

## Visitor Discontent at Five Ex-Situ Elephant Conservation Establishments in Asia

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**Abstract.** Tourism is a significant aspect of most ex-situ conservation establishments for Asian Elephants. We assessed reasons for visitor discontent in five highly visited establishments in Asia, by analysing on-line visitor comments. The proportion of negative reviews varied significantly between institutions. Ten reasons for visitor discontent were identified. Unethical treatment of elephants was the commonest and lack of conservation relevance the second commonest reason stated for discontent. Other reasons for visitor discontent were related to misbehaviour of mahouts, management deficiencies and inadequacy of facilities.

### Introduction

Nature based tourism has experienced rapid growth in recent decades (Newsome *et al.* 2012) and currently accounts for about 20% of the global tourism market (Center for Responsible Travel 2016). Similar to zoos, establishments that house single wildlife species are ex-situ wildlife facilities with a strong tourism component. Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) are listed as 'endangered' by the IUCN and a number of institutions have been set up in range countries, as ex-situ conservation establishments. Most such establishments are styled as 'elephant orphanages' thereby appealing to the emotions of tourists. They are popular among tourists enthusiastic in watching elephants and getting to close quarters with them.

Visitor satisfaction and quality of experience are key factors that determine visitation and have a bearing on the development and continuity of such establishments. A key to economic stability and effective management of recreation sites is the reaction of visitors to facilities and services offered (Akama & Kieti 2003). Visitor feedback provides an opportunity for tourism establishments to understand problems associated with their operation. The WWW is a

major source of information for travellers around the world, and posts by visitors have gained recognition as a credible source of information for both travellers and the industry (O'Connor 2010). TripAdvisor <<https://www.tripadvisor.com>> is a popular travel website and its reviews are increasingly used in contemporary travel research (O'Connor 2008, 2010; Owens 2012; Kladou & Mavragani 2015).

This study assessed reasons for visitor discontent at five ex-situ Asian elephant conservation establishments, by analysing reviews on TripAdvisor.

### Methodology

#### *Identification of establishments*

The keywords 'Elephant Orphanage' and 'Asia' were used for searching the TripAdvisor site and the five ex-situ conservation establishments with the highest number of reviews on 31st January 2017 were selected (Table 1).

Elephant Nature Park (ENP) is a private sanctuary and rescue centre in Mae Taeng District, Chiang Mai Province, Northern Thailand, approximately 60 km from Chiang Mai city. The park was

**Table 1.** Selected establishments.

Establishment	Abbreviation	Country	# Reviews
Elephant Nature Park	ENP	Thailand	6939
Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage	PEO	Sri Lanka	2747
Elephant Safari Park	ESP	Indonesia	1598
Hutsadin Elephant Foundation	HEF	Thailand	1052
National Elephant Conservation Centre	NECC	Malaysia	610

established in 1998 and provides sanctuary for ‘rescued’ elephants, dogs, cats, buffaloes and other animals. Visitors and ‘volunteers’ pay to visit and help care for the animals, and can stay for extended periods. It has more than 30 elephants (Elephant Nature Park 2017).

The Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage (PEO) is a government establishment located in Kegalle district, Sri Lanka, approximately 95 km from Colombo. It was established in 1975 by the Department of Wildlife Conservation to care for baby elephants orphaned in the wild (Fig. 1). It came under the Department of National Zoological Gardens in 1978. The PEO continued to receive orphaned elephants till 1993, when the Elephant Transit Home was established to rehabilitate orphaned elephants and release them back to the wild (Fernando *et al.* 2011). Consequently, the PEO has become a captive breeding centre, tourism destination and a site to conduct research on captive elephants (Tilakaratne & Santiapillai 2002).

The Elephant Safari Park (ESP) was established in 1997 and is located in Taro, Bali Province, Indonesia. It is a private establishment authorized and monitored by the Indonesian government to keep and breed elephants saved by government camps in Sumatra. It is set in about 2 ha of landscaped botanical gardens, surrounded by natural forest. Facilities include a reception and information centre and a museum (Elephant Safari Park and Lodge 2017; Bali Adventure Tours 2017).

The Hutsadin Elephant foundation (HEF) is a private ex-situ conservation facility located in the Hua Hin District of the Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, Thailand. It was started by three local businessmen to rescue and care for elephants abandoned by their owners due to ill health, old age or because they were unable to work any longer. It depends on donations from companies and the general public. HEF provides opportunities to ride, wash, walk and feed elephants (Hutsadin Elephant Foundation 2017).



**Figure 1.** Chained elephant calf at PEO.

**Table 2.** Distribution of reviews for each establishment.

Establishment	# Reviews	Rating (% of total reviews)					% negative reviews*
		terrible	poor	average	very good	excellent	
ENP	803	0	0	3	7	90	3
PEO	279	9	9	19	29	34	37
ESP	119	9	4	9	21	57	22
HEF	110	2	4	5	19	70	11
NECC	60	3	5	17	27	48	25

\*Cumulative of average, poor and terrible ratings.

