



Elephant welfare and your travels

Who doesn't love to see elephants during their travels? Their majesty, their walk, their amazing trunks, their intelligence ... and the delightful antics of baby elephants. In recent years, a whole industry has developed around operators offering travellers an elephant 'experience'. Sadly, many of these experiences are not positive for the elephants and their welfare is very much compromised.

During 2010 and 2011, Intrepid Travel lent support to extensive research in Asia concerning the welfare of captive elephants, conducted by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA). The research looked at wildlife entertainment venues and assessed the welfare of the elephants, monkeys and tigers housed there. We have learnt much, particularly about elephants, that we'd like to share with our travellers, so that together we can work to improve the welfare of elephants.

Animal welfare basics

Animal welfare concerns the state of an animal's body and mind, and the extent to which its nature is satisfied - so just like humans, it's about an animal's physical and psychological state. Scientists have worked out the following pillars of an animal's welfare which they call **the five freedoms**.

- **Freedom from hunger and thirst** — ready access to fresh water and a diet that maintains full health and vigour
- **Freedom from discomfort** — an appropriate environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area
- **Freedom from pain, injury or disease** — correct nutrition, disease prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
- **Freedom to express normal behaviour** — sufficient space, natural stimulation of the senses and the company of the animal's own kind
- **Freedom from fear and distress** — conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

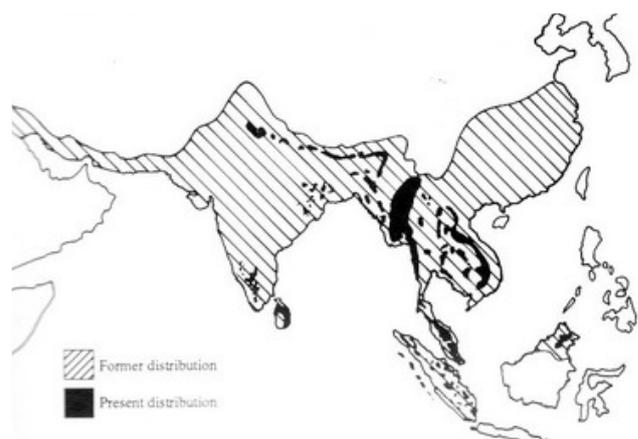
If all of these freedoms are true for an animal, it indicates good welfare.

About Asian elephants

Asian elephants are highly endangered (as classified by the IUCN) and their habitat in Asia has been seriously depleted. There are an estimated 30,000-52,000 in the wild, with about 15,000 in captivity. This number seems large, but there has been a rapid decline and they can only now be found in fragmented habitats, which prevent them from crossing borders and being able to breed freely. The risk is that on the current rate of decline, Asian elephants could become extinct within three generations.

Elephants are extraordinary animals. They are huge of course and they need to eat around 200kg of fresh food every day. They normally eat a surprisingly large number of species, choosing from around 180 different plants, and in the wild they will move around and eat for around 18 hours a day.

They live 60-70 years in the wild, but usually significantly less in captivity. They form herds of 8-20 animals and are led by an undisputed leading female - the matriarch. The male elephants, once reaching maturity, split off from the group going off with other males until they meet up with females. They are extremely intelligent and highly socialised animals, forming complex groups. They are capable of self-recognition (in a mirror), empathy and cooperation. For example, they have been known to stand 'guard' on a busy road while the younger ones cross! They are very communicative, with around 80% of their communications being through infrasound, which is not audible to us. And they can cover large distances of 30-50km in a day.



What happens in captivity?

