

Editorial

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The management of tame elephants is a complicated system that is now evolving fast, especially in the zoos and other institutions in the west. However, in Asian elephant range-countries the changes are very slow.

In a paper published in this issue of *Gajah*, Piers Locke quotes Richard Lair from his book *Gone Astray: "The scientific and technical disciplines of biology, forestry, veterinary medicine, animal husbandry, and law are obviously essential in managing domesticated elephants. Less obviously, the crucial caretaking function performed by mahouts and owners requires the entry of humanities such as social anthropology, as well as more arcane subjects such as comparative religion, social history, linguistics, etc"*. Yes indeed, managing tame elephants are a complex matter.

It has long been a tradition in Asia to capture elephants and then to tame them. It is possible to tame African elephants as well but there is no tradition of capturing and taming elephants in Africa.

The management of captive elephants, especially Asian elephants, has a long history. For instance the people of Sri Lanka have a unique relationship with captive elephants for over 2500 years. In earlier times elephants that were captured in many Asian range states were used in a number of ways: for official occasions and temple ceremonies; to clear jungles; to plough fields for agriculture; in the construction of the large reservoirs and magnificent edifices most of which are in ruins today; for trade with other countries and as gifts to kings and potentates of other countries with which they had friendly relations.

Over the years many methods have been employed to capture elephants from the wild. In one method, tame elephants were used to lure elephants from the wild. In two other methods elephants were caught in snares and by driving them to a pound. Another

method was with the use of a pit. A pit, camouflaged with leaves was dug along one of the jungle paths used by elephants. In more recent times elephant capture was by the stockade or kraal method. The kraal method is where a number of elephants are driven into a stockade.

The taming and training of the wild elephant starts soon after capture. The methods of capture and taming employed traditionally create a lot of trauma. Traditionally the captured elephant is starved, deprived of water for long periods and physically abused till its spirit is broken. It is kept awake for long periods with fires lit close to it to make it uncomfortable. Illegal capture and training is even more cruel in that due to the stealth necessary, the elephant is more stressed.

The elephant is a tractable animal and once tamed can be trained to obey a number of commands in four to six months. The objective of training is to get the elephant to lose its aggression and to carry out certain functions at the command of its keeper (*mahout*). Training also teaches obedience.

The style and quality of tame elephant management has come under much discussion and criticism. Most of the criticism is directed towards the management methods prevalent in the Asian countries. There has been a lot of focus on these methods by elephant managers, zoos and also animal welfare organizations. The criticism was on the poor conditions that elephants lived in, lack of hygienic lodgings, lack of water and insufficient food, lack of exercise, being chained thus restricting their freedom and their being subject to constant illnesses and disease and the inhuman methods of management, thus leading to an unnatural, miserable and confined life for the elephant. Some argue that an elephants place is in the wild and not in captivity and zoos.

The methods of tame elephant management in the Asian countries are those that have been handed down to the keepers for generations. Over the

years these methods have seen little change. However there have been significant changes in management styles in the zoo and institutions in the west. The most significant change has been the change from free-contact to protected-contact management.

Earlier there was only free contact. Free Contact is the conventional and traditional way of dealing with tame elephants. The advantage of direct contact with an elephant lies simply in the good treatment of the elephant. In bathing, foot care, and in the treatment of various injuries and illnesses free contact has an advantage. It also helps the keeper to establish a better relationship with the elephant.

In Protected Contact the keeper works with a strong barrier between himself and the elephant. This helps to keep the elephants, especially the males, more securely and to minimize accidents.

Everyone, including zoo professionals, seems to agree that improvements in the management of tamed elephants are necessary and appropriate. But how can these methods be changed to satisfy, the elephants, their owners, their keepers and the animal welfare critics who find fault but do not seem to be able to offer solutions.

There is an urgent need to have guidelines on the care and management of tame elephants. These guidelines have to be drafted carefully to encompass both the elephant and the training of the keeper. They should address the housing, feeding, health care, working conditions and ethical treatment of elephants. These guidelines should apply to all institutions and persons

keeping elephants including zoos, circuses, temples and private owners and must be enforced stringently so that the elephants are taken care of responsibly.

From a conservation point of view it is very difficult to release tame elephants back to the wild. In Sri Lanka there are two institutions that cater to baby elephants that are orphaned in the jungle. Originally orphaned babies were brought to the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage. Here the baby elephants were looked after with close interaction with humans. Because of this close association with humans these elephants cannot be released back to the jungle. The elephants in Pinnawela have been breeding well and now have been there for up to three generations. However, at the Elephant Transit Home, where orphaned babies are now taken, they are brought up with reduced contact with humans and are released back to the jungle after a few years. Some of the elephants that have been released have adapted very well and in fact one female has had a baby of her own. Others are said to have come into conflict with people, venturing into nearby villages. Some have died and there are rumors that some released elephants have been illegally captured.

The positive aspects of having tame elephants are that they interact closely with people in a number of ways. Working in timber hauling and tourism the elephant is of economic benefit. Elephants taking part in religious and cultural activities are of social benefit. The close association of people and elephants especially in range states, fosters love and caring for elephants among the general public and can help in their conservation.



Elephants in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka
Photo by Palitha Anthony