

Elephant Training in Karnataka

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Abstract. I examined the training methods of captive elephants at Sakrebyle and Dubare Elephant Camps in Karnataka and describe the basic training of captive-born elephants, wild-captured elephants, and training of elephants for tourism. Captive-born elephants adapted faster than wild-captured elephants to training and to cooperate with mahouts. This is likely due to the early training they received, where both mothers and calves formed close associations with single mahouts and were fed by them, making the training process faster and easier..

Introduction

The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), is classified as 'endangered' and exists in a number of fragmented populations in South and Southeast Asia (Williams *et al.* 2020). India is home to an estimated 26,000–28,000 wild elephants, constituting nearly 60% of the global population (Bist 2002). Elephants are of significance in India's religions, myths, historical narratives, and cultural heritage.

The practice of capturing and taming elephants dates back to the Indus Valley Civilisation more than 4,000 years ago (Sukumar 2003). Historically, elephants have been utilised in wars, circuses, logging, and construction (Sukumar 2003). Presently, the primary reason for capturing elephants is human-elephant conflict, where elephants causing crop damage and human fatalities are captured. Additionally, elephants fallen into wells or pits and rescued, orphaned calves and those with health issues are also brought into captivity.

In India, captive elephants are managed under private ownership, temples or the Forest Department. Karnataka hosts eight elephant camps, housing over 100 elephants, run by the State Forest Department. Elephants of both sexes are maintained in forest camps and al-

lowed to forage in surrounding forests. Consequently, captive females in forest camps breed regularly with wild or captive males. Both captive-born and captured elephants undergo training for wildlife monitoring, jungle safaris, and other tourism-related activities.

I investigated the basic training of captured wild elephants and captive-born elephants, and training of elephants for tourism-related activities.

Materials and methods

The study was primarily conducted in the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp, situated in the Shivamogga District of Karnataka, approximately 14 km from Shivamogga city (Fig. 1). Additional observations were done at the Dubare Elephant Camp in Coorg, Karnataka. Sakrebyle Elephant Camp is adjacent to the Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary and is proximal to the Gajanur dam, ensuring a perennial water supply (Fig. 1). It offers training for elephants captured in Karnataka and is managed by the Karnataka Forest Department (Madur 2017). Dubare Elephant Camp is located in Kodagu District, Karnataka, and is managed by Jungle Lodges and Resorts Ltd. an institution, established in 1980 and owned by the Karnataka government to promote wildlife tourism in Karnataka (Harni 2014).

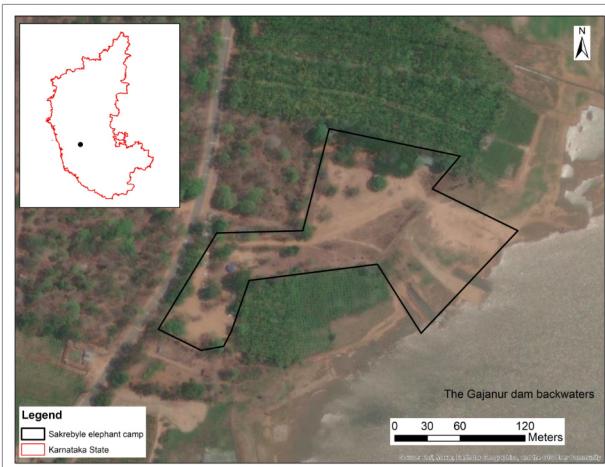


Figure 1. Map of the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp, Karnataka.

Every day from 7:00 am to 11:00 am the Sakrebyle camp elephants perform tourism related activities such as giving blessings, playing football with children, elephant bathing and elephant rides. Then they feed till 12:30 pm and are released to the Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary for foraging and resting till the next day. While in the sanctuary, the right front and back legs are bound with a drag chain, approximately 10 feet long to restrict movement and slow them down.

Mahouts bring the elephants back to the camp around 6:00 am. In the camp, the elephants are scrubbed and bathed by their caretakers. Each elephant has its own space to rest and is fed by its mahouts with a ball consisting of 10 kg of grass, 500 g jaggery, 3 coconuts and mixed grains. Supplements such as vitamins and any prescribed medicines are also mixed into the grass ball.

The study extended from September 2016 to April 2017. Information on camp elephants and elephant training was collected through observations and interviews of staff and mahouts. The Sakrebyle Elephant Camp was visited three days per week, and observations conducted from 9:00 am to 12:00 noon. Information on wild elephant training was obtained from visiting the Dubare Elephant Camp, three days per week, from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm, for a total of eight days in November and December 2016. A total of 48 hours were spent in the Dubare Elephant Camp.

The study on training of captive-born elephants, was based on a 2-year-old female named Hemavati undergoing training during the study period. Hemavati was born in 2014 at Sakrebyle Elephant Camp to a pregnant female elephant, captured due to crop raiding the same year.