If we compare the above understanding with what is happening in captivity and at many elephant camps, their conditions are highly compromised. Some common observations:

- Chaining of elephants so they have very limited movement - particularly of the bulls (males)
- Limited diet - for example, just one or two plants such as pineapple leaves
- Isolation from others - limited opportunity for touching or other normal social interaction
- Little or no veterinary care
- Unsuitable, unyielding ground such as concrete, which is harmful to their feet
- Bright sunlight where it may be up to 40 degrees with limited shade

Activities

- Rides - saddles may be left on all day and insufficient cushioning may cause discomfort
- Use of hooks, sticks and other tools to control the elephant - causing pain if used inappropriately
- Elephant painting may seem peaceful, but in reality the training of an elephant to be compliant to the mahout's movements of their ear and directing the movement of their trunk, would only be achieved through threat of pain
- Elephant football entails training the elephant to respond to a command (again through threat of pain) to make very unnatural and physically stressful movements. The sudden and unnatural movement of a 1500kg elephant makes them very vulnerable to injury
- Other extreme activities such as tight rope walking (highly risky - a 1m drop would be fatal), riding a tricycle and playing basketball all entail cruel training techniques

In the above circumstances, it is clear that the 5 Freedoms are not being granted. Amongst animal welfare professionals, it is widely understood that elephants cannot be kept adequately in captivity. They are large, they are demanding and they are not domesticated animals.



What about domestication?

Elephants are NOT domesticated. Cow, horses, dogs etc. have been domesticated - a process which is done through selective, human-guided breeding over at least 10 generations of an animal. You cannot domesticate an individual animal during its lifespan. Even though elephants have been kept by humans for around 3,000 years, they have been, on the whole, poached directly from the wild, with perhaps one generation (or rarely two) being bred in captivity. Domestication is a breeding process where you select the characteristics you want and breed the animals with those characteristics over many generations. This has never been done with elephants.

Because all captive elephants are not domesticated animals, for them to be kept in captivity:

- they need to be restrained
- they are vulnerable to sudden outbursts of human targeted aggression, leading to injuries and fatalities
- they undergo a cruel and painful process to break the elephants will and accept human control
- they are susceptible to the development of health and behavioural problems

Breeding in captivity

Most elephants seen at camps in Thailand are first generation from the wild. Even when bred in captivity, elephants need to be 'broken' to accept human control. Breeding in captivity is often promoted as a conservation activity that helps prevent poaching, but this may not necessarily be the case if done for commercial purposes. Elephants don't breed in captivity easily and they have a very long gestation period (22 months), so the number that can be bred in captivity is very low. This means there will continue to be a demand for elephants to be taken from the wild while there is an interest from tourism. The breeding of a few in captivity, combined with animals poached from the wild, helps to cover up the illegal trafficking of elephants (as with other endangered species.) A captive bred animal is highly unlikely to be introduced into the wild successfully and without habitat protection and scientific management of the breeding process, the captive bred animal may be inbred and of lower genetic quality.

What can you do to help elephants?

- Share your new understanding of appropriate elephant welfare - you are welcome to share this document
- Keep in mind a few simple key points to look out for when visiting a venue with wild animals:
 1. Freedom to move without restraint. Are the animals free to move without restraint when not used for tourists? Can they interact with other animals on their own terms?
 2. No signs of abuse or distress in the animals. Are the animals healthy and without wounds and not showing any behavioural problems? Do the animals seem calm but not apathetic?
 3. Clean and natural husbandry conditions. Are the animals housed in a natural environment? Is the area kept clean?
 4. Fresh and varied food available. Is fresh, unprocessed food available at all times? Can the animals forage natural food? Most animals also require free access to water at all times
- Don't ride elephants or patronise shows where the elephants are clearly made to perform unnatural or human-like activities. You can politely voice your concerns to the appropriate tourism authorities
- If wanting to help elephants or experience them at close range, please support a 'commendable venue' or at least a venue that clearly prioritises the elephant's welfare. Intrepid can help with suggestions. The existing captive elephant's situation will require improvement and by bringing support to better welfare-providing venues, this will pressure other venues to improve while overall aiming to prevent new elephants from ending up in the trade

In summary

- The keeping of elephants adequately in captivity is just not possible because they are not domesticated and they are big, demanding animals
- The initial training of elephants for entertainment of tourists is extremely cruel
- Many of the activities they are made to do are physically and psychologically damaging and stressful
- Captive breeding must be seen with scepticism and as potentially counter-productive for conservation purposes, as well as totally disregarding the basic principles of animal welfare
- The existing captive elephant populations need action to improve their welfare