The National Elephant Conservation Centre (NECC) is a governmental institution established by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks of Malaysia in 1989. It facilitates translocating problem elephants from areas where their habitats were encroached by development to safer habitats including Taman Negara National Park. The centre has relocated more than 700 wild elephants. In addition to being the home to the translocation team and a number of captive elephants, the centre also looks after orphaned elephants. It carries out public awareness activities related to elephant conservation in Malaysia and supports research activities related to elephant translocation and conservation (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2017).

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The TripAdvisor site allows respondents to post detailed reviews and to rank their experience at a destination on a Likert scale ranging from ‘terrible’, ‘poor’, ‘average’, ‘very good’, to ‘excellent’. Reviews posted with regard to the five establishments in the six-month period from 1st August 2016 to 31st January 2017 were used for this study (n = 1371) (Table 2).

Reviews rated as ‘poor’, ‘terrible’ and ‘average’ were considered as negative. Extracted negative reviews (n = 181) were entered into a spreadsheet and analysed through latent content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Respondents’ country and reasons for discontent were recorded and analysed with respect to establishment. Quantitative analyses were performed with SPSS 16.0 and Microsoft Excel 2010.

## **Results**

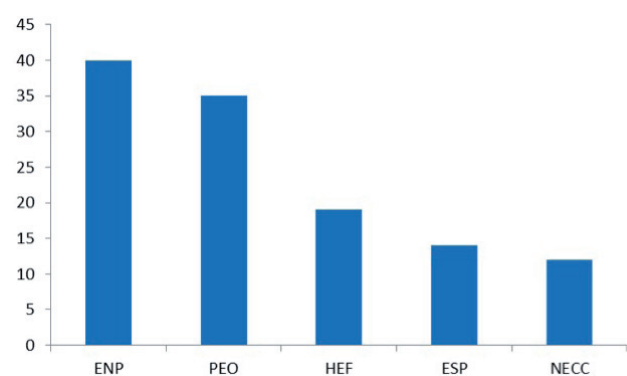
The number of countries represented by reviewers ranged from 12 to 40 per establishment with a total representation of 61 countries (Fig. 2). The proportions of ratings were significantly different among the five establishments ( $\chi^2 = 379.1$ ;  $p < 0.00001$ ).

#### *Reasons for discontent*

Ten reasons for visitor discontent were identified (Fig. 3, Table 3).

Unethical treatment of elephants was the commonest reason for visitor discontent and was stated for all five establishments. Respondents identified physical harassment, chaining and caging of elephants, elephant performances and elephant rides as unethical activities.

Lack of conservation relevance was ranked second and was also identified in relation to all five establishments.



**Figure 2.** Number of countries represented by reviewers of each establishment.

**Table 3.** Reasons for visitor discontent in each establishment as a percentage of negative reviews for each establishment (multiple answers possible).

Reason for discontent	ENP	PEO	ESP	HEF	NECC
Unethical treatment of elephants	29	57	77	58	20
No conservation relevance	21	37	19	42	13
Misbehaviours of mahouts	8	42	0	50	0
High entrance fee	21	26	54	0	0
Inadequate activities	0	19	23	8	27
Poor service	79	4	0	0	33
Lack of information	17	17	0	8	0
Visitor exploitation	13	13	4	33	0
Overcrowding	33	6	4	0	13
Poor facilities	13	2	0	0	33

Misbehaviour of mahouts was the third commonest concern and was identified for HEF, PEO and ENP. The activities identified consisted of asking for bribes, not wearing uniforms, smoking tobacco close to the elephants, excessive use of mobile phones by mahouts, compelling elephants to pose with tourists for photographs and to eat food given by tourists and offering ivory products for sale during elephant rides.

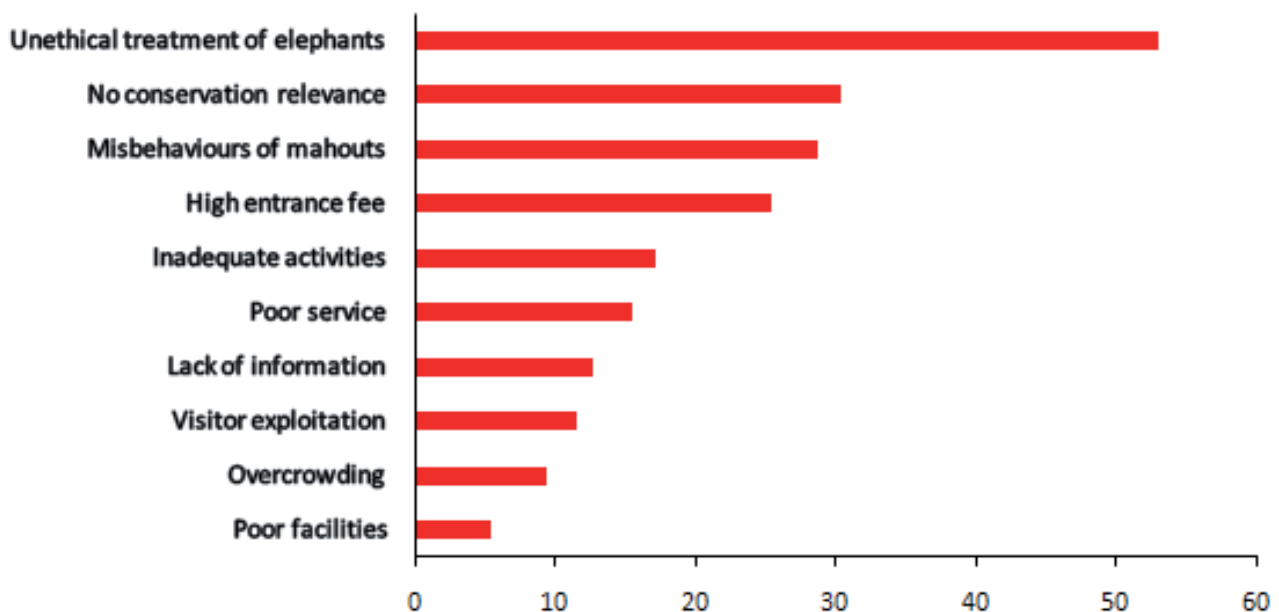
The fourth highest reason for discontent was the high entrance fee for ESP, PEO and ENP.

