Executive summary

Elephants. Not commodities.

Pre-Covid-19 we estimated that the entire captive elephant tourism industry generated between US$581.3 to US$770.6 million of sales per year on the back of elephant suffering. Now, with very few tourists, owners and venues are struggling to feed their elephants and pay their workers.

Throughout our research we have consistently found distressing cruelty to captive elephants in all countries. It involves separation of mothers and calves, harsh training methods, restriction of movement, poor nutrition, limited or no veterinary care, social deprivation and punishment. In most tourist venues the elephants are chained for long periods when not needed for tourism activities, often in inadequate shelters featuring concrete floors and unhygienic conditions. They will typically have little or no social interaction with other elephants and are made to perform strenuous and stressful activities. Our researchers also noted many venues actively trying to breed more elephants into captivity. This not only fails to address the core problem of elephant captivity, but also reduces the limited resources available to the elephants already in the industry.

This report documents the plight of the 3,837 elephants used in tourism in Thailand, India, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Malaysia as of January 2020. It features elephant living conditions, training, breeding, the status of the industry, academic research – regarding welfare and conservation – and is part of our 10 years work in the region. Over these years we have conducted more than 1,000 visits to more than 350 elephant entertainment venues, conducted several global public surveys, engaged with hundreds of travel companies and associations, and been working with elephant venues on the ground.

Despite greater demand for ‘ethical tourism’ and awareness of the distress caused by elephant rides, the vast majority of captive elephants in Asia still endure widespread and lifelong cruelty, living in severely inadequate conditions.

And their situation is likely to get worse because of the numbers of captive elephants still being bred for the tourist industry and the economic devastation caused by Covid-19.
Assessing elephant welfare conditions

We assessed elephant welfare using nine recognised criteria considered to have a significant direct impact on an elephant’s welfare. Our researchers visited elephant tourism venues offering a range of entertainment activities including rides, shows, elephant washing, feeding, selfies and observation.

Our data was collected through in-person observation of the elephants, tourism activities and living conditions as well as through informal conversations with staff on site. Photographs and occasionally videos were taken to document the findings.

Ongoing suffering – but also some positive changes

From January 2019 to January 2020, our researchers assessed the welfare conditions of 3,837 elephants at 357 venues. In the Asian countries evaluated for this report we found 2,390 (63%) elephants suffering in severely inadequate conditions at 208 (58%) venues. Improved, yet still inadequate conditions, were experienced by 1,168 (30%) elephants. Only 279 (7%) elephants were kept in truly high-welfare observation-only venues.

We documented distressing conditions at venues with severely inadequate welfare conditions. Frequent short chaining, demanding activity schedules for the elephants, limited possible social interaction between elephants and conditions that allowed for very little natural behaviour were common.

Venues with improved, yet still inadequate conditions often offered half or full-day elephant washing or bathing experiences. Despite tourists’ perceptions that elephant washing, and bathing venues provide high welfare to elephants, our researchers expressed concerns about these attractions. Although our research shows that venues offering bathing activities typically offer better welfare conditions than riding venues, they still have significant welfare problems. These facilities were often misleadingly promoting themselves using terms like ‘sanctuary’, ‘rescue centre’ and ‘ethical’.

The high welfare, primarily observation-only venues allowed the animals to behave more naturally and within natural habitats. Visitors at these venues had very limited or no direct interaction with the elephants. They were able to enjoy observing elephants being elephants, without human interactions, while the mahouts continued to supervise their elephants remotely.

Image: A young, underweight elephant tied up at a venue in Thailand. At this venue, 50% of the elephants demonstrated stereotypies including head-bobbing and pacing.
Thailand – centre of captive elephant tourism

Nearly three quarters of the elephants in Asia are used in Thailand (73%, 2,798) which attracted 39.8 million tourists in 2019. Our research estimates that about 10.9 million (28%) of those rode or planned to ride an elephant while on holiday in Thailand.

Our 2019–2020 research identifies Thailand as a continuing hotspot for elephant suffering. This is because of the number of elephants involved and the scale of cruelty inflicted due to tourist numbers and demand.

The overall number of captive elephants used for tourism has increased by a shocking 70% in just 10 years. Between 2010 and 2020, there was a dramatic 135% increase in the number of elephants living in the very worst of conditions in the country. Out of 2,798 elephants, we found that only 5% (144) were kept in high welfare conditions.

India

India is home to the second highest number of elephants used in tourism out of the countries in our report. Twenty one tourism venues housing 509 elephants were assessed. We found that 44% (225) of the elephants were kept in severely inadequate conditions. Fifty one percent were housed in medium welfare venues. Just 4% of the assessed elephants lived in higher welfare conditions. Seventy percent of elephants were housed at venues offering rides.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, we identified and assessed 13 venues, housing 188 elephants. This is an increase of 13% or 22 elephants held captive since 2015. More elephants were living in severely inadequate conditions - 24% (46) compared to 22% (36) of elephants in 2015. However, we found 28% (52) of elephants living in high-welfare conditions at a single venue, Elephant Transit Home. Here there is a clear policy against elephant entertainment and the ultimate aim is to reintroduce their elephants into the natural habitat.

Cambodia

We assessed 10 venues with 64 elephants. Thirty eight percent 38% (24) of elephants were living in severely inadequate conditions. This has decreased from 67% (24) of elephants in 2015. Forty two percent (27) were living in medium scoring venues with improved conditions. In 2015 there were no elephants at any middle scoring venues.