The study of tourism activity training was based on a 45-year-old female elephant named Kunti and a 4-year-old male named Arjuna.

Results and discussion

The Sakrebyle Elephant Camp housed 25 elephants comprising of 12 females and 13 males (Table 1). They included elephants that were born at the camp, captured from the wild, and transferred from other captive centres (Table 2). A newborn wild calf was brought to the camp from Yellapur and two elephants, Kapila and Indri aged 80 and 82 years, respectively, died during the study period.

Training of captive-born elephants

Training of captive-born elephants commenced at the age of two years, as young calves demonstrate rapid comprehension and responsiveness to commands. The training focused on instilling a "learning to learn" mindset, using rewards by a trainer.

Mother and calf separation

The initial step was separating the calf from its mother. Firstly, the mother was tethered to a tree using chains, while two to three adult captive elephants were positioned to prevent the

Table 1. Elephants in Sakrebyle Elephant Camp by age and sex.

Age (years)	Male	Female	Total
<10	2	2	4
10–20	4	1	5
20–30	0	2	2
30–40	3	1	4
40–50	2	2	4
50–60	1	1	2
60–70	0	0	0
70–80	0	1	1
Death	1	2	3
Total	13	12	25

Table 2. Detailed information on elephants currently (December 2024) held at the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp.

Name	Sex	Age (years)	Birth	Place of birth	Year of capture	Training duration (months)
Indri*	Female	82	Wild	Kakanakote	1968	20
Kunti	Female	47	Wild	Hassan	2014	16
Kapila*	Female	80	Wild	Kakanakote	1971	21
New tusker	Male	51	Wild	Shettihalli Sanctuary	1974	12
Gange	Female	72	Wild	Kakanakote	1971	18
Geetha	Female	55	Wild	Coorg	1971	20
Bhanumati	Female	42	Wild	Hassan	2014	16
Sagar	Male	32	Wild	Sagar	1978	19
Davangere Ganesha	Male	47	Wild	Assam	2006	Trained in other centre
Ranga**	Male	33	Wild	Shettihalli Sanctuary	unknown	24
Manikanta	Male	37	Wild	Bangalore	unknown	Trained in other centre
Bangalore Ganesha	Male	42	Wild	Anekal	unknown	Trained in other centre
Arjuna	Male	11	Wild	Hassan	2014	16
Bhaskara	Male	11	Wild	Hassan	2014	16
Wild calf	Male	7	Wild	Yellapur	2016	Not trained
Hemavati	Female	9	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	6
Amrutha	Female	23	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	12
Aale	Male	16	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	6
Ragvendra	Male	40	Captive	Mantralaya	unknown	Trained in other centre
Netra	Female	29	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	8
Shiva	Male	8	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	Not trained
Parvati	Female	8	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	Not trained
Surya	Male	13	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	8
Kirana	Female	10	Captive	Sakrebyle	unknown	6
Subhdra (private)	Female	32	Captive	Udupi	unknown	Trained in other centre

*Died in 2017; **Died in 2020 (killed by a wild elephant)

calf from seeing its mother. Subsequently, a rope was fastened around the calf's neck and feet, and it was pulled away from the mother. This process required the assistance of 10–20 people. As a result of the distress caused by the process, the mother and calf experienced difficulty in feeding properly for 2–3 days afterward.

Enclosure

Next, the calf was kept in a 10 x 10 m open enclosure with an earth floor and shaded by trees, where direct contact between the restrained calf and the trainer/mahout was allowed.

Training in enclosure

During training, the calf was loosely tied with ropes to its neck and front feet and trained to sit, sleep, eat, and walk using commands (Table 3). The mahout repeatedly called out a command until the calf showed a positive action towards

the command, sometimes the calf was rewarded with bananas and coconuts when it responded with the correct action. If the calf failed to respond correctly the mahout shouted, scolding the calf. Wooden sticks were used to control the calf's behaviour. The training period was from 7:00 am to 12:00 noon. Afterwards, the calf was allowed to roam freely within the enclosure. The position of the calf was changed every day during training, for cleaning and to obtain positive responses from the calf.

The training usually took 15–20 days. After 15 days, the calf developed trust in its trainer and was comfortable with him. Then, the calf was allowed to roam inside the camp, and training continued outside the enclosure.

Free-ranging in forest

After 20 days of training the calf was allowed to go into the forest for foraging with its mother from noon till the next morning at 6:00 am.

Table 3. Commands used for training elephants in Sakrebyle Elephant Camp.