Lack of things to do was the fifth most common issue and was highlighted in all except ENP. Many visitors expected more interaction with

elephants such as washing and feeding them rather than simply observing them.

Dissatisfaction with services was the next highest and was identified for ENP, NECC and PEO. Reasons included frequent checking of tickets, congestion, assigning only a single guide for large numbers of visitors, unclear commentary of elephant show, having to be in large groups, problems with guides (insufficiently interactive, low English fluency, not properly answering visitors' questions), long waiting periods in between activities and short duration of activities.

The seventh highest reason was insufficient information regarding the establishment including



**Figure 3.** Reasons for visitor discontent as a percentage of total negative reviews.

vision, mission, objectives, history, function, and conservation and about the elephants, made the visitors discontent at ENP, PEO and HEF.

The eighth reason identified was exploitation of visitors by staff, merchants, hotels, and restaurants and was stated for all establishments except NECC. Identified instances consisted of attempts to sell food, drinks, and paintings.

Overcrowding was the ninth and was stated for all establishments except HEF.

Poor facilities including lack of adequate shops, communication facilities, transportation, shelter and sanitary facilities was identified in relation to NECC, ENP, and PEO.

## **Discussion**

We found a significant difference in ratings of the five establishments with PEO receiving the highest proportion of negative reviews (37%), followed by NECC, ESP, and HEF. ENP had the lowest proportion of negative reviews (3%), which was much lower than for any of the other establishments. The differences in the proportion of negative reviews were very high, with PEO receiving 10 times that of ENP. The observed pattern is unlikely to be related to sample size or type of visitor, as ENP had the lowest proportion of negative reviews but by far the highest total number of reviews ( $n = 803$ ) as well as the highest diversity of countries ( $n = 40$ ) of reviewers, while PEO had the highest proportion of negative reviews and the second highest number of total reviews ( $n = 279$ ) and countries ( $n = 35$ ). Therefore, it is likely that the observed patterns reflect the true situation with regard to each establishment.

The internet is a key source of information for travellers around the world and content posted by travellers has gained wide recognition as credible and unbiased sources of information for both travellers and the industry (Xiang & Gretzel 2010). Therefore negative reviews with regard to these establishments could in proportion impact the destination's image and tourists' decision to visit them.

The study identified ten reasons for visitor discontent. Nine reasons were applicable to the establishment with the lowest percentage of negative reviews, all ten to that with the highest, and six reasons were stated for each of the other three establishments. The institutions with the highest and lowest proportion of negative reviews had by far the highest number of total reviews. Therefore, the number of reasons identified per establishment appears to be related to the total number of reviews rather than reflect any actual differences between the establishments.

Unethical treatment of elephants and being unconvinced about the conservation relevance were the two commonest reasons for visitor discontent and were stated in relation to all five establishments. The finding emphasizes visitor expectations of animal welfare and conservation. With increased concern for conservation, people become more environmentally sensitive (Butler & Boyd 2000), which may be the reason for such expectations. All five establishments used the words 'conservation', 'nature', and 'orphanage' in advertising. Therefore, it appears that they were aware of current perceptions and expectations of visitors and made use of it to promote the establishment. However, the high proportion of reviews pointing out the deficiency of these aspects suggests that these establishments are lacking in them. Therefore, managers should pay more attention to ensuring animal welfare and the establishments should engage in applied conservation of elephants, in accordance with their stated objectives.

The other reasons for discontent identified were associated with management and varied among the individual establishments. Therefore priorities for corrective measures will differ between establishments. Clear expression of what facilities and types of activities are available at each establishment in information provided especially on-line, will decrease unrealistic expectations. Misbehaviour of mahouts and exploitation of visitors are problems whose correction is comparatively easy and less costly. Their prevalence suggests lack of vision and effectiveness of management.

Finally, the two establishments with the highest percentage of negative reviews were governmental institutions. While the sample size of 2 and 3 respectively for government and private institutions precludes any definitive conclusions, the result may reflect the general lackadaisical attitude and absence of a drive for excellence commonly observed in government institutions in Asia.

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