare. PLoS ONE 14(10): e0221537. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221537

[16] Schmidt-Burbach, J., Ronfot, D. and Srisangiam, R. (2015) Asian elephant (Elephas maximus), pig-tailed macaque (Macaca nemestrina) and tiger (Panthera tigris) populations at tourism venues in Thailand and aspects of their welfare. PLoS One, 10(9): e0139092.

[17] Vanitha, V., Thiyagesan, K. and Baskaran, N. (2011) Social life of captive Asian elephants (Elephas maximus) in Southern India: Implications for elephant welfare. J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci., 14(1): 42–58.

exhibited at least some symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, including cognitive symptoms, mood disturbances, and overdeveloped avoidance responses.[18]

In some tourism camps food is provided in a single location, such food provisioning may provide elephants with their nutritional needs, but does little to meet their foraging needs. Foraging involves social interaction, collective design making, information gathering and processing as well as walking.[19] These behaviours are prevented when food is simply provisioned at one spot.

To ensure good welfare. elephants must be provided with opportunities to make their own choices, to choose when to forage, explore and socialise with each other. Captive elephants at tourism camps are often deprived of the ability to perform such natural behaviours. They are either confined, tethered, or under the control of the mahout. Most important, they are deprived of choice: choice of behaviour, social encounters, activity, cognitive engagement, foraging, foods, resting times and places – in short, everything with which a free animal occupies him or herself all day is denied and replaced by human-mandated activities. The combination of boredom, frustration and stress can cause severe pathology.[20]

Elephants may not show overt signs of distress. Chronic stress is internalised to engender physiological and psychological changes that can make the animal ill over time. Chronically high levels of cortisol, immune suppression, structural changes in the brain, cognitive dysfunction, heart disease, kidney disease, weakening of the muscle structures, and endocrine disturbances are some of the problems which chronically stressed animals may suffer from. Poor veterinary care and compromised immune function from stress can result in high parasite burdens, nutritional disturbances, viral infections, and wounds that do not heal. Compromised immune condition is relevant not only to the susceptibility, and therefore probability, of elephants acquiring and harbouring infections, either from each other or from humans, but also to the likelihood of them asymptomatically or symptomatically shedding pathogens.[21]

Public Safety

Public health & safety issues are endemic to elephant tourism. Opportunities which allow people to be in close contact with elephants bring with them a substantial safety risk and there are numerous cases of tourists and mahouts being injured[22] and killed[23] by captive elephants.

Research[24] has also identified at least 12 confirmed or potential zoonotic and other transmissible infections relevant to the elephant tourism sector, including tuberculosis,

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[18] Rizzolo, J.B. and Bradshaw, G.A. (2018) Human leisure/ Elephant breakdown: Impacts of tourism on Asian elephants. In: Wild Animals and Leisure. Routledge, England, p113–131.
[19] Veasey JS. Assessing the Psychological Priorities for Optimising Captive Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) Welfare. Animals (Basel). 2019 Dec 23;10(1):39. doi: 10.3390/ani10010039. PMID: 31878085; PMCID: PMC7022842. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31878085/
[20] Kati Loeffler, DVM, PhD, MRCVS, Veterinary Advisor, International Fund for Animal Welfare. Personal communications, 2015
[21] Warwick C, Pilny A, Steedman C, and Grant R. (2023) Elephant tourism: An analysis and recommendations for public health, safety, and animal welfare, Int. J. One Health, 9(2): 49–66 https://www.onehealthjournal.org/Vol.9/No.2/2.pdf
[22] https://vnexpress.net/nu-du-khach-bi-thuong-khi-cuoi-voi-4133322.html
[23] https://vnexpress.net/voi-nha-huc-chet-nguoi-4103414.html
[24] Warwick C, Pilny A, Steedman C, and Grant R. (2023) Elephant tourism: An analysis and recommendations for public health, safety, and animal welfare, Int. J. One Health, 9(2): 49–66 https://www.onehealthjournal.org/Vol.9/No.2/2.pdf

[25] toxoplasmosis and leptospirosis. Elephants are also susceptible to infections transmissible from humans to elephants, notably tuberculosis, with varying degrees from low to high morbidities and mortalities affecting both elephants and humans. The researchers conclude that close contact between humans and elephants under artificial captive conditions should be avoided, due to known pathological concerns.

Wild Capture & Trade

Whilst the majority of elephants in tourism camps are now captive-born, live capture of wild asian elephants has been a major contributing factor in the decline of wild populations over the past century.[26] A 2014 TRAFFIC report documented 81 wild elephants entering the Thai tourist industry between April 2011 and March 2013, 60% of which originated in Myanmar.[27]

It is estimated that for every calf smuggled across Myanmar's border into Thailand, up to five adult elephants, including the calf's mother and other protective family members, may be killed. The forests of Myanmar are one of the last strongholds for the endangered Asian elephant, second only to India. But this trade, in contravention of CITES[28] regulations, is decimating the Myanmar population, estimated at around 2,000 individuals which, at a capture rate of 100 elephants a year would lead to the extinction of Myanmar's wild elephant population in less than 30 years.[29]

Credible 'sanctuary'

Many elephant tourism camps claim to be 'sanctuaries', in some cases this may be because they have 'rescued' elephants from government logging camps where they may have been subjected to conditions leading to poor welfare outcomes. Animals Asia believe that a facility only offers true sanctuary if the following conditions are met;

- Elephants are provided with opportunities to express their natural behaviours with particular emphasis on their ability to socialise with other elephants and to forage within natural habitats where possible.
- Elephants have the choice to live in stable social groups where possible
- Violence is not used in handler-elephant interactions
- Breeding does not takes place unless there is a clear, locally agreed and resourced path to safely return such individuals to the wild
- There is no direct physical contact between tourists and the elephants

Conclusion

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[25] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/threat-of-tuberculosis-transmission-looms-in-captive-elephants?fbclid=IwAR0FuBaGmYd_mkJPFxc1J_2jHQy0q2F2rqmXnJtId_HcLFusorNaZeF6p-8

[26] Lair, R. (1997). Gone Astray: The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity. FAO, Bangkok,Thailand; Leimgruber, P., Senior, B., Aung, M., Songer, M., Mueller, T., Wemmer, C., and Ballou, J. D. (2008). Modelling population viability of captive elephants in Myanmar (Burma): implications for wild populations. Animal Conservation 11: 198–205.

[27] TRAFFIC (2014). An Assessment of the live elephant trade in Thailand, a report by TRAFFIC. https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/an-assessment-of-the-live-elephant-trade-in-thailand/

[28] Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora

[29] Leimgruber, P., Senior, B., Uga, Myint Aung, Songer, M.A., Mueller, T., Wemmer, C. & Ballou, J. (2008) Modelling population viability of captive elephants in Myanmar (Burma)—implications for wild populations. Animal Conservation 11: 198-205.

Elephants do not thrive at elephant tourism camps offering direct public interaction experiences. In the immediate future we hope to see all tourist facilities with elephants

- End elephant performances in circus shows
- End direct elephant contact experiences
- Provide elephants with a safe environment where they can experience significant time periods chain free, in stable social groups and provided with natural foraging opportunities where possible.
- End the breeding and/or acquisition of elephants and allow those at a facility to live out their natural lives.

These transitions can be made with the assistance of the respective governments, captive elephant husbandry specialists, and the tourism industry to switch from promoting close contact 'elephant experiences' to promoting facilities which truly provide elephants with conditions aimed at meeting their complex physical and psychological needs.

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Updated 11th September 2023