



Foreword for Elephant not Commodities

By Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE

I have been fortunate, over the years, to have spent a good deal of time watching elephants in Tanzania. Of course, this is a report about Asian elephants, but the two species are very similar in their social behaviour. Both species form close knit groups of related females and young, led by a matriarch and these groups sometimes join up, into larger herds. They have a complex communication system that is only now beginning to be understood, and are among the most intelligent of all animals, with big brains, long memories and very distinct personalities.

I spent time with a family group where one mother had very young twins – which is not common in elephants. It was charming to see how they were trying to get the hang of their trunks, which clearly got in the way when they were trying to suckle. Their older brother was a pure delight to watch as he showed-off mock charging our land rover several times, tossing his head from side to side so that his trunk swayed to and fro. One of the females, possibly his mother's sister, gently swatted him with her trunk so that he moved away from us. Suddenly he spied a warthog in the grass and charged him.

Elephants show great compassion for each other. As one wounded female lay dying the members of her group formed a close-knit group around her, stroking her body with gentle trunks, trying to help her to her feet. They stayed until she died. And returned next day to cover her body with branches and leaves.

African and Asian elephants are both listed as endangered, and for both, habitat loss is a major factor. As human populations expand, elephants come into conflict with villagers when they raid crops. Both in Africa and Asia elephants earn tourist dollars, but whereas in Africa this is mostly through wildlife viewing, Asian elephants are ruthlessly exploited in captivity. Sangita Iyer's acclaimed documentary "Gods in Shackles" provides tragic insights into their abuse for ceremonies at temples. And it is Asian elephants who have been forced to perform for people, trained to stand on their heads, walk upright, or to carry paying visitors on their back to walk in circles. Their situation is made more intolerable because of cruel training, prodding with a pole with an iron spike called a bull hook, and shackling in between tourist performances.

This report is the result of a 10-year study of the thousands of captive Asian elephants used and horribly abused for the entertainment of tourists, mostly kept in conditions that do not supply even their most basic needs. They are forced to give rides to groups of people on their backs throughout the day, or to be washed by people as a so called 'ethical attraction'. Some in Thailand are trained to make drawings to sell.

Many of these elephants have been captured as youngsters from the wild, others are bred in captivity, but all are torn from the love of their mother and families. And then comes a cruel period when they are beaten into fear and submission. Like us elephants know joy and sadness, fear and depression. Like us they feel pain. This torture goes on until their will is broken and they obey to their Mahout through fear.

I went to one of the better elephant camps in Nepal. There they are trying to create an environment where the elephants can be released from their shackles and most of them were taken out to forage in the forest every day. Yet even there I watched two males hobbling forward, their front legs tightly chained together to prevent them from running off. It broke my heart and I am not ashamed of the tears I shed.



The exploitation and cruelty as detailed in this meticulous report is all the more shocking because in both Buddhism and Hinduism the elephant is revered. The Hindu God of Beginnings is Ganesha or Ganesh, depicted with the head of an elephant. In Buddhism the elephant stands for strength, honour, patience, peacefulness, and wisdom. Both these religions teach respect for animals. Mahatma Gandhi wrote that “a nation can be judged by the way it treats its animals”. By this criteria most countries exploiting captive elephants and other animals would get very low marks.

As I write, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every country and caused great suffering, loss of jobs and economic chaos. The tragedy is that to some extent we have brought it upon ourselves through our disrespect for the environment and our disrespect of animals. Zoonotic diseases are on the increase because we are creating ideal conditions for pathogens to spill over from animals to humans – in the wildlife markets of Asia, the bushmeat markets of Africa, the factory farms of today’s intensive animal agriculture and the trafficking of animals and their parts for food, medicine or exotic pets. Tuberculosis, one of the 10 most deadly diseases, has repeatedly spilled over from humans to elephants, and infected elephants can infect humans.

It is to be hoped that this pandemic will lead to us developing a new relationship with the natural world of which we are a part and on which we depend. We must recognize the importance of intact ecosystems in which every species of animal or plant has a role to play in the tapestry of life. Tragically we are losing species at an unprecedented rate – we are in the midst of the 6th great extinction, and this one is caused by us. To continue to capture or kill elephants in the wild is leading to their extinction in the wild, to the detriment of the habitats where they live. To continue to exploit them in captivity, whether wild caught or captive born, is to perpetrate unacceptable cruelty to highly intelligent social and sentient beings.

More and more tourists are becoming educated and demanding elephant friendly experiences – safaris to see them in the wild or sanctuaries where rescued elephants are rehabilitated. More and more people are understanding that we humans are not the only ones with personalities, minds capable of solving problems and, above all, emotions. What was acceptable in the past is no longer acceptable as our understanding increases.

Of course, those whose livelihoods depended on the exploitation of these amazing beings, the mahouts and the owners, must be helped to find other ways of making a living that are both profitable and ethically acceptable.

This report provides insights and propositions that, if followed, could ensure that the current generation of captive elephants kept for commercial tourism is the last.

Future generations of elephants must not experience captivity – they should thrive in their natural habitat. I pray we all do our part to ensure this vision comes true.

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