Command	Action
Maar	To walk
Beth	To sit
Ti re	For lying
Dhalai	To lift the trunk up
Tol	To lift forefeet up
Hadi tol	To lift hind feet up
Up	Lifting both legs up
Kule beth	Backside sitting
Bhar sab	Filling water in the trunk
Fook	Spraying water from the trunk
So maar	To get up after lying
Sarak	Sideways movement
Dhalai maar	To bring down the object using the trunk
Dhal piche	To go backward
So beth	To sit up after lying
Dubb	To dip the whole body inside a water
Dhar	For feeding
Pi	To drink water
Bol	To trumpet

Daily training sessions continued from 8:00 am to 11:00 am for the next six months, during which the calf learned all commands.

Commands used to train elephants

The most common language used for elephant training in India are Hindi and Urdu; however, it differs from one camp to another. Commands used in the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp were in Urdu (Table 3).

Training of wild-caught elephants

Training ranged from three to six months, depending on the elephant's behaviour.

Enclosure

Captured elephants were brought to the camp in a heavy vehicle. They were unloaded, directed and pushed into a kraal using 4 to 5 trained, experienced camp elephants. The kraal was an enclosure made of wooden logs, where the movement of the elephant was restricted. Direct contact between the elephant and mahout was not allowed during this period (Fig. 2). The size of



Figure 2. Kraals used in wild elephant training.

the kraal was 5.2 x 5.3 m and the posts were 3.5 m high. Only one elephant was kept in the kraal at a time, and they remained there for up to three months (Fig. 3). During this period, a designated mahout tried to communicate with the elephant and draw the elephant's attention to his commands.

In the first few days, wild elephants showed aggressive behaviour and tried hard to break out of the enclosure. Elephants were tied inside the kraal with ropes around their neck and legs and



Figure 3. Elephant inside the kraal.

were prevented from breaking out by scaring them by shouting loudly and tapping sticks on the ground to create noise. Sometimes the elephants were stabbed with non-pointed sticks, which could cause wounds when done forcefully and repeatedly. Being unable to break out of the enclosure, the elephant broke down and slowly adjusted to the situation.

Then the elephant trainer started calling the elephant gently and entered the enclosure to provide food and clean the enclosure. With this process, elephants started building trust with the trainer and finally responded positively to training.

After 1–2 months in the enclosure, the elephant was moved out of the enclosure for 2–3 hours daily, under control of other trained elephants. Four to five trained elephants covered the captured elephant from all directions, leaving no chance to escape while roaming outside the enclosure.

Occasionally, during the training, the mahout received injuries such as broken skin, wounds, and fractures due to actions of the elephant. A mahout was designated for each elephant and remained for the whole training process.

Provision of food and water

Food and water were regularly provided two times a day at 11:00 am in the morning and 5:00 pm in the evening to the elephant inside the enclosure. The food comprised 10 kg rice, 10 kg grass, 500 g jaggery, 100 g salt, and three coconuts daily. In addition, a special diet of mixed and boiled grains is given twice a week. Water was provided by a 60 cm deep hole dug in the ground in close proximity to the enclosure, which was accessed by the elephant with the trunk.

After three months, the mahout was able to make direct contact and enter the enclosure to provide food directly to the elephant by hand. This helped to gain the trust of the elephant and develop a close companionship. Bathing of the elephant was done only after it was released from the enclosure.

Habituating elephants to crowds

From the 2nd to the 3rd month, around 12–15 people surround the kraal and make noise by shouting loudly and lighting firecrackers for one hour each day over a span of 30 days. Tourists were allowed to observe wild-caught elephants inside the enclosure facilitating their habituation. The elephants were kept inside the enclosures, and there was no direct contact with people.

Imprinting of elephant's name

Once the elephant is named, a mahout starts using it frequently, which results in the elephant's positive response to it. Repetitive calling of the elephant by its name results in imprinting of its name in the elephant's mind.

Free-ranging in the forest area

After completing training, the elephant was allowed to go to the forest for foraging and resting under the observation of a mahout, who accompanied the elephant for four to five weeks and observed its behaviour. Elephants initially free-ranged inside the forest for 3–4 hours a day. Then, they were allowed to range from 2:00 pm to 6:00 am next morning. The commands and procedure used for further training of wild-caught elephants were similar to captive-born elephants.

Transporting of trained elephants

Following training, elephants were kept in the camp for tourism and entertainment purposes. Trained elephants were transferred to various captive centres according to government requirements. This requires the learning of commands used at different centres. To introduce new commands, the trainer increases the frequency of using the new commands while reducing the usage of old commands.

Drawbacks of training

Occasionally, both elephants and mahouts suffer severe injuries, ranging from minor scratches and wounds to significant fractures,

which can result in fatalities of persons or elephants. Training a pregnant elephant or mother with her calf presents considerable challenges. If an elephant shows any abnormal behaviour such as aggression, stereotypic movements, or ferocity, it undergoes the same training process again, after completing its initial training.

