

In Defence of Elephant Tourism: The Role of Captive Elephants in the 21st Century

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It would be difficult to find a sector of the tourism industry more polarising than Asian elephant tourism. For thousands of years Asian elephants have played both practical and symbolic roles for humanity; shaping human settlements and holding prestigious positions in religious ceremony. But it seems captive elephants and their current role in modern-day society are facing their highest level of scrutiny and criticism yet. Fervent Western values imposed onto countries with vastly different socio-economic and geopolitical contexts are threatening to undo the positive changes that are quietly occurring at many elephant camps. Instant industry reform at all elephant camps is logistically unfeasible; there are over 10,000 captive Asian elephants that need managing. But positive industry change has begun to occur and it's time to acknowledge the progressive changes in attitudes and welfare that are being implemented. Elephant-based tourism and the management of a substantial population of endangered species requires a fresh and holistic approach. The combination of visitor needs and endangered species conservation will always be controversial, but a voice needs to be given to the quiet achievers of the industry, not just the loud and powerful international animal welfare organisations.

It is common for tourists to seek out wildlife encounters while holidaying. Particularly within southeast Asia, there is a compelling desire for visitors to experience elephant-based tourism. Yet it seems barely a month can pass without another media article emerging, describing the appalling conditions captive elephants throughout southeast Asia are kept. Images of captive elephants being 'broken in' by men intent on capitalising of the growing elephant tourism trade, or elephants collapsing from heat exhausting while working in extreme temperatures. While these stories can

be disturbing, and animal cruelty is in no way condoned, the validity or legitimacy of the content is rarely disputed or constructively analysed. Old footage is often recirculated with the advent of another sensational exposé into elephant tourism. Animal rights organisations frequently call for the total ban of all elephant-based tourism and the release of captive elephants into the wild. These images and representations rarely offer a balanced, unbiased view of elephant tourism or the complex nature of Asian elephant ownership and endangered species management. In some cases, reactive and short-sighted boycotts of elephant-based tourism may do more harm than good for captive elephant welfare.

Western tourists in particular hold very strong emotions and values about the ethics surrounding elephant riding, elephant shows and other perceived 'unnatural' behaviours that elephants are 'forced' to participate in. Emotive words such as *fear*, *suffering*, *agony* and *torture* are commonly used throughout articles discussing elephant tourism. Yet the sources and accuracy of these statements are seemingly never questioned or analysed in-depth. Most information regarding elephant tourism is distributed by a handful of animal welfare activist organisations such as World Animal Protection, PETA and IFAW. Rarely offering peer-reviewed substantiation, animal rights organisations all have their own agendas to push and rely on media sensationalism to drive their campaigns and raise donations. Of course, no one wishes to support a harmful industry, and some tour operators have banned selling elephant-based tourism products for fear of supporting cruel practises. While this is commendable, bans and boycotts often have the reverse effect and can actually reduce positive industry changes. The visitors are still visiting the elephant camps. But without consultation and



discourse from leading elephant experts or tour operators, unscrupulous elephant camps have zero incentive to improve elephant care.

Visitor education and evidence-based awareness around what constitutes elephant cruelty is sorely lacking. If done correctly, riding an elephant is not harmful and can actually be beneficial to the elephant. Evidence suggests that the captive elephants participating in riding activities have better body score conditions and general health outcomes than captive elephants that do not undertake riding. Adult Asian elephants are easily capable of carrying 200–300 kg on their back, and benefit from a minimum of eight kilometres of gentle walking each day. If used appropriately the ankus is a guiding tool, not a cruel weapon of torture. Asian elephant experts all agree on these statements, yet years of academic research and evidence is overshadowed by reactive and emotive arguments that perpetuate old stereotypes about the inherent inhuman nature of elephant tourism.

Captive elephants were once commonplace in villages throughout southeast Asia. Used by royalty and peasants alike, elephant relationships are both symbolic and utilitarian. These complicated and intimate connection between human and elephant still have a role in the 21st century. To argue that every community in southeast Asia that keeps elephants must now stop is to sever thousands of years of cultural and religious practise, and deep knowledge about living with these animals. This is not to say that all traditional methods of training and care need to continue – every culture adapts and evolves to modern-day technology, industry and ethical changes.