Nepal

We assessed 55 venues with 143 elephants. The number of elephants at tourism venues in Nepal has decreased by 8% between 2015 and 2020, from 155 to 143 elephants. We also found that between 2015 and 2020, the percentage of elephants living in severely inadequate conditions decreased, and those living in improved conditions at medium welfare venues had increased.

Since 2015 several smaller scale projects have been initiated that aim to provide observation-only attractions for tourists, providing higher welfare to a few elephants.

Laos

We assessed 11 venues with 105 elephants. The number of venues has increased by 83% (6) and the number of elephants by 78% (46) elephants since 2015. We found 48% (50) elephants living in severely inadequate conditions and 15% (16) living in improved conditions at medium scoring conditions. Thirty seven percent (39) of elephants lived in two high welfare venues. In Laos, during 2019–2020, more elephants were living in better conditions, and fewer were living in the worst than in 2015.

Malaysia

We assessed 30 elephants at the sole identified elephant tourism venue. This was the first year including Malaysia in our assessments.

Image: Saddled elephants giving tourists rides at a venue in Cambodia
Training cruelty - lasts a lifetime

Footage was made available to World Animal Protection documenting the common practices of training elephant calves for the tourism industry. This footage was made during 2019 following elephant trainers in Thailand who train 30-40 elephants annually for the industry. It includes harrowing footage of eight calves being trained.

The footage documents the traumatic separation of two-year-old calves from their distressed mothers. This was followed by the physically and emotionally cruel methods used to establish the dominance needed to make elephants ‘safe’ for the tourist industry.

Methods included: calves put in a ‘crush’ - two heavy, wooden frames - to stop them moving; chaining; prodding and hitting if they showed any signs of defensive behaviour or aggression. These extremely cruel methods were mixed with offering rewards when the elephants complied, and often involved some spiritual components as well.

Similar or variations of these training methods are used throughout Asia, but the cruelty of them is frequently denied or underplayed by venues and trainers. They are also not failsafe; mahouts (handlers) and tourists are injured or killed by elephants every year.

In a separate study, conducted together with the Faculty of Social Sciences of Chiang Mai University, we found that thirty one percent of the mahouts we interviewed had been sick or injured through their work; and of those almost half were still in pain from their injuries when interviewed.

Other less punishing training methods have been tried but are deemed ineffective in reliably protecting tourists and their handlers from harm if close contact with elephants continues to be required.

Breeding matters

Many venues argue that they keep and breed elephants for conservation purposes. However, elephants reared and kept in tourist venues are unlikely to ever be successfully released in the wild.

The breeding and use of captive elephants in tourism is a lucrative business and is driven by tourist demand, commerce and profit. Most captive elephants in Thailand today have been bred specifically for commercial tourism. Across most of Asia, elephants are commodities and legally traded as livestock. Prices are as high as an expensive car.

Unfortunately, more captive elephant breeding is likely to be happening during 2020 and beyond as owners try to mitigate the economic effects of Covid-19.

Changing tourist attitudes

Our consumer surveys show that attitudes towards wildlife entertainment in China and other Asian countries are changing, as the public become more aware of animal welfare issues. Several industry-leading travel companies in China have joined our list of more than 250 travel companies worldwide pledging to stop selling elephant rides and offer humane alternatives instead.

More tourists from China visit Thailand than from any other country - nearly 11 million visited in 2018. And elephant riding has usually been on the bucket lists of many. However, from 2016 to 2019, there has been a decrease: 23% of Chinese tourists took part in elephant rides in 2019 compared to 36% in 2016.

In 2016, tourists interviewed in Thailand cited riding an elephant as their favourite activity (36%), and observing elephants as their least preferred activity (14%). By 2019, things had changed dramatically. Seeing wild animals in their natural habitat (37%) and observing elephants (24%) became the two most preferred activities. Eighty five percent of tourists interviewed in our most recent global poll believed that tour operators should avoid activities that cause suffering to wild animals.

Ending the suffering

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the vulnerability and dependency of captive elephants on tourism - venues have been struggling to feed their animals. The food costs for all elephants in Thailand alone are estimated at more than US$900,000 per month; a similar amount is needed for the salaries of their caretakers. World Animal Protection, other international NGOs organisations, and local organisations have had to step in to stop these iconic animals starving.

Covid-19 has also shown the close link between diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people. Tuberculosis has long been documented in both elephants and the mahouts that look after them - although this risk to human health is rarely publicised.

Change must start now to protect Asia’s elephants and over a period that gradually:

- reduces the number of captive elephants used for commercial tourism
- decreases demand for captive elephant tourism entertainment attractions
- improves conditions for the current generation of captive tourism elephants and their caretakers.
Governments must prevent captive breeding and the intake of any wild elephants for commercial use. They should also support transitions to high-welfare observation-only venues. In this report we detail how such venues can be successful businesses using the examples of Thailand’s ChangChill and Following Giants.

Travel companies and individual travellers are key to change. They should choose to only promote and visit elephant-friendly venues offering observation-only experiences, or choose to observe elephants responsibly in the wild.

Mahouts must be part of the improvements to venues and to elephant welfare. They need better employment packages and living conditions. They also need career development that will take them beyond the lifespan of the elephant in their care.

This generation of elephants must be the last to be kept in captivity. Elephants are wild animals - not entertainment commodities. They need our protection to stay in the wild where they belong.

Our researchers assessed the welfare conditions of 3,837 elephants at 357 venues.

- **63%**
  - Elephants suffering in severely inadequate conditions.

- **30%**
  - Experienced improved, yet still inadequate conditions

- **7%**
  - Of the elephants were kept in truly high-welfare observation-only venues.