

Elephants in Captivity: Happy Ambassadors or Tortured Curiosities?

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Should elephants be kept in captivity? This really is a moot point. With one fourth to one third of the global Asian elephant population in captivity, captive elephants are a fact. While some captures from the wild still occur, greater interest and success in breeding captive elephants may lead to a sustainable domesticated population in the future. Therefore the more relevant question is how should we manage elephants that *are* in captivity?

Elephants especially females are group living animals with a network of strong social relationships. Males are largely solitary, although they may also have a network of social relationships with other males but with weaker bonds than among females. Obviously it is better if elephants can be kept as a group, allowing relatively free range and social contact with each other. However, elephants have home ranges hundreds of km² in extent and social networks of hundreds of individuals. How would this compare with the few acres of ranging and a handful of companions that can be provided under the very best of captive management? Even such a scenario is possible at less than a handful of facilities around the world. The vast majority of the 10,000-15,000 or so captive elephants will continue their lives in solitary confinement or be managed in isolation till the end of their days.

Given the sexually dimorphic social organization among elephants, where an elephant is going to be kept as a single-animal is it better to keep a male rather than a female? Would a male that is solitary by nature adjust better to living without interaction with its kind? On the other hand, dogs make 'better' pets than cats because the dog is a social animal. A single dog is not so single because it bonds with the owner who becomes part of the 'pack', hence the moniker 'man's best friend'. Is there a parallel here with an elephant?

Would an elephant transfer its group allegiance to the humans around it? What is the implication here for the 'hands off' or 'protected contact' increasingly advocated by western zoos where the keepers do not come into free contact with elephants as they used to?

Elephants are big potentially dangerous animals. In traditional elephant management in Asia an elephant is 'broken' and subjugated, usually through very cruel methods so that it would never challenge the keeper. In the case of working animals such as those used in logging in Laos or Myanmar a long period of training and close contact with the mahout follows. This ensures a strong bond between man and elephant and a great degree of control. At the 'Elephant Festival' in Laos, people mingle freely with these elephants in apparent safety (Fig. 1). In contrast, many of the elephants parading in religious-cultural pageants in Sri Lanka and India who walk the roads amongst tens of thousands of people have all four legs chained together so that they can only shuffle along. They are only a jab away from the pointed ankus of the mahout, as their training is insufficient to provide a high degree of trust and control.



Figure 1. Logging elephants at the 'Elephant Festival' in Paklay (Laos).



Figure 2. Burma, a well trained elephant at Auckland Zoo, New Zealand.

Obviously any animal which is potentially dangerous and living amongst humans, whether dog or elephant, would have a greater degree of freedom and a better life if it is well trained, hence providing a high degree of confidence that it will not attack a human at the drop of a hat. Is it then better to establish 'control' by even cruel means so that the elephant leads a 'better' life afterwards with close contact with humans rather than being always held in mistrust and at arm's length in protective contact? Or is it possible to be in free and close contact with an elephant through training by building trust and a system of reward and kindness, the safety being provided through understanding the nuances of its 'body language' as Andrew Coopers of the Auckland Zoo in New Zealand seems to think and practice with his ward 'Burma' a female Asian elephant? Burma plays and moves around with kids and keepers unfettered and in free contact. She responds to commands very well and seems to be a 'happy' elephant (Fig. 2).

Take the case of wild male bull elephants in Sri Lanka. In general wild bulls tend to raid crops much more than female groups. Farmers and authorities throw foot long firecrackers at them and shoot them with muzzle loaders and buckshot in an endeavour to protect crops. The elephants respond to such confrontational crop protection by becoming more aggressive. Some elephant bulls charge with intent to destroy,

the moment a flashlight is shined on them, as they know what follows. Man and elephant get locked into a vicious cycle of escalating conflict and raiding, leading to the annual death of 250 elephants and 70 humans in Sri Lanka alone. On the other hand there used to be numbers of these wild elephant bulls standing along an electric fence in Udawalawe National Park being hand fed by people (Fig. 3). They were so docile that some people went so far as to stroking their trunks and petting them. It seems an elephant too reciprocates to love with love and hate with hate.

Perhaps the most important role of captive elephants is as ambassadors for their wild brethren. The sparkle in the eye of a little girl or boy who meets a 'friendly' elephant kindles a sense of wonderment that will remain throughout life and foster love for elephant kind. Perhaps such feelings will translate to a desire to protect and conserve elephants in the future. Unfortunately most or many of the elephants in captivity today are not trained well or socialized to humans. Hence not only do they have to suffer through their lives in chains and pain but also will have a diminished ambassadorial role. Given that elephants in captivity are a fact, should we explore better and kinder ways of training them? Training of dogs and horses etc. has come a long way since people thought fear is the key to control. Can we use some of the newer more humane techniques in the case of elephants? Or should we stick our head in the sand in utopian hope of a day without captive elephants?



Figure 3. Wild elephant being fed at the fence along the Udawalawe National Park (Sri Lanka).