A constant criticism pitted against elephant tourism is that young calves are separated from their mothers at birth and forced into submission using severe punishment techniques and beatings. While this practice may infrequently occur in remote regions of Thailand, these days the vast majority of calves at elephant camps are born into captivity. Most calves are reared alongside their mother, are allowed to suckle freely, and are naturally weaned from their mother around age four. Neither cow nor calf engage in tourism practises during these years, except for passive walking and feeding. In general, most elephant calves are very spoiled. Calves are trained from birth by experienced national and international mahouts using positive training methodologies (for an example, see H-ELP). The perpetual folklore that all captive calves are whipped, beaten and ‘broken in’ by mahouts is designed to be divisive. This old stereotype creates mistrust between foreigners and locals and polarises the issue further.

While some elephant camps are exploring the possibility of wild reintroductions, the majority of captive elephants are not in the position to be released. Habitat destruction, forest fragmentation, poaching and human-elephant conflict means reintroduction is currently a largely unfeasible option. An intelligent approach to the issue of elephant welfare and management would be to work alongside governments and individual camps to develop and implement high standards of welfare, conservation and breeding for the captive elephants that currently need it.

Yet a growing number of Western tour operators have banned the sale of elephant-based tourism products, citing animal welfare concerns and an unwillingness to support animal cruelty. But as with most things, a total ban rarely produces the



desired result. A boycott on all elephant tourism does not incentivize poor camps to improve their practises. Banning all elephant tourism disempowers local communities; reduces local employment, while ignoring the point that captive elephants rarely have the option of successful reintroduction into the wild. Tour operators are simply hoping that elephant tourism will miraculously fix itself or disappear entirely, without recognising the positive and real impact their own patronage can have in affecting change in struggling communities that may need their continued assistance.

An elephant camp that harms elephants should not be supported. But banning all elephant-based tourism will not improve elephant welfare standards. Banning all elephant-based tourism doesn't reward camps that promote high levels of elephant welfare and conservation strategies. Banning elephant tourism simply perpetuates poor camp conditions. A better strategy would be for tour operators to promote and visit elephant camps that have strong animal welfare procedures, passive elephant viewing, and supporting the camps that engage in sustainable, local community engagement and species conservation. Those poor-quality camps are still open and operating— but they are shut out of the discourse and are given no opportunity or reason to improve their welfare practices. Instead they attract a visitor demographic that may not worry about animal welfare. This does not assist the end goal of providing a better quality of life for captive elephants.

Further, the captive Asian elephant population is relatively large and should be afforded the same conservation goals and outcomes of wild elephant populations. If anything, the captive elephant population is in a unique position as their age, sex and reproductive ability has the potential to be saving reservoirs for species continuity. As wild elephant numbers continue to decline, the captive elephant population can be managed, maintained and even increased. This in itself is a compelling enough reason to ensure that the welfare of captive elephants is protected. To ban elephant tourism is to stop the flow of funding and research to this core elephant population. It



is time to think strategically about what captive elephant management can bring the species as a whole. Calling for a total ban will not improve or increase the number of this endangered species.

Positive changes in elephant-based tourism are already occurring. Accreditation standards for elephant camps are being trialled and implemented throughout camps in southeast Asia. Asian elephant experts have collaborated to create an extensive collection of elephant camp standards; covering issues such as veterinary care, dietary requirements, living shelters, exercise, socialisation, positive reinforcement techniques, mahout training and much more. Camps are volunteering to be assessed and critiqued. This willingness and openness to change should be supported, as these camps are leading the way in elephant welfare, transparency and ensuring a high level of animal welfare is standard practice. Creating a benchmark of targets to meet gives all elephant camps the ability to create changes in areas they may lack knowledge or guidance.

Tourists also have the ability to improve elephant tourism and elephant welfare by supporting elephant camps. There is nothing morally or ethically wrong in wanting to enjoy an elephant experience while on holiday. Visitors should be empowered into making an educated choice and seek out camps that have standards reflecting a high level of elephant care. Banning all tourism does not achieve anything. It simply reinforces stereotypes and does not motivate elephant camp managers to improve their standards.