

Book Review

“The Asian Elephant in Captivity - A Field Study” by Fred Kurt and Marion E. Garaï
“The Sri Lankan Elephant in Captivity” by Fred Kurt and Marion E. Garaï

Reviewed by Jayantha Jayewardene

In *The Sri Lankan Elephant in Captivity*, Fred Kurt and Marion E. Garaï have outlined how the lives of captive elephants could be improved. It provides data on ecology and behaviour of captive elephants in relation to their wild counterparts. These stem from a recent research project carried out by the authors and colleagues in Sri Lanka together with a number of their studies on wild and captive elephants in Sri Lanka, South India, Myanmar, South Africa and several European zoos and circuses.

The book starts off dealing with body characteristics like weight, shoulder height, depigmentation, ear forms, length and density of hairs and mastication frequencies which are given according to sex and age to define age criteria and social classes.

Captive elephants engaged in forest and conservation work were observed to spend their ‘free’ time in nearby jungles, where they find food, meet tame and wild elephants and reproduce on a more or less regular basis. Contrary to these extensively managed elephants those living in temples and urban areas are kept intensively. They are chained when not used and fed. Social contacts are avoided, reproduction is absent or rare.

Wild and captive elephants differ considerably in many respects, e.g. the diversity of daily activity, diet and behaviour. Differences have been found in the use of tools, such as sticks to scratch the skin or stones to be thrown at adversaries. Wild elephants use a variety of different tools but captive ones use certain tools more often.



Feeding time at the Elephant Transit Home in Udawalawe, Sri Lanka (2007)
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini

The authors have found differences in behaviour and body growth, not only between wild and captive elephants, but also between captive elephants growing up under different living conditions. It seems that orphans slept more and performed ‘weaving’ behaviour more often. The authors consider ‘weaving’ a ritualised searching (repetitive) behaviour, which evolved from permanent rhythmical fore and backwards steps accompanied by searching trunk movements.

The authors believe that long lasting lack of contacts with other elephants lead to the incomplete development of social behaviour and even infanticide. Social isolation was found to be only one of numerous other defects, due to restraints by inadequate conditions in captivity leading as well to retarded body growth and occasionally obesity, malfunction of feet, teeth and ligaments, or low or even absent successful reproduction.

About the authors

Dr. Fred Kurt, member of the AsESG, has taught at the Pedagogic High School of Zurich,

Switzerland, and the University of Veterinary Sciences of Vienna, Austria. For over 40 years Fred Kurt has been engaged in studies of Asian elephants. Between 1967 and 1969 he was field director of the Smithsonian elephant survey in Sri Lanka and between 1997 and 1999 headed a team of 111 students from Sri Lanka and five western countries to study behaviour and ecology of wild and captive Sri Lankan elephants.

Dr. Marion E. Garai, member of the AfESG, She is the founder of the Elephant Management & Owners Association (EMOA) in South Africa and its chairperson. She is also the chairperson of Space for Elephant Foundation (SEF).

The Asian Elephant in Captivity - A Field Study
Fred Kurt and Marion E. Garai (2007)
Cambridge University Press India, New Dehli
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The Sri Lankan Elephant in Captivity
Fred Kurt and Marion E. Garai (2007)
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Elephants bathing in the river at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage in Sri Lanka
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini