

Elephants in Asia, Ethically

**Humane experiences with
Asia's sacred animal**

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2nd Edition

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Mahouts Elephant Foundation



Praise For Elephants in Asia, Ethically

Elephants are highly intelligent and social wild mammals that live in complex family groups made up of multiple generations. They are often used as part of exploitative tourism experiences which frequently separates families and which can severely compromise the welfare of individual animals. The Born Free Foundation is opposed to the keeping of wild animals in captivity, including the use of elephants in exploitative tourism practices. We work around the world, engaging with the tourism industry, individual tour operators, governments and other stakeholders, to improve the quality of life of individual wild animals, through the provision of animal husbandry and care guidance, the sharing of our expertise, and by championing efforts to keep wildlife in the wild.

The practical information contained in this guide will encourage the phasing-out of exploitative practices, generate greater respect and understanding, and inspire compassionate conservation and the greater protection of elephants in the wild.

- Will Travers OBE, President and Interim CEO, **Born Free Foundation**

While tourism can be a means for positive interactions between people and animals, we recognise that some attractions can compromise the welfare of the animals involved. Elephants in tourism bring a number of specific challenges. Raising awareness of animal welfare issues among customers, alongside governments and industry, is critical, and we commend this guide for working to do just this.

- Mark Tanzer, Chief Executive, **ABTA**

It is wonderful to see such a comprehensive, and well-researched guide that details the realities for captive elephants working in the tourism industry. This important and timely guide outlines responsible and ethical criteria for people to understand when making choices about where to visit for the most meaningful, natural and truly educational elephant encounters. The more people support places where elephants are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve, the quicker we will see the necessary changes in the elephant tourism business that will help to ensure a healthier future for captive elephants, and those who care for them.

- Patricia Sims, Co-founder, **World Elephant Day**

People love elephants. But sometimes that means we sacrifice their well-being to get close to them. Educating the public about what elephants in trekking camps and other tourist attractions really go through to become 'tame' is key in shaping a future for these beautiful, fascinating animals.

- Sarah V. Schweig, **The Dodo**

This book is a must read. Not only for all travelers to Asia who want to experience elephants in an ethical manner, but also for everyone interested in these beautiful gentle giants and their welfare. It describes the reality of elephant riding and helps readers find the right kind of elephant experience. A very important book!

- Nick Mertens, Founder, **Pachyderm Magazine**

This is an important guide that everyone should read before visiting an elephant camp. This guide will help travelers understand that their choices, in terms of the activities they enjoy and the camps they visit, have a direct impact on elephant welfare.

- Nicolas Dubrocard, Animal welfare and tourism expert

Many travelers we meet just don't know about the ethical issues surrounding elephant tourism. They see the marketing, the photos, the happy faces of other travelers and just don't realize what the elephants went-and are-going through. I believe that if these same travelers were made aware of the unintended negative consequences of their decisions that they would choose to do something different. That is why this guide is so important to raise awareness of these ethical issues, and to offer positive alternatives.

- Audrey Scott, Co-founder, **Uncornered Market**



Contents

Using This Guide	8
Editor's Note	10
About The Authors	14
Elephant Tourism Today	
The Cost Of An Up-Close Elephant Encounter	20
The Reality Of Elephant Riding	23
What "Ethical" Means To Me	28
Building Awareness In Travelers	33
Mahouts, Then and Now	
What Is A Mahout?	39
Understanding The Mahout's Perspective	42
Mahouts As The New Park Rangers	46
Finding the Right Experience	
How Do I Pick A 'Good' Elephant Camp?	50
Who's Inspecting Elephant Welfare?	54
Tales From The Herd	58
Tales From The Road	60
Imagining a Brighter Future	
Should Elephant Riding Be Illegal?	68
A Shift Toward Wild Elephant Tourism	70
The Future Is In The Forest	72
Resources	
Building A Coalition	76
What Can You Do?	82
Travel Directory	84
Travelling To A Better World	86
Responsible Travel	88
About Horizon Guides	92
Also In This Series	93



Using This Guide

Elephant riding in Asia may seem commonplace and normal, no different to horseback or camel rides. Too few realize that with elephants—an undomesticated animal and endangered species—it's much more complicated. That's why we created this guide.

Unlike traditional guidebooks, this book is intended to help you on a different journey—a journey of realization and understanding of the complex issues surrounding elephants in tourism. We haven't provided a

list of recommended experiences. As publishers, we don't endorse any camps or tours mentioned here. Instead we've simply attempted to provide a guide to the realities to help you make informed decisions and judgements while traveling. Conclusions are up to you!

We've collected a group of the most authoritative, active and outspoken leaders in this field, and through their stories and essays you'll share their wisdom as you choose if and how to include elephants, ethically, in your Asia travels.



Photo: Antoinette van de Water





Editor's Note

Muddy waters: A journey into Asia's elephant tourism

In Chiang Mai, a small city in northern Thailand that I've called home for several months, I'm surrounded by elephants. Not real ones, of course, but images of Asia's sacred animal. They adorn clothing and souvenirs at the night markets. They're the subject of art and statues. They're pictured alongside beaming tourists on shiny travel brochures.

This city is a major gateway to elephant tours in Southeast Asia and

visiting the gentle giants is a big part of why travelers come to northern Thailand.

For fun, I started collecting brochures for all the elephant tour operators I could find. I gathered more than 20, each making claims: "no riding" policies for example; how they served as "care homes"; how they practiced "elephant rescue".

"From what, exactly, are we rescuing these creatures?"

Reading through the glossy trifolds, I found more questions than answers. From what, exactly, are we rescuing

these creatures? And how are we, as travelers, supposed to know which operators are really doing what they claim to be doing?

From those questions, this guidebook was born. Travelers need help navigating the muddy waters of Asian elephant tourism, so we set out to look at this thorny subject, create a guide to the ethical issues, and how to choose tours responsibly.

What a species!

You'll know. As soon as you look an Asian elephant in the eye, you'll just know, as I did, what all the fuss is about. Spend more than a few

minutes interacting with or just observing them, and you'll get it.

You won't be the first to fall under their spell. Human-elephant relationships date back for centuries and elephants are revered in many Asian cultures. Tourists have been drawn to elephant attractions for decades. Truly a "charismatic megafauna," the Asian elephant is for many, a rallying point for wildlife conservation.

I admire Asian elephants for their cognitive prowess, their sentience, and their deep-rooted social bonds. They live for up to 70 years in the wild, organizing themselves in matriarchal

herds of eight to 20 members. Their use of tools and complex problem-solving makes them rare in the animal kingdom. They display self-awareness and empathy. They communicate through infrasound that we humans can't perceive. If they could talk to us, they'd have quite a tale to tell.

How the story goes

The narrative of elephants in Asia usually goes something like this: Once upon a time, hundreds of thousands of Asian elephants roamed free, inhabiting the healthy lush corridors of India and Sri Lanka, down into the jungles of Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. Then along came human encroachment, and things started changing. Fast.

Over the last couple of centuries, Asian elephants have lost huge swaths of their habitat and populations have plummeted, with numbers down into the tens of thousands.

On top of that, elephants were taken into captivity at alarming rates. They became beasts of burden, spirit-broken and forced to drag heavy trees for the logging industry. In Thailand, when commercial logging was banned in 1989, thousands of captive elephants were left "unemployed". Their owners needed to find ways to continue to pay their huge food and care bills (maintaining elephants in captivity is not cheap!). Some took to the streets of Bangkok and other big cities to beg with their elephants. Others entered the burgeoning elephant tourism trade, where the animals were trained harshly to give rides and do tricks for travelers.

"The owners of captive elephants depend on tourism dollars to feed and house their animals."

That brings us to today. Asian elephants have dropped in numbers to the point of endangerment as a species – at risk of extinction within three generations – and a large number live in captivity.

Why can't we simply return them to the wild? Because there's not enough intact, protected wilderness area left. The owners of captive elephants depend on tourism dollars to feed and house their animals. And as long as there's a cash market for more elephants in tourism, they'll continue to be extracted from the wild. The dilemmas are piling up.

Who to ask about the ethics of elephant tourism

In my journey through the landscape of elephant tourism in Asia today, I've met an amazing cast of characters. I've heard from storytelling travel bloggers who have spent anywhere from a few hours to several years with Asian elephants. I've reached out to activists and advocates at non-profit organizations doing inspiring things in the field of elephant conservation and welfare. I've interviewed a lively pair of wildlife tourism inspectors. I've learned from the scientific community about what we know and what we don't. Finally, I've gotten up close and personal with mahouts (traditional elephant handlers, whose voices go largely unheard), and elephants themselves, rescued from cruel pasts and with the scars to prove it.

"Do we insist on up-close, selfie-ready encounters? Or can we move on?"

This book is a collection of their voices, their stories, their perspectives. In these pages, you'll hear from some of the most vocal experts in the field. Spoiler alert: they'll disagree. There are significant research gaps on elephant training methods. Opinions run strong on the ethics of elephant riding and other tour activities. Discourse has become polarised and emotive. While strong Western viewpoints abound, it is harder to find local voices willing to put their heads above the parapet. I've come

to realize there are no clear, tidy answers.

As I sought out who to ask about elephants and tourism here in Asia, I came full circle. We need to ask *ourselves*. The questions are left for us, as travelers and as humans: what kind of elephant experiences will we demand? Do we insist on up-close, selfie-ready encounters? Or can we move on to something a little more in-the-wild, more distant, more hands-off? The decision is yours to make.

Cynthia Ord
July 2016



About The Authors



Antoinette van de Water

Antoinette is the founding director of the Dutch and Thai foundation **Bring the Elephant Home**. In the Netherlands, she worked for Friends of the Earth for five years. In 2006 she moved to Thailand, where she coordinates community-based elephant conservation programs. She has published a book about Thai elephants, won three awards and her work has been featured in an Animal Planet documentary and several publications.



Cynthia Ord

Cynthia's travel habit formed while volunteering at an ecolodge in Guatemala. Since then, she's lived and worked on five continents, earned a master's degree in tourism and environmental economics, and teaches an online course on community-based tourism development. A travel media pro, Cynthia works remotely from faraway places as an editor and co-founder at **Horizon Guides**. She'll hike pretty much anywhere to see rare wildlife. Follow her on Twitter [@cynthiaord](#).



Diana Edelman

Diana Edelman is a responsible elephant tourism expert, freelance writer and the voice behind **d travels 'round**, a travel blog on her adventures as a solo female traveler and expat. In 2012, she relocated to Chiang Mai, Thailand, where she spent nearly three years working with renowned elephant conservationist and founder of Save Elephant Foundation, Lek Chailert. Diana has been featured in Fodor's, BuzzFeed, USA Today, LA Times, Yahoo Travel and other publications. Diana is co-founder of the **Responsible Travel & Tourism Collective**, and also runs **Vegans, Baby**, a site dedicated to making the vegan lifestyle accessible to people in Las Vegas, where she is currently based.



Hayley Lynagh & Jo Hendrickx

Hayley and Jo are founders of **Global Spirit**, a consultancy providing support to tourism companies seeking to evaluate and improve their animal footprint and integrate animal welfare standards into their overall corporate social responsibility approach. Hayley has acquired over 20 years management and business experience within retail, leisure, and publishing. Jo was a former Sustainable Destinations Manager at the Thomas Cook Group, working extensively with destination suppliers to assess performance against sustainability criteria. She holds a Masters Degree in Responsible Tourism Management.



Jakrapob Thaotad

Jakrapob Thaotad was born in Phang-Nga in Southern Thailand. His first degree was in medical technology at the University of Rangsit, Pathum Thani, after which he went to London and graduated with a BSc in Biomedical Science from the University of Greenwich, with post-graduate studies at Queen Mary University of London. After working in the pharmaceutical industry in the UK, he returned to Thailand to follow his passion for elephant welfare and promoting human-elephant interaction. He is the managing director of **Phang Nga Elephant Park**.



Jeremy Scott Foster

Jeremy Scott Foster is a travel writer, photographer, and professional adventurer. His work has been featured by The New York Times, National Geographic, and USA Today. He has led campaigns to raise awareness about wildlife issues from Asian elephants in tourism to rhino conservation in southern Africa. He publishes the adventure travel blog **travelFREAK**.



John Roberts

John Roberts is the director of elephants at the **Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation**. He earned a degree in materials science and engineering at Bath University in the UK. He then pursued his interest in conservation in Northern Australia, followed by five years in Chitwan National Park, Nepal. John is a trustee of the International Trust for Nature Conservation, and has contributed articles to several publications. He writes Anantara's **Elephant Tails** blog. Follow him on Twitter [@elehelp](#).



Monica Wrobel

Monica Wrobel is Head of Conservation at **Elephant Family** and brings 20 years' experience in conservation project management. She has worked on projects to mitigate human-wildlife conflict and empower local communities in land-use decisions. Elephant Family is a small but dynamic NGO that exists to protect the Asian elephant from extinction. Since Elephant Family's inception in 2002, it has funded over 150 projects across 6 countries.



Rebecca Winkler

Rebecca Winkler is the project manager for Mahouts Elephant foundation's "Walking with Elephants" initiative and lives

in Huay Pakkoot village. She spent the past two years researching how elephant tourism affects the lives of elephants and mahouts across Thailand. At Wesleyan University, her thesis focused on addressing elephant tourism and conservation. She's behind the cute ele photos and videos on Mahouts Elephant Foundation's **Facebook** and **Instagram**.



Sarah Blaine

Sarah Blaine is cofounder of **Mahouts Elephant Foundation**, a UK charity working to improve welfare for captive working Asian

elephants. She spends time at the foundation's Thai centre, returning elephants back to their natural habitat in protected forest areas. The project, called "Walking with Elephants" has successfully returned four elephants back to the forest. It is now welcoming tourists to come and watch the elephants (and their mahouts!) living their lives in the forest, free from the demands of work.



Sean Boyle

Sean Boyle is a food and travel writer who is currently traveling full-time with his wife, Jennifer. The couple sold their home in

Southern California in 2013 and have been slowly making their way around the world ever since. They started their blog, **Venturists**, to inspire others to get out of their comfort zone and experience life in a new way. Follow them on **Instagram** and **Twitter**.



Sinchai Jarernbanpot

Sinchai Jarernbanpot is the deputy to the chief of Huay Pakoot village; a remote Karen hill tribe community in northern Thailand. He is a third

generation mahout; working with captive elephants since adolescence has provided him with a wealth of experience. He runs the community elephant project within the village and collaborates with Mahouts Elephant Foundation on their Walking With Elephants project. Sinchai is also studying part time in Chiang Mai for a degree that will help him advocate for a stable future for his community. He divides his time between the village and with his family in Chiang Mai.



Photo: Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation



PART 1

ELEPHANT TOURISM TODAY



The Cost Of An Up-Close Elephant Encounter



Antoinette van de Water
Founding director,
Bring the Elephant Home

Up-close elephant encounters are the highlight of many a visit to Thailand. Even though welfare concerns are increasingly recognized, the explosive mix of demand plus vast profits means this largely unregulated industry continues to boom.

Wise to the demand for ethical tourism, many elephant businesses now claim to offer “sanctuary” to captive elephants but sadly this is not always the case. All too often camps claiming to “save” elephants keep their animals in confined spaces, use harsh training methods, and make no meaningful contribution to the conservation of the species.

The bigger picture

Thanks to the efforts of NGOs and campaigning organisations, responsible tour operators and vocal travel bloggers, travelers are increasingly aware of the need to tread carefully and spend their travel dollars wisely.

There is plenty of good advice on what to ask before visiting an elephant sanctuary, to make sure your visit will contribute not just to the welfare of the elephants at

one particular centre, but also to the conservation of the species as a whole.

More people visiting the few centres with higher welfare standards means more elephants enjoying happier lives. But what about the bigger picture?

“Releasing captive elephants to the wild is challenging and, in the short term, not feasible.”

Of course improving animal welfare standards is an urgent priority in Thailand. However, this alone won’t fix the sad predicament of the Asian elephant’s imminent extinction in the wild. Releasing captive elephants to the wild is challenging and, in the short term, not feasible. So let’s take a look at what we can do to give them lives worth living.

Animal welfare

Elephants have never been domesticated or genetically adapted to living in captivity. True domestication, such as with dogs and horses, involves human intervention over generations – selectively breeding individual animals to manipulate their evolution, honing desired traits and eradicating unwanted characteristics.

This has never happened with elephants. Captive elephants are tamed wild animals in full possession of their unpredictable temperament and behaviour. If we use elephants for entertainment we have to accept the fact that human-elephant interaction will always have a negative impact on elephants, especially when a high



Photo: © Peter Yuen Photography, courtesy of Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation

level of interaction with people is demanded of the animals.

This is an important distinction that runs to the heart of the common argument that “if we can ride horses, why not elephants?” Aside from their very different biology and spine structure, when we ride a horse we’re sitting atop an animal that has been genetically adapted over millennia for that very purpose. For an elephant, no matter how tame, it is a profoundly alien and unnatural experience.

“Centres that offer direct interaction, such as riding, must by definition use fear and pain to control their elephants.”

In order to make close human contact possible, negative reinforcement training based on fear and pain, is used to control the elephants.

Many professional animal trainers say that elephants can be trained without cruelty with the “protected contact” method, where commands are taught through positive reinforcement.

However, elephants tamed this way cannot be used for any activity that involves direct contact with humans. Centres that offer direct interaction, such as riding, must by definition, use fear and pain to control their elephants.

Cruelty-free training techniques could replace traditional methods providing



Elephants used for riding purposes often suffer from spinal damage, internal injuries and wounds resulting from ill-fitting seating

Photo: Jeremy Scott Foster, travelFREAK

The Reality Of Elephant Riding



Diana Edelman
d travels 'round

This is reprinted from Diana's blog, based on her time working with Save Elephant Foundation. See the [full post](#) for an excellent discussion.

I lived in Chiang Mai, one of Thailand's main centres for elephant tourism, for almost three years, working with the Save Elephant Foundation for much of that time. It became an issue very close to my heart, and I regularly receive emails from readers asking about elephant riding. Here are some of the questions I answer most often.

How are captive elephants trained?

One of the most troubling aspects of elephant training is the "spirit-breaking" process, called the *phajaan*.

The Asian elephant is a massive, undomesticated, and potentially dangerous wild animal. Turning one into a submissive, obedient beast of burden is far from easy. The *phajaan* is a method for taming elephants and has been used for centuries to prepare the animals for direct human contact.

It is a centuries-old ritual in which baby elephants are placed in small wooden enclosures, often called the *crush*, since its purpose is to "crush" the animal's spirit. Their feet are tightly bound and they are struck with knives and other sharp implements

on their most sensitive areas, over an extended period of time. This breaks the elephant's independent spirit and instills a fear of humans that will stay with them for a lifetime. In this brutal manner, a wild elephant is tamed (but not domesticated, see p. 20).

"At the end of 'the crush', the ties to their family herd are gone and elephants are slaves to people."

The *phajaan* goes on for days. During this time, they are deprived of sleep, food and water, and are beaten and bloodied until they learn to obey human commands. Many young elephants don't survive. At the end of "the crush", the natural ties to the family herd are gone and the elephant is left completely subservient to its master.

This dirty secret is not widely known by tourists or acknowledged by the mainstream travel industry. Operators, of course, will deny that their elephants have undergone the *phajaan* but in reality, captive elephants working with people have often experienced this torture. It is what many elephants go through before they make it to trekking camps, circuses and zoos.

"That there is still demand for these activities merely indicates to the travel industry that abusing animals for our enjoyment is considered acceptable."

It's dangerous to assume that just because rides are available, even from an apparently legitimate operator,

that there is anything ethical about them. That there is still demand for these activities merely indicates to the travel industry that abusing animals for our enjoyment is considered acceptable.

Are shows, paintings and sports ok?

Perhaps you've seen a video of elephants painting pictures or playing music and thought it was adorable. Elephants are so smart and talented, right? As with riding, these are all profoundly unnatural activities.

Elephant painting can involve some of the most abusive training practices I have ever seen. The elephants are taught to lift and hold up their trunk. The paintbrush is inserted into the elephant's nostril. The mahout then uses the trunk as an extension of his arm and guides the trunk to move as he wishes. Elephants are unable to see right in front of them, so they cannot see the paper on which they are painting. While they move the brush on the canvas, the mahout holds the ear tightly, a sharp nail in his hand stabbing into the earlobe.

Elephants do not paint; they are simply used to make a painting.

What's the best way to experience elephants?

Hands down, the best way to experience elephants is in their natural environment. Sadly, in many parts of Southeast Asia, their natural environment has been encroached upon by logging, mining and, in some cases, conflict.

Safaris, such as Minneriya in Sri Lanka, are one way to see elephants

in nature. But even these safaris verge on the irresponsible as they involve too many vehicles getting too close to the animals. Alternatively, visit and support Southeast Asia's national parks for the chance (but far from guaranteed) to see wild elephants.

See *How Do I Pick a 'Good' Elephant Camp?* (p. 50) for more details on finding the right experience.

How can I help elephants?

Education is key to change. By educating others on the plight of captive elephants you can help make a change.

Set an example. Don't participate in rides or shows, don't buy paintings. Speak out. Sharing photos of people riding elephants sends a message that encourages others to think about animal abuse in terms of "bucket-list" experiences. Don't do it, and challenge your friends when they do.

"Sharing photos of people riding elephants sends a message that encourages others to think about animal abuse in terms of 'bucket-list' experiences."

Instead, take a moment and educate people as to why images like this should not be shared via social media.

Finally, consider supporting some of the organisations trying to do some good for both captive and wild elephants. Many of those organisations are included in this guide.

See *What Can You Do?* (p. 82) for some more practical advice on making a positive impact while abroad.



Photo: Jeremy Scott Foster, travelFREAK

we are all willing to keep a safe and respectful distance from the animals.

To embrace more humane ways of working with elephants we must give up on up-close elephant encounters. But interaction with wildlife sells, so this would be a huge and unlikely concession for the captive elephant industry to make.

As long as the tourist dollars keep flowing, change is highly unlikely to happen anytime soon.

A life worth living

With animal welfare standards in mind, it is easy to conclude that riding elephants or other forced unnatural behavior has a negative effect on the welfare of the animal. But shouldn't we think beyond minimal animal welfare standards and aim for lives worth living?

If you visit captive elephant venues, observe carefully how the elephants are treated. Does the centre stimulate the natural behavior of the elephants or are the elephants forced to entertain visitors?

Elephants have a roaming, grazing lifestyle and require a lot of space; in a non-fragmented forest landscape, the minimum home range for the Asian elephant can reach 300 km². They have complex social structures and bull elephants in musth (mating "heat") are even less suited to captivity.

As long as we have elephants in captivity, their management should be based on the needs of the animals themselves while understanding their biology and behavioral ecology. Captive elephants should at least

live in an environment similar to their natural habitat where human-elephant contact is minimal, or even better, non-existent.

They should be able to roam free and managed by a protected contact system with no restraints or hooks, and where positive reinforcement training is used.

"The danger arises when people share space with elephants and stress the animals with constant demands."

Advocates against free-ranging facilities argue that allowing unrelated elephants to share space is difficult or even dangerous for the elephants. Indeed, introducing a new elephant to a group of unrelated animals in a free-range facility does require careful planning and management.

European zoos have been working with this model for years, with even less space at their disposal than an average elephant camp in Thailand. The danger arises when people share space with the elephants and stress the animals with constant demands.

Removing close contact with elephants is an important concession for all of us – travelers and the industry alike. Only then can tourism contribute to both the welfare of captive elephants and a more long-run vision of conservation for the wild, endangered species.

As with riding, most performances are profoundly unnatural activities



Photo: Born Free Foundation



Photo: Sean Boyle, Venturists

What “Ethical” Means To Me



Jakrapob Thaotad
Managing director,
Phang Nga Elephant
Park

My family has always been an elephant family. We’ve been keeping elephants for over 150 years. We opened our elephant park in Phang Nga Province, north of Phuket, because I care passionately about their welfare and their future. We wanted to bring our elephants home.

The story of the park

When I was living and working abroad in London as a medical scientist, I was sending almost half my salary home to take care of our family’s elephants. I wanted to solve the problem of the high cost of their care, so I started the Phang Nga Elephant Park project. We own some of the elephants and others still belong to their owners, but we can give them a better life here in the jungle away from the awful circus tricks and gimmicks in some of the tourist centers.

Phang Nga Elephant Park is home to 13 adult elephants and one baby,

aged seven months. They are all female, except for an 11-year old male and the baby. Most of them come from logging camps where they had hard lives: one losing an eye, others affected by leg and joint injuries and some with skin diseases.

“The human-elephant bond can be inspiring. Encouraging human-elephant interaction is a fundamental part of our operation.”

The park is their haven. Our mahouts have a very close relationship with their elephants. One elephant, one mahout. They keep a constant eye on their animals, checking their skin, their teeth, their feet and even their poo (my own training helps here). My cousin Lek is the head mahout and has thirty years of experience looking after elephants. It’s amazing just to observe him with his animals, as he watches every movement and looks out for them at all times. The human-elephant bond can be inspiring. Encouraging human-elephant interaction is a fundamental part of our operation.

What “ethical” means to me

On our website we state clearly that we offer “ethical” elephant tours and many visitors ask about what this means. I enjoy these conversations, as they are a chance to explain and sometimes to educate people.

I like to ask our visitors what “ethical” means to them. I try to explain that in my view, ethics is more than just not riding elephants. It also means finding ways to look after them once they’re

in captivity, treating them as family, and not hurting them. We want a world where the elephant is used but never abused.

The saddle, or *howdah*, is a contentious issue. Saddles exist for human comfort and so we transitioned to short bareback rides, along with other activities for interaction. Visitors can swim with the elephants, feed them, walk with them, and try riding bareback if they’d like. We must remember that elephants have been ridden by humans for thousands of years. The problems arise when animals are overworked or poorly protected, so welfare is always paramount at Phang Nga Elephant Park.

Ethics also means travelers making the right choices about the camps they visit and the experiences they enjoy. You can’t compare an hours-long ride in a saddle, on a road among traffic and in the midday sun, to a 20-minute bareback ride to a waterhole in the jungle.

“The use of welfare-focused training methods are the only way to go in the 21st century.”

Some people rightly criticise the old fashioned training methods where elephants were dominated into submission. Our elephants were trained before they arrived, so sadly we don’t know what methods were used. For the next generation of elephants, we are adopting new methods based on positive reinforcement. Education is everything and we are working with other

groups to extend our knowledge and to educate elephant owners that the use of welfare-focused training methods are the only way to go in the 21st century.

We have nothing to hide about how we handle elephants here. I'm happy to explain our approach because it's good for education and transparency. We have an education center in which we are totally open about what we do, why and how we do it. The information is also on our website.

The future of captivity and tourism

In Thailand elephants carry deep spiritual significance. When a baby elephant is born into your home, it is considered great luck. It's our responsibility to care for them. Even when they're returned to the forest they still need protection from wild elephants and farmers.

"Instead of arguing we should be working together to educate tourists and camp owners."

I don't know what the future holds. There is a lot of disagreement between different camps about the best way to care for elephants in tourism, whether riding should be banned, and so on. Instead of arguing we should be working together to educate tourists and camp owners, training mahouts on how look after their animals properly. I want to turn the negatives into positives. We must remember that if elephant camps are pressured to close, thousands of elephants in captivity will have

nowhere to go and nothing to eat. That *will* be a welfare problem.

Even without tourism we would still keep the elephants in our park. I'll do anything to keep them safe and happy. We're currently setting up a non-profit registered in the UK to fund a retirement program for very old elephants.

I'm also setting up a program for people with disabilities to come and visit the elephants. Blind kids, for example, deserve the chance to touch an elephant and feel its presence, even if they cannot see it.

I'll never become a millionaire like this but I don't want to keep expanding. At present we can look after a maximum of 20 elephants but with the planned retirement home for our old ladies this number will increase. The goal is to give each visitor a unique experience with lots of interaction. This is better than a high volume model where each traveler just sits on the elephant for 30 minutes and leaves.

It's possible for life in captivity to be a life worth living, but it takes all of us—tourists and camp owners alike—to step up to the plate.



Photo: © Peter Yuen Photography, courtesy of Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation



Photo: Jeremy Scott Foster, travelFREAK

Building Awareness In Travelers

How one blogger campaigns for better animal tourism



Jeremy Scott Foster
travelFREAK

In late 2013, Jeremy Scott Foster of the popular blog travelFREAK, decided he'd had enough. He'd seen elephant tourism in Thailand at its ugliest. He'd also visited an inspiring elephant sanctuary, and wanted to spread the word.

In his post **Why You Shouldn't Ride Elephants in Thailand**, he wrote:

"Look at me!" she shouted. "Take a picture! Look!"

Her voice screeched with annoying enthusiasm as she flailed her arms in the air. She was a toothy English girl with a smile the size of a quartered honeydew. Straddling the elephant's spine, she widened her eyes, beamed a smile, threw her arms above her head and cast two peace signs into the air. I think, at this moment, she had reached the very pinnacle of her life.

I tried to contain myself.

On one hand, this girl was traveling to new places, learning exciting things about the world, experiencing the globe and, hopefully, a new culture. On the other hand, she was contributing to a very cruel facet of tourism in Thailand.

In her defense, she probably didn't know any better. Not that ignorance is an excuse, but it's allowable.

I ask myself, where are the ethics in tourism anymore? Where are the real travelers? Is the world nothing more than everybody's personal amusement park?

Jeremy channeled his frustration into something positive, something powerful. As a travel blogger with a number of high-profile blogger friends, he was in a great position to address the ignorance about exploitative elephant tourism in Asia.

Under his leadership, more than 20 travel bloggers banded together in December 2014 in a grassroots charity project to support the Save Elephant Foundation, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. They used their blogs to leverage awareness about responsible tourism and to raise donations for Elephant Nature Park.

Today, over a year later, Jeremy has had a chance to reflect on the campaign and answer a few questions about it.

What made you take action on elephants in tourism?

Jeremy: I'll be honest — it wasn't just the elephants. I had seen the ugly side of tourism, the side that most people acknowledge but few talk about. It's rife in Southeast Asia, yet for some reason, a lot of people turn a blind eye.

In many parts of the world, tourism is exploitative. Sex trafficking, child beggars, rhino poaching, and elephant riding are all real-life examples.

Many travelers don't take into account the impact that their presence and their dollars have on local communities and, in many cases, local wildlife. When we're traveling, we spend a little bit more frivolously. It's exciting, and a vacation is what so many people save up for. I was the same way for many years.

But then I realized that, every single day, as consumers, we vote in support of exploitation by spending money in certain places. Every dollar spent is a vote in support of those business practices. And in Thailand, so many tourists vote in favor of elephant abuse, likely not even realizing it.

How did your campaign go?

Jeremy: As bloggers, we are in the unique position of having a platform to reach hundreds of thousands of people every month. And with that, it's our duty as people to utilize it for good. I started Travelers Building Change as a grassroots charity project, and over the course of a couple years, we raised over \$20,000 for a couple of different causes.

Our donation to the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, Thailand, helped to buy a new portion of land for rescued elephants to live on. The sanctuary there is just that — a safe haven for abused elephants who have

been rescued. At the ENP, they can live out the rest of their lives in peace.

But elephants are big, and they need land. When the ENP ran out of space, our final donation helped them to buy more, literally giving these elephants a home, where they'll be safe for many generations to come.

In your opinion, is awareness on the rise? Is it pushing the industry in a more positive direction?

Jeremy: I do think awareness is on the rise, but I think ignorance is on the rise too. It's easier to ignore elephant abuse than it is to care about it. Vacation is an escape, and when

people are on vacation, the last thing they want to think about is what it means to be "responsible".

When I was trekking in northern Thailand, I actually ended up at an elephant camp with about 12 other travelers. Before arriving, I spoke with the group to make sure each person understood what they were doing, and how they were contributing to the abuse of these animals.

With the exception of one girl, every single person decided to ride the elephants anyway.

The one girl who didn't ride is now my girlfriend.



Photo: Jeremy Scott Foster, travelFREAK



PART 2

MAHOUTS, THEN AND NOW



Photo: Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation

What Is A Mahout?

The human side of elephant husbandry



*Sarah Blaine
& Rebecca
Winkler*
**Mahouts
Elephant
Foundation**

The word “mahout” is often misunderstood and misused.

The term derives from Hindi and means elephant keeper. In Thai the term is *kwan chang* and is often translated as “one who walks with an elephant”.

Traditionally, the role of a mahout passes down patrilineally along with ownership of a family’s elephants. Being a mahout was never very profitable: they were probably on a par with farmers. But historically mahouts were held in high esteem because they and their elephants were useful in times of war.

Again, traditionally, a mahout usually owned his elephant and typically worked with a single animal throughout its life.

“The lifelong bond between keepers and creatures is becoming a thing of the past.”

Today, the picture is very different. Like the issues facing elephants in Thailand, the issues facing mahouts have changed drastically with the evolution of the tourism industry. Many mahouts are members of indigenous groups or immigrants

from Myanmar, working more as low-status day laborers rather than as traditional mahouts, and the lifelong bond between keeper and creature is becoming a thing of the past.

The logging ban of 1989 and its fallout

In response to devastating flash floods caused by unregulated deforestation, the Thai government passed legislation banning all private logging. The ban was not based on concern for elephants and the ban made no allowance for the 2,000 elephants and mahouts in the industry. Many families were left in dire need of funds to feed and maintain their elephants.

With few options, many elephant owners either travelled across the border to Myanmar, where logging was still legal, or brought their elephants to cities where they would beg for money from tourists.

The problem of “unemployed” elephants is often highlighted by those in the elephant tourism industry but this narrative fails to address fully the issues facing mahouts and elephants. The labor standards we use to analyze the human workplace should not be a measure of elephant welfare, and discussing “elephant employment” can conflate these two distinct ideas.

“Be careful of anthropomorphizing elephants into human laborers and animalizing human workers.”

Mahouts are the ones employed in the elephant tourism industry, not

elephants. It is always important to examine the rhetoric used to discuss elephants and mahouts and be careful of anthropomorphizing elephants into human laborers, and animalizing human workers.

Mahouts and elephant tourism today

Since 1989 Thailand's tourism industry has grown beyond all recognition. While tourist arrivals boomed (in 2013 Bangkok was the most visited city in the world), new solutions for unemployed mahouts and their elephants emerged.

Tourism, more specifically ecotourism, offered much better solutions for elephant welfare and mahout economic security than begging and illegal logging. But with little infrastructure or regulation in

place, the emerging industry was ripe for exploitation.

The industry is structured so that mahouts are underpaid, overworked, and left without options. Although many own their elephants and do all the hard labor, camps still take the vast majority of their income, leaving the mahouts to live on tips.

Life today is hard for mahouts and their families. They can be left with no option other than to take the family's elephant to the city or tourist area to earn a living. They often have young children and wives whom they may only see once a year.

They are often more aware than anyone that conditions are incredibly harsh in the tourist camps. Elephants have to be restrained on short chains and suffer a poor, unvaried diet.



Photo: © Peter Yuen Photography, courtesy of Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation

The animals have virtually no social interaction and cannot thrive.

The mahouts have to work long hours to supplement poor salaries with tips and often live in very basic shacks in the camps with poor hygiene facilities and sometimes even with no running water.

"Bad reputations turn into stereotypes. All mahouts get labelled as forceful and abusive."

To make matters worse, unscrupulous camps will often employ the cheapest labor possible. They hire young and inexperienced men who are often frightened of the animals in their care, which easily leads to abuse and accidents. These men are not "true" mahouts with generations of knowledge behind them and, sadly, bad reputations turn into stereotypes. All mahouts get labelled as forceful and abusive.

A new model for elephant tourism

At Mahout Elephant Foundation we are proud to work with the most incredible mahouts. When we ask them what a good mahout is, their answer is simple: "someone with a good heart". The mahouts in our community come from generations-long lineages of caring for elephants. They are members of a Karen hill tribe from northern Thailand, and the compassion and understanding they have of their elephants is at a level few of us can hope to understand. The animals are considered family members.

Working collaboratively we are helping to return elephants from a life of work back to an area of protected forest. Here the elephants can be themselves, foraging freely, bathing in rivers, mud bathing and dusting. Most importantly, they are able once again to live in social family groups and make decisions as a herd.



Photo: Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation



True mahouts build lifelong bonds with their animals

Understanding The Mahout's Perspective



*Cynthia Ord
with Sinchai
Jarernbanpot*

Mahouts are perhaps the most misunderstood and overlooked part of the complex picture of Asian elephants in tourism.

The livelihood of elephant-keeping requires an intense amount of caregiving and attachment. Although mahouts once played an important military role, these days their social status is low. To quote scholar Richard Lair, "Socially, Asian societies accord great theoretical respect to the elephant but very little to the mahout, who remains a sort of invisible man."

To meet a mahout, I took a visit to **Mahout Elephant Foundation's** elephant tourism project in the Karen hill tribe village of Huay Pakkoot where captive elephants (and their

mahouts) are freed from tourism camp work and instead roam in a forest habitat. In the village, which is surrounded by forest, I was granted a unique opportunity to interview Sinchai Jarernbanpot, a third-generation mahout, about his livelihood.

Tell me about the elephants in your family. How many are there?

Sinchai: Many! Among the extended family, we own 12 elephants. Each elephant needs its own mahout. Sometimes the owners don't have time, so they hire mahouts. In our family, eight live near the village here, and four are still in camps. They're not trekking camps, though. They're more alternative "mahout training" camps where tourists learn mahout skills. It's better than giving rides, but still, there's no chance for the elephants to go out into the forest. They just eat cut grass.

What does an elephant bring to the family?

Sinchai: Well, that has changed over time. In the past, we had only two elephants, bought from a nearby village. Ownership was a way to show off, display power, and gain an income from logging. Then, logging became illegal and many owner mahouts moved to Burma where it was still allowed. Then, gradually, as elephant tourism became more popular, mahouts moved to trekking camps with their elephants. Today, around half the camps don't allow tourists to ride.

In the bigger camps around Chiang Mai, they will buy the elephants from mahouts. But in the Karen tribe we don't just sell them off. We will only go to camps that will allow us to stay with the elephant.

Today, owning elephants is not so much a sign of power. Instead, it's a job that isn't farming and doesn't harm the forest like farming does. The forest and the elephants support each other.

What does an elephant cost the family?

Sinchai: If the owner can be the mahout, and if the elephant is free to forage in the forest for the food it needs, then it costs nothing. Otherwise, owners have to hire a mahout and send both to a camp. The salary needs to be enough for the mahout to live on, otherwise he will leave. To support an elephant and a mahout at a camp, the cost is around 10,000 baht (\$285) per month.

For example, I own my elephant Thom Kam, but I didn't buy her. She was born into our family—we owned her mother too. Now, the foundation pays my salary so we don't have to work at a camp, and Thom Kam gets all her food from the forest.

Describe a typical day for a mahout.

Sinchai: Here, with the foundation project, we look out for the elephant's health, and we make sure they don't get too close to the farms. We bring elephants to better areas to forage, and we observe their behavior. If their ears and tails are wagging, then that's a good sign.

How does one become a mahout? At what age?

Sinchai: It depends on the intention of the boy. My father Manit started at age 10. To be a mahout, you have to really love elephants, because you're stuck with them the whole time! You have to go out, rain or shine, every day, and sometimes even at night to watch over them.

I trained every weekend, starting at age 12. Then, at age 18 after completing school, I became a full-time mahout near Chiang Mai. Today, my dad is still a full-time mahout, but I split my time between this and studying in Chiang Mai, where my family lives.

What is the best thing about being a mahout?

Sinchai: I'd say it's the relationship I form with the elephant. It's like a lifelong friend or a good companion. Sometimes I even talk to Thom Kam. I tell her all sorts of things!

What's the hardest part of the job?

Sinchai: It's hard because we can't spend much time with our families. My father Manit had to leave the family for a year to go work in logging in Burma with his elephant. Sometimes, though, mahouts quit the profession once they have families, since it's so hard to do both.

What do you think is the best life for mahouts and their captive elephants?

Sinchai: The best thing would be to leave elephants in the forest for long periods of time. Like in the past, during logging, when elephants were

free to forage and roam for certain months of the year.

Mahouts have so many skills! What can tourists learn from you?

Sinchai: We know how to track an elephant and identify each one by its footprints and dung. We know why they eat what they eat. For example, sometimes they eat special bark, roots, or even soil to help with stomach problems and get worms out of their system. In the camps, they have to eat soil more often. You can always see the worms come out the other end!

As far as forest survival skills, we know how to catch frogs, fish, mice, and birds to roast. We just bring some rice and chili, and find the rest for ourselves. With forest cooking, we aren't into details. Just catch, cook, mix with chili, and eat!

Sinchai's son is three years old and lives in the city of Chiang Mai. He and mom make the four-hour drive to visit the village often. Will his son become a mahout someday? Only time will tell, but chances are slim for this under-recognized and fast-changing livelihood.



Photo: Sarah Blaine, Mahouts Elephant Foundation

Mahouts As The New Park Rangers

A forest-protection role for mahouts in Sumatra



Monica Wrobel
Head of Conservation,
Elephant Family

The number of Asian elephants in captivity is a major issue for the species' welfare and conservation. In Sumatra, the decades-long history of elephant husbandry has taken a recent turn for the better.

In Sumatra during the 1980s and 90s, a government program to reduce elephant crop raiding led to "problem" wild elephants being captured. The program employed these captured elephants in labor and tourism.

That practice stopped several years ago but the legacy of that time has resulted in a population of hundreds of captive elephants that require feeding, stimulation and veterinary care. It has also produced a cadre of professionally trained mahouts. Together, mahouts and their captive elephants are seeking alternatives to heavy labor and harsh tourist camps.

Peacekeeping mahouts

Today, Sumatra's captive elephants and their mahouts can play a role patrolling, protecting forests, and keeping wild elephants away from villages. Protecting wild elephants from conflict with humans is vital, as Sumatran elephants are officially classified as a critically

endangered subspecies with as few as 1,500 left in the wild.

"The mahouts understand how intelligent and social elephants are. They become cultural advocates for the animals."

Part of this new role is veterinary assistance in the bush. When a wild elephant is injured from stepping into illegal wire snare traps, wildlife veterinarians can get close enough to sedate and treat it because the captive elephants can keep the rest of the wild herd away during the procedure.

Thanks to years of close interaction with elephants, mahouts understand how intelligent and social they are, and become cultural advocates for the animals, fighting misconceptions among Sumatrans and challenging assumptions that elephants are just the same as cattle. One young man in particular became inspired to train as a mahout for the government when, as a volunteer back in 2004 after the devastating tsunami in Aceh, northwest Sumatra, he saw the strength and delicacy of the elephants as they were used to help remove debris and rescue injured people.

The few hundred Sumatran elephants remaining in captivity deserve the best possible life and care. Meanwhile, the need to protect the forests of Sumatra and to guard against human-elephant conflict is as great as ever. Professional mahouts and their elephants are repurposing their skills to become habitat keepers and forest protectors. It's a win-win model that considers both the welfare of the captive animals and the conservation of the wild species.





PART 3

FINDING THE RIGHT EXPERIENCE

All elephants are wild and naturally unpredictable; direct contact is discouraged by many experts



Photo: Elephant Jungle Sanctuary

How Do I Pick A ‘Good’ Elephant Camp?



John Roberts
Director,
**Golden Triangle
Asian Elephant
Foundation**

In an ideal world all tourist camps would be run to the highest ethical standards – avoiding riding and unnatural interactions, investing in welfare for captive elephants and conservation for those in the wild, working

sensitively with ancient communities and traditions, and all the other factors that make a “good” elephant camp.

Trekking feeds elephants and mahouts

But the hard reality is that this model may not be a short-term answer for all of Thailand’s elephants. That’s because there’s a downside to this approach: low impact tourism is expensive. It means having few guests but charging a lot.

“Low impact tourism is expensive. It means having few guests but charging a lot.”

Those of us following this approach care for just 200 of Thailand’s (officially registered) 4,614 elephants.

It’s clear that we also need a positive solution for mass tourism in order to cater for the staggering 1.1m tonnes of fodder the country’s elephants need every day, not to mention the livelihoods of around 4,000 mahouts and their families.

This is a bold assertion. If we must accept the existence of elephant camps (at least in the immediate term), it is up to the industry and individual travelers to support operations that don’t cause suffering to their elephants. But how can we know which are which?

Research fills the knowledge gaps

Luckily, science is beginning to show the way with two peer-reviewed papers that can help travelers ask the right questions.

“There is no evidence that trekking in the saddle is inherently harmful.”

The **first paper** “Risk Factors for Saddle-Related Skin Lesions on Elephants used in the Tourism Industry in Thailand” is published in Bio Med Central. Its findings are important because they confirm that there is no evidence that trekking in the saddle is inherently harmful.

The paper's conclusions were that trekking elephants need:

- Proper monitoring by professional veterinarians, especially for older animals;
- Fewer than six working hours per day;
- Use of appropriate padding – specifically avoiding rice sacks.

This is useful as it gives us three specific questions we can all ask before visiting a trekking camp.

Where TripAdvisor and animal welfare clash

The **second paper**, "The Customer Isn't Always Right – Conservation and Animal Welfare Implications of the Increasing Demand for Wildlife Tourism" was published by Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) in the Plos One journal.

The purpose was to compare TripAdvisor ratings against measured conservation and welfare standards. It found that the majority of reviews tended to focus on the travel experiences and often overlooked the condition and treatment of the elephants.

"You shouldn't take a TripAdvisor impression of conservation or welfare excellence."

The point is that online reviewers aren't experts and we shouldn't put much stock in a TripAdvisor review of welfare standards. Consumer reviews mostly reflect a facility's ability to deliver the experience that guests expect.

But if not TripAdvisor, where should we look? Again, the research can help. WildCRU employed longstanding criteria that looked at conservation and welfare aspects of assessment – the "five freedoms" of animal welfare:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst;
2. Freedom from discomfort;
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease;
4. Freedom to behave normally;
5. Freedom from fear and distress.

These basic criteria give travelers some guidelines to help make up their own minds before taking part in a saddled ride, a bareback ride, a walkalong in the jungle, a bath in the river, or any kind of elephant interaction.

Problematic price tags

A final question that is almost totally overlooked is the buying and trading of elephants. Even sanctuaries that are proactive about welfare standards ought to be aware of the threats to the species in the wild – and have policies never to buy elephants, which can contribute to wild capture.

The most important questions to ask might be: Where did the elephants come from? How did they arrive at this sanctuary or camp? If you're not satisfied with the answer it may be wise to take your money elsewhere.



Photo: Marcel Biesdorf © 123RF.com

Who's Inspecting Elephant Welfare?



**Hayley Lynagh
& Jo Hendrickx**
Co-founders,
Global Spirit

Western travelers often make optimistic assumptions about their host country's animal welfare

laws. The Thai government *must* be making progress towards more humane elephant tourism, right?

Not necessarily. In Thailand, for example, wild elephants are protected as endangered species, but captive elephants have the same legal status as cattle – “working livestock”. Meanwhile, bribes and corruption make illegal trafficking of elephant calves across borders commonplace.

So in the absence of a good legal framework or an international certification scheme, who *is* looking out for captive elephants working in tourism?

Roots of Global Spirit

Combining our decades-long experience in sustainable tourism and business consultancy we founded Global Spirit, a consulting group based in the UK that helps tourism

businesses to evaluate and improve their “animal footprint”.

In this capacity we travel the world to assess the conditions of captive animals in tourism. From swimming with dolphins in the Caribbean to elephant riding camps in Asia, we've seen it all.

The problem with captive Asian elephants goes far beyond whether they're giving rides to tourists. People have become fixated on elephant



riding being an issue, but it's not just the activity that's the problem; it's how the animals are kept and their general welfare that needs to be the priority.

Complex criteria

In our audits we work through a pages-long set of criteria, making an assessment against the Global Welfare Guidance for Animals In Tourism, and the additional Elephants in Captive Environments guidelines developed by the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) and the Born Free Foundation.

We look at basic welfare issues such as access to food, water, shade and suitable enclosures, as well as licensing and documentation, correct training and whether the elephants are kept in social groups as they would naturally live in the wild. We also look at the human side of the welfare picture, from societal norms and cultural practices to mahout livelihoods and the economics of owning elephants. When it comes to practical solutions, it's essential we factor in the commercial scenarios.

Admittedly, universal criteria for animal welfare is a hot topic, where disagreement runs rife. The spirit-breaking of baby elephants, known as *phajaan*, is perhaps the most divisive practice of all. In recent years, horrifying *phajaan* videos have been released online and used as focal points for anti-riding campaigns.

“Universal criteria for animal welfare is a hot topic, where disagreement runs rife.”

Although these videos are certainly distressing to watch, our relationships and experience on the ground points to a more nuanced picture. Our audits suggest that the *phajaan* is becoming less widespread and that training with extreme violence is more the exception than the norm.

Amid these emotive campaigns the general public doesn't get to hear all sides. It's easy to pass judgement but there are lots of other factors to take into account, such as the cultural and religious context of owning elephants, and the reasons why these elephants are now being used in tourism.

We have to look for where there is most room for improvement. In the tough case of Asian elephants, it almost always comes down to space. For camps that have met around 60 per cent of the minimum requirements, the amount of land per elephant is usually the pain point. But we're optimistic. If we can help them resolve their roaming space issues, we can maybe get them up to 85 or even 90 per cent.

No stamp of approval

It's not as simple as a rubber stamp at this stage. While providing useful consumer-facing information and guidance is important, this has to be done in a careful and considered way. Simply turning our backs on an elephant camp or an activity is not going to achieve improved standards of welfare for the elephants. The loss in business from tourists is more likely to cause hardship and result in less of an ability to provide the care that these animals need.

We're currently focused on working with multinational tour operators in starting to assess the elephant camps against the ABTA criteria. This is the first step to achieving improvements because these tour operators are in a strong position of influence. They can encourage and support their local suppliers (the owners of the elephant camps) to begin to make positive changes.

We are developing an idea to provide a Global Spirit 'stamp' to identify which animal attractions have been audited and have committed to improvement, so watch out for our logo in the future.

“The audits are constructed in a way that encourages continual improvement.”

It's unlikely that any elephant camp will achieve 100 per cent straight away. The audits are constructed in a way that encourages continual improvement..

By going out into the field to audit, and by providing elephant attractions with actionable steps toward positive change, we can begin to apply much-needed standards for animals in tourism.



Photo: Diana Edelman



Photo: Save Elephant Foundation

Tales From The Herd

Three heart-warming elephant rescue stories

At some of the more forward-thinking elephant experiences in Southeast Asia, storytelling is the new “ride”. At sanctuaries and rescue parks, you’ll meet the elephants and hear tales about their lives. Rather than saddling them up for you to mount, their keepers will regale you with details about personalities and the herd’s social dynamics as you feed them bananas and perhaps take a walk with them for a mud bath in the river.

Here are three such stories – elephant biographies – from organizations working tirelessly at ground level to identify and rescue pachyderms in need. Check with the organization about the chance to

adopt these brave animals and make their new life a reality for others.

In these histories are common themes of work in the logging industry (both legal and illegal), injuries, forced breeding, circus performing, street begging, and giving rides to tourists in trekking camps, but finishing with a happier ending. Meet some of the lucky ones.

Dok Ngeon (Silver Flower)

Bring the Elephant Home, Thailand

- Born: 1998 in Surin
- Rescued: December 14, 2005

Dok Ngeon was the first elephant rescued by Bring the Elephant Home. Dok Ngeon was found backstage at an elephant festival in Surin. She was screaming, looked very stressed, felt cold and was shaking. The mahout, who didn’t seem to care much about her, said she was from Surin and had been begging in Pattaya.

Now she was back in training to learn new tricks such as playing a mouth harmonica and to prepare for elephant riding. She was covered with scars and fresh wounds. After the festival, workers from Bring the Elephant Home visited Dok Ngeon in her village. In the full heat of the sun she was found standing with her feet chained together and wooden pins behind her ears.

Fortunately this was the end of her ordeal and she was rescued by an elephant sanctuary. Upon arrival Dok Ngeon was scared of elephants and people but she was taken under the wing of another elephant, Sri Nuan, who protected Dok Ngeon, made her feel safe, and welcomed her into her new family. It took six months for Dok Ngeon to settle and revert to being a playful juvenile.

In July 2009, Dok Ngeon gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Chang Yim (Smiling Elephant) and in April 2013 she gave birth to a baby girl, Dok Mai.

Dok Ngeon lives in a big herd now, with many aunties to protect the young ones, and playful cousins. Sri Nuan and Dok Ngeon are still best friends, and are never far from each other’s side.

Dok Mai (Queen of the Flowers)

Bring the Elephant Home, Thailand

- Born in 2013 at Elephant Nature Park
- Daughter of Dok Ngeon

On 6 April 2013 the elephants at the sanctuary became restless and our staff set out to uncover the problem. They quickly saw that Dok Ngeon

was the cause of the fuss – she was in labor and it wouldn’t be long until the baby came. She was moved to a different shelter where she could bring her baby into the world in peace. At 7:45pm, Dok Ngeon gave birth to another beautiful baby. The baby was named Dok Mai, which means Queen of the Flowers. She is adored by her aunts, and, as her name suggests, is treated like royalty.

Dok Mai will never have to undergo violent training or learn tricks to entertain people. She will live a long and happy life at the Elephant Nature Park.

Khamkoon (To Move Forward)

Surin Project, Thailand

- Born in 2009
- Rescued 2012

Khamkoon was born in an elephant camp in Phuket. As a baby she was trained to perform in elephant shows and to beg. As she grew older her owner wanted to use her for elephant rides. Fortunately for her, she was too small and so was sold to the Elephant Study Center in November 2012.

Khamkoon joined The Surin Project in January 2013. She is still quite nervous among the big herd and she usually stays alone with her mahout.

The name Khamkoon means “to move forward” and it is hoped that with time her confidence will grow and that she’ll begin to mix with the rest of the herd.



Photo: Amanda Williams

Tales From The Road

Travel bloggers share their first-hand experiences

In this collection of first-hand anecdotes, we hear from bloggers who've been shaken up by elephant rides, moved by heartwarming sanctuary visits, and put to work as volunteers on a mission.

Elephant Riding Regrets

Chris Walker-Bush,
Aussie on the Road

As our time in Thailand came to a close, we decided to take a day-long adventure tour that would feature white water rafting, cycling, and (I'm ashamed to admit) the elephant ride that seems to have become an integral part of any visit to Southeast Asia.

At the time I had some awareness of animal cruelty in Thailand, but put it to the back of my mind as I tried my best to balance experiencing Thailand

without spending a small fortune in the process.

We both immediately regretted our decision. As we moved slowly alongside the river atop this majestic, beautiful elephant, Heather openly wept at the way the handlers seemed to take pleasure in randomly beating it.

It was a jarring experience. It's one thing to hear about animal cruelty and think "Oh, but that's just a travel horror tale", and another thing to see it first-hand and realize that all those stories we'd read and heard, about the horrendous ways in which the beautiful animals are "trained", were true.

Laurine Robb-Horning,
It's One World Travel

When I found myself in Laos with an opportunity to spend some more time with elephants, I jumped at it. Despite checking that the elephants were well and happy – having been "rescued" from a life of logging – I was quickly disappointed.

My elephant for the day was chained under a thatched shelter and her

eyes were hollow, empty, dark, dead. Dismissing my initial judgment I bought some bananas to feed her. Again, I was taken aback by the emptiness of her acceptance. Where was the connection? Where was the joy? "I must just be a silly tourist." I chastised myself. "She's an adult. She doesn't know me. She is allowed to be cold and distant."

When the tour leader led me to a platform to reach her back I recoiled at the chunky wooden bench strapped to her back. Don't worry, I was told, she was strong, it would not hurt her. She's an elephant right?

"Of course she can manage it," I told myself against the screaming in my head.

I put my foot out tentatively, onto her back and sat down on the bench – and immediately got up again and, in floods of tears, jumped off. I couldn't do it. This seemed so wrong. So unnatural.

Instead of following my gut and demanding to be taken back to town, I walked alongside my elephant with her mahout while the other tourists rode theirs in front of me. When the time came for the elephant's bath and I was offered a ride bareback – on her neck – I admit, with scarlet cheeks, that I accepted. This seemed more natural.

At the end of the tour, she was re-chained, the same dull blackness in her eyes, and I said goodbye to her, filled with sadness, confusion and anger. I left with the memory deeply etched into my being, vowing never to support elephant tourism in Asia again.

Ian Ord, Where Sidewalks End

"When I go to Thailand, I can't wait to ride an elephant!"

I remember having these thoughts myself, and have heard them echoed countless times since. Of course! Why wouldn't you want to sit atop such a majestic beast? It would be just like riding a horse – except bigger, and *much* cooler. Right?

It wasn't until moving to Thailand that I actually started to learn more about elephants and what they must endure to be ready for us to ride them. What I discovered was not the happy picture I had imagined, nor did it reflect all the fun photos my friends and family had returned with from their vacations.

Many of us only do things which may be harmful to others, the environment, or any of its creatures simply because of a lack of knowledge. I believe in people and our desire to live in a better world – not only for ourselves, and our loved ones, but for everyone we share the planet with.

Had I known then what I know now, of course, I would never even have considered riding an elephant when I arrived to Thailand.

Soul-Satisfying Sanctuary Visits

Barbara Weibel, Hole in the Donut

Half a dozen elephants wandered around the compound as I dug into my delicious lunch at Elephant Nature Park in northern Thailand. Earlier that day I'd fed and walked among the elephants that the park had rescued from circuses, logging operations, and



Photo: Barbara Weibel, Hole in the Donut Cultural Travel

street begging, but at the moment I was watching a big female who was rubbing her rump against a tree hard enough to make its yellow blossoms fall.

"Elephants have thick, but very sensitive skin," explained my guide. "They often use tree trunks and the concrete columns scattered around as scratching posts." The big female lumbered out of the trees and deftly picked up a broken tree branch her mahout had tossed in the dirt road. "The theory is that she will use it to scratch herself," my guide continued. Sure enough, she wrapped her trunk around the stick and used the broken end to scratch her thigh, chest, back of her leg, and a couple of toes.

Watching that elephant wield her stick, I recalled an earlier trip in 2007. I was visiting Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and riding an elephant up a hill to see the sunset from one of the temple ruins. Halfway up I turned in my seat to take a photo of the procession

behind me, only to see a mahout repeatedly jam a pointed metal rod into the forehead of an elephant, forcing it to climb the hill. Appalled, I vowed then that I would never again ride an elephant.

As I continued my tour of Elephant Nature Park I realized the importance of the place. Seven of the elephants are totally blind. One spent years in a circus and was blinded by constant flash photography. Others lost their eyesight when cruel handlers used slingshots to control their behavior. One elephant walks on three legs, her fourth crippled by a landmine. Yet another has a broken back. All the elephants at the park are incapable of living in the wild, which makes it all the more important.

Brandy Bell, *It's One World Travel*

I'll never forget the moment I first met an elephant. A good friend had invited me to her job at a sanctuary in Chiang Mai, Thailand. We got on

a bus and made the windy drive to a camp in the Mae Taeng area. I looked to my left and saw a procession of elephants. Their proximity turned the beats of my heart up, and as we arrived at the park I struggled to contain my sheer childlike giddiness.

Feeling like a kid in a candy store, I was overwhelmed and couldn't figure out which elephant I wanted to meet first. My friend Diana took me over to a solitary female, Sri Prae. I approached her slowly and with great trepidation.

With that gentle grace that these giant animals so naturally possess, she touched my hand with her trunk. "Rub my belly" "scratch me", she seemed to be saying. I indulged her, rubbing, pressing my hands into her side and feeling her thick skin beneath my fingers.

Sri Prae, at 31 years old, sported more wounds than an army vet. Her front left foot was disfigured by a landmine blast. She had slaved in the

backbreaking field of illegal logging, and to top it all off she was then sold into forced breeding. When she was unable to conceive, Sri Prae was lucky enough to be rescued and brought to the sanctuary.

Eye-Opening Volunteer Experiences

Amanda Williams, *A Dangerous Business*

During my recent trip to Thailand, I spent time at an elephant sanctuary called Elephant Nature Park. It is run by a woman named Sangduen "Lek" Chailert, who may be one of the most inspirational people I have ever met.

Lek lives her life for the elephants. She has been disowned by her family, blacklisted by the Thailand Tourism Authority (because she shows people videos of the "phajaan"), and has even received death threats. But still she has persisted in her mission to rescue abused elephants and give



Photo: Amanda Williams

them a safe place to live out the rest of their lives.

ENP has a growing herd of elephants – the number now stands at more than 40 – that have all been rescued from depressing situations. Many came to the park with broken bones, infections, landmine injuries, or blind. And all arrived with broken spirits.

Despite what they have been through, the elephants at ENP have adapted to life at the sanctuary. They have formed family groups; some have even conceived and given birth to adorable (and mischievous) babies. They play in the mud and roll around in the river. They mourn friends and adopted family members when they pass away.

If I learned anything at Elephant Nature Park, it's that these creatures are much more than "just animals".

They are emotional. They are smart. They are full of personality.

And they are not animals that should be used for any tourist's amusement.

Sadie Redinger, Eclectic Trekker

We had just arrived at the small village of Baan Tha Klang, and my week working with the elephants of the Surin Project was about to begin. As I was sitting there, I could hear the sound of chains hitting the ground.

I looked out of the little hut and saw a huge tusker (not in the Surin Project) walking towards me. He was carrying his mahout on his shoulders and another person sat in a large cage harness on his back. It would seem that they were training the tusker or taking him to give rides to tourists.

As he walked he kept yelping like a dog would if you were to accidentally step on its foot. His mahout had a bull hook, but he was resting it on the elephant's head so that wasn't causing him any pain...yet.

I looked around and noticed that the tusker's mahout had his foot hooked underneath the elephant's huge ear and was pulling up on it to keep the large male in control. An elephant's ears are very sensitive and mahouts will often tug and pull on them to direct the elephant.

This big guy did not like his ears being messed with. He started shaking his head in frustration which caused his mahout to do one of the worst things I have ever seen.

With a loud pop, he swung his bull hook and stabbed it into the top of the elephant's head. The tusker let out a loud scream that echoed throughout the small village. He dropped down on his front legs and lowered his head, cowering away from the abuse of his owner.

I knew I would see some disturbing incidents while I was at the Surin Project, but I wasn't expecting something so terrible to happen within the first five minutes of me being there.

Our coordinator came to take me to my host family shortly after the tusker had walked away. Once in my room, I dropped my bags and broke down in tears. How can humans be so cruel?

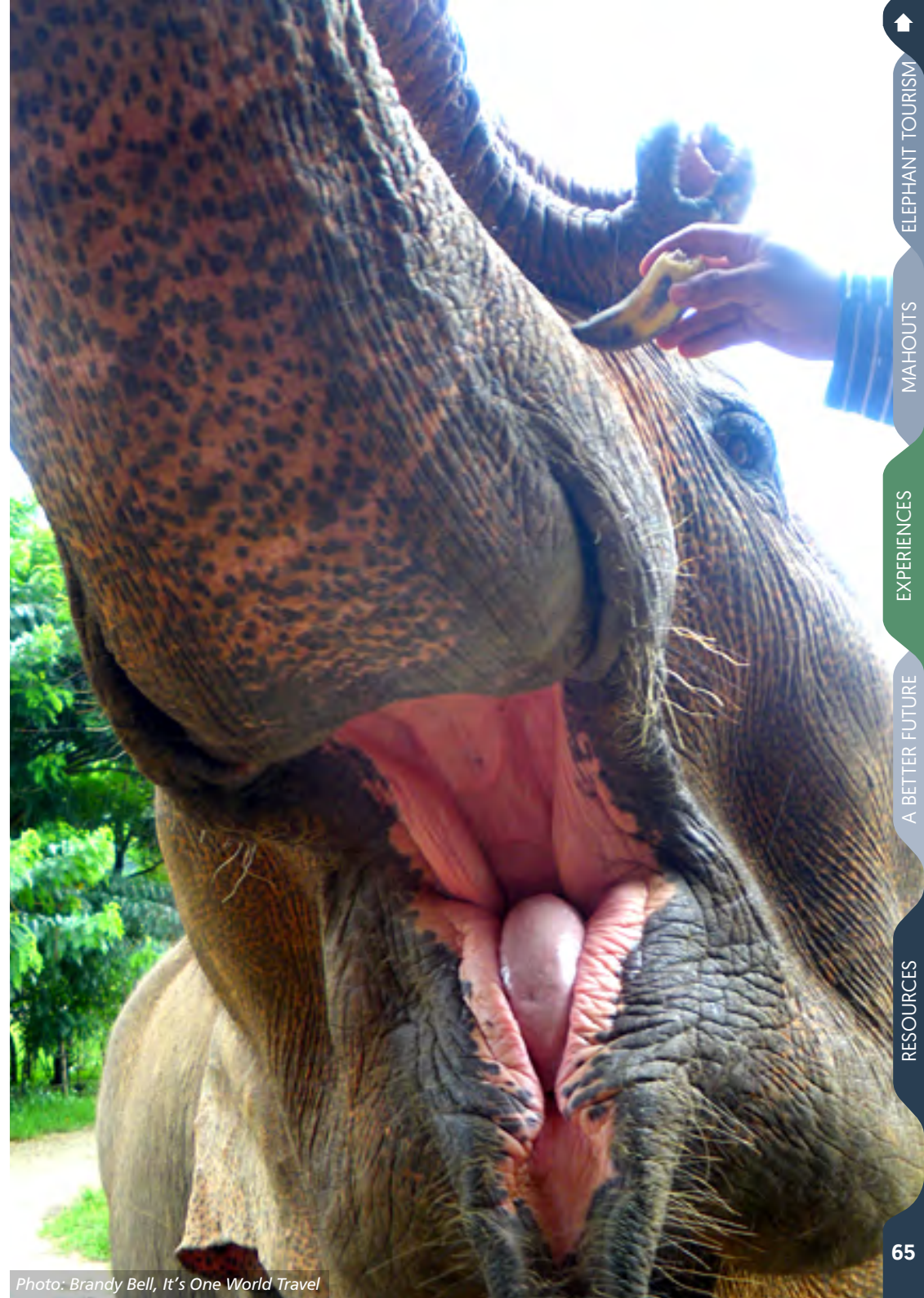


Photo: Brandy Bell, *It's One World Travel*

PART 4

**IMAGINING
A BRIGHTER
FUTURE**

Should Elephant Riding Be Illegal?



Sean Boyle
Venturists

Over recent years there has been a growing backlash against elephant riding in Thailand. In response,

many operators now advertise “no riding” camps where you can visit elephants to touch, bathe, and even feed them, but not ride on their backs.

It’s increasingly acknowledged that riding elephants involves animal abuse, and yet it is not illegal. Should it be?

What riding requires

The most cited concern of elephant tourism and riding are issues of abuse. Elephants in riding camps are “broken”, a violent process that ensures they will follow commands. And this can be just the beginning of abuse. Visiting a camp for rescued elephants reveals the results of that abuse and neglect: many animals permanently blinded by slingshots, or maimed as the result of injuries left untreated.

“Even in preserves and parks that allow softer interaction such as elephant bathing, the elephants must be trained to follow commands.”

Any elephant that interacts with humans, in any sort of captivity,

requires a certain amount of training, which often begins with the breaking process. While the phrase “domesticated elephant” is commonly used, in reality all elephants in captivity are wild animals, no different genetically from the elephants living in the wild. Elephants are intelligent, extremely strong, and have a will of their own. Even in reserves and parks that allow softer interaction such as elephant bathing, the elephants must be trained to follow commands (or enticed with food) to move to the river at the appointed time.

Halt all riding?

Opponents of elephant riding may suggest that elephant rides are outlawed. One worry is that a ban could lead to another massive change in how elephants are treated and cared for, similar to the fallout after elephant logging in Thailand was ended in 1989. How will mahouts currently making a living and supporting themselves and their (expensive) elephants through rides, continue to do so? The average lifespan of an elephant in captivity is 60 years – any solution needs to take into account the long-term effects on the elephants now employed giving rides.

Nor would a legal ban ensure that elephant riding ends. When logging was banned in Thailand, an illegal trade continued in remote areas – often under cover of night. Some logging operations involved perilous border crossings to Myanmar. Similarly, a black market for elephant riding would look even murkier than the current legal one.

What about a boycott? Where uncertainty and greenwashing abound, should wary travelers simply avoid elephant tourism altogether? That’s up to each individual. Any mass-organized boycott, however, could be just as damaging to livelihoods and welfare as a ban.

For now, elephant riding is not illegal and any interaction with these huge, powerful animals can be a highlight of a visit to Thailand. Inform yourself on the issues, do your research, and make sure that any camp or preserve you visit treats its captive elephants humanely.



Captive elephants are often kept in restricted, unnatural environments, and chained for long periods

Photo: Jeremy Scott Foster, travelFREAK

A Shift Toward Wild Elephant Tourism



Antoinette van de Water
Founding director,
Bring the Elephant Home

The best way for tourism to contribute to elephant conservation, and the most authentic way for tourists to experience elephants, is wild elephant tourism.

The fee to enter protected areas can be used for habitat maintenance

and improvement, the prevention of poaching and for research. Furthermore, local communities could be included as partners, benefiting from and helping to protect wild elephants in their natural habitats.

Wild elephant tourism has provided huge economic benefits for many African countries but also in Nepal, India and Borneo. Thailand has many beautiful national parks, full of biodiversity and the potential for authentic wildlife observation.

“Patience, time and distance from the animals are required, and in the wild nothing is guaranteed.”

Compared to the elephant excursions currently on offer this would require a fundamental change of attitude and expectations from tourists. Patience, time and distance from the animals are required, and in the wild nothing is guaranteed. But the tradeoff is a true, authentic wildlife experience.

Imagine a Thailand where tourists leave with photos of free-roaming herds of wild elephants in a tropical forest, instead of images of tame animals carrying people, painting senseless pictures, and forced to ride on bicycles.

In the long run, the demand for up-close encounters with elephants – and

for elephants in captivity in general – should end.

With a shift towards observing elephants in the (semi) wild, we can aim for elephant lives that are truly worth living, and for the conservation of the species. The central question is how much are we willing to change our own expectations as individuals and how much of a role we’re willing to play to help bring that about.



Photo: Born Free Foundation



Photo: Diana Edelman

The Future Is In The Forest



Monica Wrobel
*Head of Conservation,
Elephant Family*

Hidden in their natural habitat of jungle and forest, it is difficult to gauge the number

of Asian elephants left in the wild, although official estimates range from just 25,000 to 50,000.

Over the last 100 years the wild population has crashed by 90 per cent, earning a place on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List of the most endangered species.

The reason for their near-disappearance from the wild is simple: their forests are vanishing. Without its natural habitat, the Asian elephant is homeless and cannot survive in the wild.

A call for better conditions

In an ideal world, all elephants would be wild and free to roam in their natural habitat. For thousands of elephants this is not possible, either because their habitat has disappeared or because they were born into captivity and don't know how to survive in the wild.

There are around 15,000 captive Asian elephants in the world today, for whom release into the wild may never be possible.

Elephants eat up to 200kg of food per day and can live up to 70 years, so keeping them happy and healthy is an expensive business.

"There are around 13,000 captive Asian elephants in the world today, for whom release into the wild may never be possible."

It is possible for tourism to cover the cost of an elephant's upkeep and

welfare but it is essential that the animal is cared for properly, that it has adequate space, access to water, and companionship to suit its personality. Unfortunately, that is all too rare.

Towards wild elephant tourism

For any elephant experience – even at a responsible rescue centre – it is worth remembering that any close encounter with a wild animal means asking it to change its natural behaviour. Only when we keep our distance from a wild animal are we truly respecting its freedom.

"Only when we keep our distance from a wild animal are we truly respecting its freedom."

So what does this mean for the future of elephant tourism? To truly put the big picture of conservation first, countries that are home to Asian elephants must be encouraged to

protect as much of their habitat as possible.

For a tourist, seeing an Asian elephant in the wild is one of the most thrilling experiences you can have. The future of these animals is in our hands. It's up to us to vote with our wallets and demand more in-the-wild observation rather than hands-on entertainment.



Photo: Diana Edelman



RESOURCES



Photo: Amanda Williams

Building A Coalition

A statement from the Asian Captive Elephant Working Group

The welfare of captive elephants is a topic of intense debate among animal managers, conservationists, scientists, the general public, animal welfare/ rights groups and the media. Common concerns, especially on welfare, raised about elephant tourism in particular are complex in their nature and impact, and call for urgent scientific evaluation as well as for realistic solutions to ensure the sustainable

and ethical management of captive elephants in the future.

The interaction between elephants and people has a long-standing cultural and commercial history and elephants continue to play a role in the economy. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) there are approximately 13,000 Asian elephants in captivity used for tourism, logging and transport throughout the Asian elephant range countries. The use of elephants in tourism camps is increasing; an estimated 2,700 elephants from an

estimated total captive population of 4,500 are used for such purposes in Thailand.

For the tourist camps in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, there are currently no acknowledged and/or widely used guidelines for best practices for the management and care of elephants. This has resulted in a large number of facilities operating with an insufficient capacity to manage captive elephants. Such facilities are extremely vulnerable to criticism, creating false assumptions about proper captive elephant management and undermining the reputation of good facilities.

Recognizing the urgent need to create more awareness about both the problems and the possible solutions as well as provide recommendations to improve health care and management practices for captive elephants in the ASEAN countries, a group of regional elephant specialists, veterinarians, researchers and conservationists formed an Asian Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG) in June 2015.

The ACEWG acknowledges:

1. Closing all elephant tourism camps is not a realistic option for a variety of reasons, including the lack of alternative livelihoods for both people and elephants. Releasing captive elephants back into the wild should be explored, but is currently not a realistic option for a large majority of captive elephants due to a lack of suitable habitat within elephant

range countries, the high levels of human-elephant conflict (HEC) across Asia, and the risks—real or perceived—that releases will result in increased HEC.

2. There are a variety of opportunities or uses for elephants in tourism facilities including, but not limited to activities such as riding, bathing, interaction with tourists, shows, mahout “experiences” and zoo style viewing of elephants in a landscaped area. In addition, these facilities have the potential to provide favourable conditions for studying and offering education about elephants.
3. The relationship between humans and elephants has existed for thousands of years. The elephant tourism industry provides an opportunity to maintain the knowledge and historic cultural value of elephants in ASEAN range countries, and showcases the deep human-elephant bond that encourages an understanding and appreciation for elephants.
4. With limited possibilities for raising the significant income required for elephant food and care, an increasing number of captive elephants now depend on employment in the tourism industry.
5. Elephants are intelligent and mobile animals with a highly developed social structure. They have complex needs and in captivity require professional management and care protocols.

6. Elephants have the capacity to be fatally dangerous to humans and other elephants in both captive and wild situations and must be managed accordingly.
7. The use of elephants in tourist camps has raised global concerns and public debate. It is evident that although there are no simple solutions, more research is required to scientifically guide the development of protocols to appropriately address welfare concerns and to further improve management systems.
8. Wild elephant populations continue to be threatened and thus the removal of elephants from the wild for any reason, but specifically to meet the needs of the tourism industry, is a major concern to the global conservation community.
9. To ensure better welfare for captive elephants modern techniques of animal training should be developed and introduced gradually to adjust or supplement those traditional training and handling practices



Photo: Diana Edelman

- that cause severe discomfort or suffering.
10. The majority of captive elephants in ASEAN countries are owned or cared for on a daily basis by people adhering to a management culture that has been passed down over thousands of years. Efforts are currently underway to improve the quality of captive elephant management but understanding, adopting and enforcing the need for new management practices within local culture will take time.
11. A formal elephant registration program, particularly in those countries without an existing program, is urgently needed and will help to reduce the illegal capture and trade of elephants. Existing formal elephant registration programs must be properly enforced.
12. Effective animal management requires systematic registration, health management and record keeping for all individuals in a population. Such databases can track reproduction and mortality, thus providing valuable information on genetic diversity and demographic stability of the registered population.
13. Different management systems have to be carefully and scientifically assessed as releasing elephants into the wild or large managed habitats does not automatically address welfare concerns appropriately.
14. The term "sanctuary" is often misapplied to, or by, some

captive elephant facilities in an effort to differentiate them from other places with alternative management styles. At present, no tourism-funded ASEAN elephant facility meets all the requirements that define a true sanctuary. A full understanding of the limitations of elephant care and welfare as well as different elephants' individual needs in any facility is needed before any such designation can or should be applied.

15. A certification program for elephant tourism camps is urgently needed. This has the potential to encourage the development of a much needed registration system for all captive elephants, enforce best practices for welfare, improve training opportunities for mahouts, and provide a means by which camps that follow best practices are rewarded by greater financial viability.

As a group of elephant specialists, veterinarians, researchers, camp managers and conservationists we recognize the urgency to, proactively and with sound scientific knowledge, address the current situation of elephants in tourism in ASEAN countries.

The goals of the ACEWG are to:

- Ensure sustainable populations are only created from already existing captive elephant groups.
- Promote a high quality of life for captive elephants in ASEAN elephant range countries by

- supporting positive elephant welfare practices, ensuring that the physical and mental needs of elephants are met, and promoting proper environmental stimulation, enrichment and social group living.
- Eliminate the capture of wild elephants for any commercial purpose whatsoever from within ASEAN countries.
 - Bring together knowledgeable/experienced parties to address all matters related to ensuring a sustainable quality of life for captive elephants in ASEAN elephant range countries.
 - Improve captive elephant welfare by supporting quality mahouts and protecting elephants from abuse and misuse by humans.
 - Support the creation of an Elephant Welfare Standard for captive elephants in ASEAN countries providing camp managers and the public with a baseline for elephant care as well as guidelines & support for camps to exceed this standard.
 - Identify sustainable means for covering the costs of captive

The ACEWG statement was written by and endorsed by elephant specialists & vets from Chiang Mai University; Thai National Elephant Institute; Wild Elephant Lover Club; Myanmar's Ministry of Environment, Conservation & Forests; Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute; Wildlife Reserves Singapore; Think Elephants International; Department of Conservation Biology, Mahidol

- elephants while encouraging ethical management and conservation.
- Maintain the traditions and culture surrounding elephant care while developing effective and humane elephant management plans that respect mahout tradition and its cultural history and significance.
 - Encourage good business practices, and strengthen business models for captive elephant management based on high welfare standards.
 - Enhance education and awareness of issues related to wild and captive elephants, and recognise the opportunities the captive populations present for species conservation.
 - Encourage tourism facilities to use accurately researched and conveyed science and education to promote wild elephant and habitat conservation and good captive elephant welfare practice to the public.

University; Elephant Conservation Centre, Laos; Naka Elephant Foundation; Wildlife Alliance, Cambodia; Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation; Zoo & Wildlife Veterinarian Association of Thailand; Treasure Our Elephants Foundation; The Zoological Parks Organisation under the Auspices of HM the King & Myanmar Timber Elephant Project.



Photo: Kathawut Rueansai © 123RF.com

What Can You Do?

Taking action for a happier future

In this guide we've covered the full range of voices and arguments. Although all agree that the situation for many captive elephants needs to change, you'll have spotted nuances in their responses and some differences of opinion in how best to improve the condition of Asia's elephants.

The hard truth is that there are no easy answers. As with most ethical dilemmas, the facts are complex and the reality on the ground is difficult.

So what is a regular traveler to do? Well, the fact that you've read this far demonstrates that you're one of those who genuinely care – well done, and thank you! But caring is just half the battle. Here are some practical steps for putting that concern to good use:

Before you go

Research any elephant camp or sanctuary experience very carefully. Ideally do this before you start shopping around in-destination. Remember that ticket vendors can be very persuasive and not always entirely honest – taking people at their word isn't always enough.

Likewise, online reviews aren't always the most reliable. TripAdvisor reviews are usually written by non-experts with no professional qualifications. Rely instead on trusted organizations, such as the people included in this guide.

Even better, consider letting go of close-up elephant encounters completely. This can be a hard one, since elephant riding is often at the top of many people's bucket lists. But ask yourself: is it an essential experience? Does your interest and passion for interacting with an

elephant outweigh its welfare and happiness?

You can just as easily visit and support a national park where elephants roam in the wild. Or look for projects where elephants are in a "semi-wild" habitat, roaming free and foraging for their own food. You may be surprised how close and intimate a more in-the-wild experience feels.

While you're away

Think about the way you share your elephant encounters with friends on social media. You may have researched a responsible and ethical operator but your friends won't know that – all they see are photos of you having fun with the animals.