Unnatural behaviour of Bangalore Ganesha

Bangalore-Ganesha, born in 1981 in the Anekal range of Bannerghatta National Park, commenced training at the age of two in the Bannerghatta Elephant Camp. At the age of seven, he killed his mahout. Subsequently, he was relocated to the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp, where he killed his mahout in 1994 and two drivers in the Sakrebyle Elephant Camp. Presently, Bangalore-Ganesha was kept within the forest of Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary, tethered with a single chain 300 ft in length, loosely tied to his front and back left feet, with the other end secured to a tree which restricts mobility, preventing him from exhibiting natural roaming behaviour. Food and water were provided within his reach. To prevent entanglement, the mahout inspects daily to make sure the chain does not have any obstacles. Direct interactions with mahouts and Bangalore Ganesha were avoided due to its unpredictable behaviour.

Training period for elephants

The training duration of wild-caught elephants averaged 17.4 ± 3.25 months, making it longer than that of captive-born elephants, which averaged 10.4 ± 2.33 months (Table 2). These figures refer to general training for handling and management and not tourism-based training.

For captive-born elephants, initial training begins 20 days after the calf was separated from its mother. This initial phase focuses on basic commands and acclimatisation to human interaction. However, comprehensive training continues beyond this period until the elephant was ill-trained to all required commands. Captive-born elephants became trained quicker than wild-caught elephants. This could be attributed to the fact that elephants born in captivity are used to mahouts, as the mother and calf are both



Figure 4. Elephants giving blessing to tourists.

cared for by the same mahout. This continuous human presence fosters familiarity and trust, facilitating more efficient learning. Furthermore, captive-born elephant training begins at two years and younger animals learn more swiftly.

In contrast, wild-caught elephants often have varied training durations due to differences in age and prior experiences. Elephants involved in human-elephant conflict are captured following a government order, hence are of varying age and their training commences immediately post-capture. Older elephants generally require a longer taming period compared to younger ones.

Training of elephants for tourism

The elephants undergo training in various activities including playing football and cricket, elephant riding, giving blessing (Fig. 4), being bathed (Fig. 5), and shaking hands.



Figure 5. Elephant bathing.

Table 4. Commands used in football training.

Commands	Actions
Dhalai maar	To hit a football with the trunk
Dhalai	To lift the trunk up
Pair utha	To lift feet up
Thok	To kick
Thok maar	To kick a football by feet
Le Maar	To kick a football again

Football and cricket training

Elephants received such training at four years of age. During the training they were taught various commands to play football and cricket (Table 4, Fig. 6). The mahout repeatedly used commands for distinct actions, rewarding the elephant with bananas and coconut for executing the correct response. For instance, the mahout demonstrated kicking a football and then tossed the football towards the elephant while repeatedly giving the command “dhalai maar”, which means ‘hit the football with trunk’, until the elephant does it. The mahout would shout and employ a stick to control the elephant if responses were incorrect.

Elephant ride training

The primary attraction of the camp for tourists is riding elephants. Elephants begin ride training at ten years of age. Initially, they were taught to bear loads, approximately 180 kg, secured to their backs with ropes and undergo training to maintain a stationary posture for approximately 3–4 hours, with additional tethering to trees to prevent movement beyond the designated area.

To prepare for elephant rides, the namada (base kept on the elephant) was positioned on the elephant’s back, followed by the placement of the gaddi (cushiony cover) on top of the namada (Fig. 7). Subsequently, a charzama, a carrier designed for people to sit in, was affixed using a rope around the tail, while a chamada (a leather belt aimed at preventing rope-induced wounds) was employed to provide abdominal support.

Once the elephant gets used to bearing heavy loads, an individual rides on its back for approximately 20 minutes around the camp. Over time, the number of riders were gradually increased to four (Fig. 7). Initially, the elephant moves slowly as the load increases, but with time, it adapts and moves freely. The training process typically lasts for about one month.

Conclusions

Elephant training plays a vital role in safeguarding the welfare of individual elephants. Trained elephants can also contribute to human-elephant conflict mitigation by assisting in crop protection, relocating problem elephants, and conducting patrols to deter elephants from encroaching into human settlements. Trained elephants could also be utilised in rescue operations following natural disasters or wildlife-related accidents.

Despite the advantages of training, there are also animal welfare and ethical concerns, and controversies associated with the practice. Training methods such as mother and calf sep-



Figure 6. Football training.



Figure 7. Elephant ride training.

aration may inflict physical and psychological suffering on elephants.

Initiatives are currently being pursued both in India and internationally to advocate for the ethical and compassionate treatment of elephants in captivity. These efforts encompass the establishment of guidelines for elephant management, the enforcement of wildlife protection legislation, and the encouragement of alternative livelihoods for communities reliant on elephants for economic sustenance.

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