In addition to sharing your photos, consider including some commentary on what you've learned, and what your friends should know about the reality of elephant tourism.

If you encounter any instances of animal cruelty (to elephants or any other animals) while traveling, keep your cool. You won't save the world by getting angry or upset with locals who are most likely just small cogs in a big machine, but you can spread the word via social media, on review sites, and using the Born Free Foundation's **monitoring tool** to help build a map of instances of animal cruelty worldwide.

When you get home

And when you are back at home your concern and interest can still be valuable. Consider supporting the work of trusted welfare and conservation organizations and keep spreading the word – including this guide!



Photo: Worradirek Muksab © 123RF.com

Travel Directory

FLIGHTS & TRANSPORT

Round The World Flights - Long distance and round-the-world flight specialists. Personal service to help you find the right flight. www.roundtheworldflights.com

Wanderu - Reduce your carbon footprint and make shorter trips by bus or train. Wanderu searches hundreds of services connecting 8,000+ cities across North America and Europe. www.wanderu.com

DESTINATION GUIDES

Travelfish - Authoritative, in-depth and reliable travel guides and coverage for Southeast Asia. www.travelfish.org

Caravanistan - A studiously updated online travel guide for Central Asia and the Silk Road. www.caravanistan.com

Routes North - An independent travel guide to Scandinavia with city guides, money saving tips and accommodation reviews. www.routesnorth.com

New Worlder - An online magazine covering travel, culture and food in the Americas. www.newworlder.com

VoiceMap - Audio tours created by local journalists, filmmakers, podcasters, and guides in over 100 cities worldwide. The app uses GPS to play audio automatically, at the right time and place. www.voicemap.me

READING

Trip Fiction - A website that matches global works of fiction and travel related memoirs with the locations in which they are set. Search by location, author, or genre to find your perfect holiday read. www.tripfiction.com

Maptia - Inspiring travel writing and thought-provoking stories that will make you want to get out and explore the world. www.maptia.com

Adventure.Travel - Find travel stories, resources and companies to inspire and equip your responsible adventures. www.adventure.travel

Adventure.com - An online magazine covering emerging destinations and unique perspectives, with great travel writing and stunning photography. www.adventure.com

Family Traveller - The go-to magazine and website for family centric travel. www.familytraveller.com

Immersion Travel Magazine - A member-supported digital magazine covering authentic, ethical and sustainable travel. www.immersiontravelmag.com

Travellerspoint - An online community offering various tools to help you plan and share your trip with others. Create a map of your travels, blog about your trip or discuss plans with other travellers. www.travellerspoint.com

Outbounding - A community-powered reading list of the best travel writing on the web. www.outbounding.org

CONSERVATION & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Born Free Foundation - An international NGO working to prevent animal suffering and protect threatened species in the wild. Born Free provides information on how to enjoy an animal-friendly holiday. www.bornfree.org.uk

Global Heritage Fund - An international nonprofit dedicated to the sustainable preservation of world heritage sites in areas of economic need. You can support their work here: www.globalheritagefund.org

Ethical Travel Guide - Guides and travel advice on responsible tourism in destinations around the world. www.ethical.travel

People And Places - A social enterprise that matches skilled volunteers to international projects. Can be organised as a standalone volunteer trip or as an addition to an existing booking. www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

Sustainable Travel International - Working towards improving lives and protecting places through travel and tourism. sustainabletravel.org

Travel+SocialGood - A global nonprofit and community aimed at solving issues like poverty and inequality through business and leisure travel. www.travelsocialgood.org

INSURANCE

World Nomads - Travel insurance for independent travellers from more than 130+ countries. www.worldnomads.com*

TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Travel Aware - The UK government provides British nationals with the latest travel advice and information at www.gov.uk/travelaware

Travel.State.gov - The US State Department's travel information and advisory portal. www.travel.state.gov

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Travelling To A Better World

Harold Goodwin

Our holidays are precious: most of us work hard for that city break or two weeks in the sun, that opportunity to get away from it all, to indulge ourselves.

But the way we travel and the choices we make can make tourism better for us, and for our hosts. We can choose to travel and holiday better. Responsible travel is about using tourism to make better places to live in, because great places to live in are great places to visit.

Holidays should be carefree, but not careless. Very few of us want to trash the places we love to visit. Travel and tourism is what we make it – the small choices we make as individuals add up to make huge differences. Fly less. Recycle more. Avoid disposable plastic. When you walk into a hotel room and the temperature is down at 15° with all the lights and TV are on, complain at the front desk and ask to see the manager. Consumers are powerful if we all speak up.

Value the authentic local experience. Forsake the hotspots and the trophy selfie, and seek out encounters with local people – our memories are made of shared experiences. Seek out local shops, local artists and crafters and buy from them – it will likely be a better experience for you and you will be contributing to the local economy.

Travel with respect and you will be treated with respect, aspire to be a temporary resident and enjoy

your experience of the other, with the other. Think hard before doing things abroad that you wouldn't do at home. You wouldn't expect to visit an orphanage or teach children, unqualified, at home – so why is it OK to do it abroad? Seek out the opportunities for authentic encounters with local people in parks, at the theatre, in markets – forsake the tourist tat and the tourist traps.

To be a holidaymaker or a traveller is to be a guest in someone else's place. Follow Robert Frost's advice in *The Road Not Taken*:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*



Photo: Alexey Poprotsky © 123RF.com



Responsible Travel

Kaitlyn Brajcich
Sustainable Travel International

Travel and tourism is the world's largest, most diverse industry. Employing 1 in 10 people on the planet, the industry touches places, lives, and communities in all corners of the globe.

But tourism doesn't always have a positive impact. The combined effect

of 1.2 billion tourists quickly adds up, contributing to environmental damage, income inequality and culture loss.

Fortunately, there are many ways to take action and lessen your impact.

Leave only footprints

Before you travel, research environmental issues in your destination. If you're visiting an island challenged by water scarcity you can avoid activities that use a lot of

water, ask hotels about their water conservation policies, and be mindful of your own water usage.

Be particularly alert if you're visiting natural areas or heritage sites. Stick to dedicated trails, follow visitor guidelines and don't remove or damage wildlife or artifacts. You can help alleviate pressure on popular sights by seeking out lesser-known attractions.

Do no harm

Try to learn about local animal welfare and conservation issues before taking part in any wildlife or animal experiences. Be particularly wary of attractions that allow direct interaction with wild animals such as elephant rides, big cat petting, sea-life shows or performing animals.

Find out what species are endangered or threatened and make sure they don't end up on your plate. When purchasing souvenirs, avoid items made from animal products such as turtle shells, ivory, or coral.

Watch out for "greenwashing"

Just because businesses market themselves as 'green' or 'sustainable' it doesn't necessarily mean that they are. Before booking ask the company what they're doing to minimise their impact and support local conservation efforts. Help spread the word to other travellers by providing feedback and writing online reviews.

Respect people and cultures

Read up on local customs and be aware of cultural sensitivities. Understanding the culture will help

you avoid awkward encounters and is an important part of learning from the travel experience.

As a bare minimum try to learn a few key words and phrases in the local language such as 'hello,' 'goodbye,' 'please,' and 'thank you.' By showing communities respect you'll help create better connections between tourism and local people.

Think twice before sticking your camera in people's faces. Always ask for permission before taking someone's photo, especially if there are kids involved.

Support communities

As a tourist you have a unique ability to help improve community well-being. Ensure that your money ends up in the hands of local people or organisations that invest in community development. Choose businesses that are locally owned and hire local staff, eat at restaurants that use local food sources, and purchase souvenirs crafted by local artisans.

Volunteer wisely

The rising popularity of 'voluntourism' may come from the best of intentions but there's evidence that many short-term volunteer schemes can have a negative impact. In fact some, especially those involving children and orphans, can do significant harm. Be careful where you choose to donate your time or money.

Watch your carbon footprint

Approximately 5% of global carbon emissions are caused by tourism, of



Photo: BlueOrange Studio © 123RF.com

which the large majority is due to air travel. When possible, take a bus or train to your destination, or consider exploring your own backyard! If you must travel by plane, choose the most direct route, pack light, and purchase carbon offsets. You can calculate your carbon footprint and purchase offsets using this [online carbon calculator](#).

Reduce waste

Lots of countries have problems with waste management, landfill and marine pollution. Each year at least 8 million tons of plastic ends up in the ocean and experts warn that by 2050, the oceans will contain more plastic than fish.

Avoid disposable products, recycle when possible, and bring along a reusable water bottle and purifier to filter your own water. Instead of bringing all your newly purchased travel supplies in their original packaging, save space and reduce waste by removing the extra packaging before packing. Of course, the best way to prevent waste problems is by reducing your consumption to begin with!

Give back

You can continue to make a positive impact once you're back home. Find out if there is a travel philanthropy fund or identify other local community development or environmental conservation organisations to support.

Get email or postal addresses from people you meet while abroad and send them some holiday photos when you get home. Better still, become

pen-pals and keep in touch with your new friend!

Never stop learning

Becoming a responsible traveller is an ongoing journey. Stay informed and keep learning about how you can help. Along the way, be sure to multiply your impact by sharing your newfound knowledge with friends and family and remember that even simply asking questions can have a positive effect.

Explore Sustainable Travel International's **Travel Better Club**, an online community for travellers to exchange experiences, access sustainable travel tips, and complete an online training course. To join, visit <http://travelbetterclub.org> and enter the coupon code TravelBetterHG to waive the membership fee.



Photo: rdonar © 123RF.com

About Horizon Guides

We publish guidebooks to incredible experiences and thrilling destinations. We exist to inspire our readers' curiosity and wanderlust with useful guides to fascinating places.

What we do

We create guides to help you find, plan and book your next adventure. Each of our guides is researched and authored by travel writers with in-depth local knowledge and first-hand expertise.

100% impartial

The information in our guides is 100% impartial and guaranteed free from any commercial influence. We never accept payment for positive coverage.

Travel far, travel well

We believe that travel has the power to change ourselves as people and the world around us, usually for the better.

But we also know that irresponsible mass tourism can be culturally disruptive and environmentally damaging.

Running through all our guides is a common theme: that travel is best when we're open, curious and mindful of our footprint. We're on a quest to promote a vision of travel that is sustainable, responsible and adds to the world rather than taking away.

Our partners are all carefully selected small and independent operators who share our mission. You will never see a Horizon Guide on all-inclusive resorts or mega cruises. We're here to celebrate real places, authentic experiences and mindful travel.

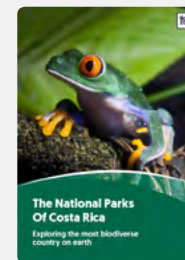
We're proud to support the following organisations who share our values:



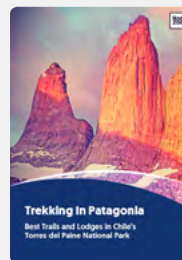
Also In This Series



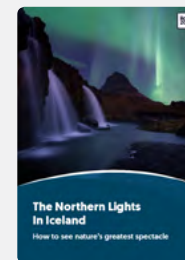
Exploring The Silk Road
Highlights and key routes
2nd Edition (2017)



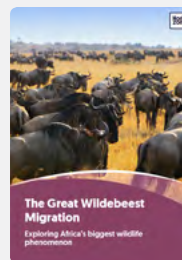
The National Parks of Costa Rica
Exploring the most biodiverse country on earth
2nd Edition (2017)



Trekking in Patagonia
Best trails and lodges in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park
2nd Edition (2017)



The Northern Lights In Iceland
How to see nature's greatest spectacle
2nd Edition (2017)



The Great Wildebeest Migration
Exploring Africa's biggest wildlife phenomenon
2nd Edition (2017)



Cuba Unwrapped
The island, the people, the culture
1st Edition (2017)

