
The Role of Tourism in Elephant Welfare in Northern Thailand

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***Abstract :** The number of elephants in Thailand has declined dramatically in the past century, from approximately 100,000 in 1900 to roughly 4,450 today. Habitat loss and fragmentation have resulted in dwindling numbers of wild elephants, but the expansion of roads and other transportation infrastructure, coupled with a logging ban since the late-1980s, has also led to a diminished need for domesticated elephants. As a result, the owners of the domesticated elephants remaining in Thailand today have been left with few legal options for earning income aside from participation in the tourism industry. The rapid expansion of international tourism in Thailand has improved the welfare of elephants by providing their owners with opportunities for income generation. At the same time, however, life for elephants working in the tourism industry is far from ideal. Using qualitative data and direct observations, this paper addresses several questions: What are the greatest challenges faced by domesticated elephants in general, and those working in tourist-oriented camps specifically? What role has tourism played in improving the welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand? What are the dilemmas and tradeoffs associated with using elephants in tourism? What can be done to improve the lives of working elephants? Though tourism-related work is considered by some animal rights activists to be demeaning and unnatural, this paper argues that, given the current absence of viable alternatives, tourism contributes to the welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand in optimal, albeit imperfect, ways.*

Keywords: Elephants, Thailand, ecotourism, wildlife tourism.

Introduction

Semi-captive wildlife settings, especially those related to elephants, have in recent years become increasingly important to the tourism industry of Thailand. In particular, Northern Thailand, which contains three-quarters of the country's captive elephant population, serves as the center of an emerging wildlife tourism sector. Prominent in many aspects of Thai history, art, religious iconography, and popular culture (Cornwel-Smith & Goss, 2005), elephants are now trained to satisfy the tastes of foreign tourists, and the tourism industry employs nearly every domesticated elephant in Thailand that is suitable and fit enough for work. Of those elephants working

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Journal of Tourism, Volume X, No. 2, 2009

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in tourism, most are found in semi-captive settings known generically as 'elephant camps' (*baang chang* in Thai), with smaller numbers working either in indoor entertainment venues such as circuses, or trekking tours that feature elephant riding as part of single or multiple day visits to indigenous 'hilltribe' villages.

Elephants in tourism-oriented elephant camps perform three kinds of activities: direct interaction with tourists, entertainment, and demonstration of obedience, skills, and intelligence. Tourists interact with elephants by feeding them items such as bananas and sugar cane that are purchased from vendors in the camp. Interaction also includes photo opportunities where tourists sit on top of elephants or are hoisted up by elephant trunks. The most important form of interaction is riding in a *howdah* - a wide, strapped-on bench with a railing on the sides and padding underneath - on the backs of elephants for short (normally half to one hour) journeys through adjacent jungle and usually through a river or stream. Elephants perform several tasks related to entertaining tourists, including playing musical instruments (gongs, drums, and harmonicas), kicking soccer balls, dunking basketballs into hoops, sitting down on hind quarters, dancing to music, and walking on their hind legs. A large portion of the elephant shows that camps stage centers on the demonstration of what critics would identify as reminders and confirmation of human control and domination over animals (Kellert, 1996). Especially important in this regard are displays of obedience to a *mahout*, the keeper and driver of the elephant. Such displays include getting elephants to follow commands to sit, lie down, lift up a leg, toss a heavy chain up onto its own neck, or assist the mahout to mount by raising its hind leg, foreleg, or trunk. In addition to demonstrating skills in various logging tasks (such as rolling, pushing, lifting, and stacking logs), a small number of elephants also paint, using the tips of their trunks to hold brushes.

Using qualitative data and direct observations gathered and conducted at several elephant camps in the Chiang Mai vicinity, this paper assesses the relationship between tourism and elephant welfare in northern Thailand. In particular, this paper addresses the following research questions: What are the greatest challenges faced by domesticated elephants in general, and those working in tourist-oriented camps specifically? What role do tourism stakeholders play in improving the welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand? What are the dilemmas and tradeoffs associated with using elephants in tourism? Lastly, what can be done to improve the lives of working elephants?

With the exception of a handful of conference papers (Khawnual & Clarke, 2002; Tipprasert, 2002), unpublished reports (Preechapanya, 2000), and broad overviews of domesticated Asian elephants (Chatkup, Sollod, & Sarabol, 1999; Lair, 1997), there is little material on the role played by tourist camps in elephant welfare. While some authors (Cohen, 1982, 1983, 1989, 1996; Dearden, 1991, 1993; Dearden & Harron, 1994; Hayami, 2006; Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998; Michaud, 1997) have examined ecotourism and ethnic tourism in northern Thailand, none have discussed elephants to any substantial degree. In light of this dearth of information on the relationship between tourism and elephant welfare, this paper provides a much needed overview of the benefits and costs of tourism for elephants. Though tourism-related work is considered by some animal rights activists to be demeaning and unnatural, this paper argues that, given the current absence of viable alternatives, tourism contributes to the welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand in optimal, albeit imperfect, ways.

Methods

There are roughly 40 to 50 elephant camps throughout Thailand (Tipprasert, 2002). This paper is based on data collected between July, 2007 and August, 2008 at a group of elephant camps in the province of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. Most camps in Chiang Mai province lie within close proximity (no more than a two hour driving distance) to Chiang Mai city. There are seven 'major' elephant camps (those with more than 15 elephants) in the three Amphoe (districts)—Mae Rim, Mae Taeng, and Chiang Dao—to the immediate north of Chiang Mai city.

In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between two and four hours took place with the owners or managers of six major elephant camps. The author also interviewed several experts and stakeholders on the topics of wildlife tourism, elephant welfare, or tourism in Chiang Mai: four staff members from the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC) in Lampang province; the Assistant Director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Northern Region 1 office in Chiang Mai city; the President of the Chiang Mai Guide Association; the Director of the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECOT), based in Chiang Mai; four activists working for animal rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangkok; a total of nine Thai faculty members from Maejo University and Payap University in Chiang Mai, and Prince of Songkla University in Phuket; Richard Lair, the world's leading authority on domesticated Asian elephants; and Pawnchai Preechapanya, the author of one of the few studies of Northern Thailand's

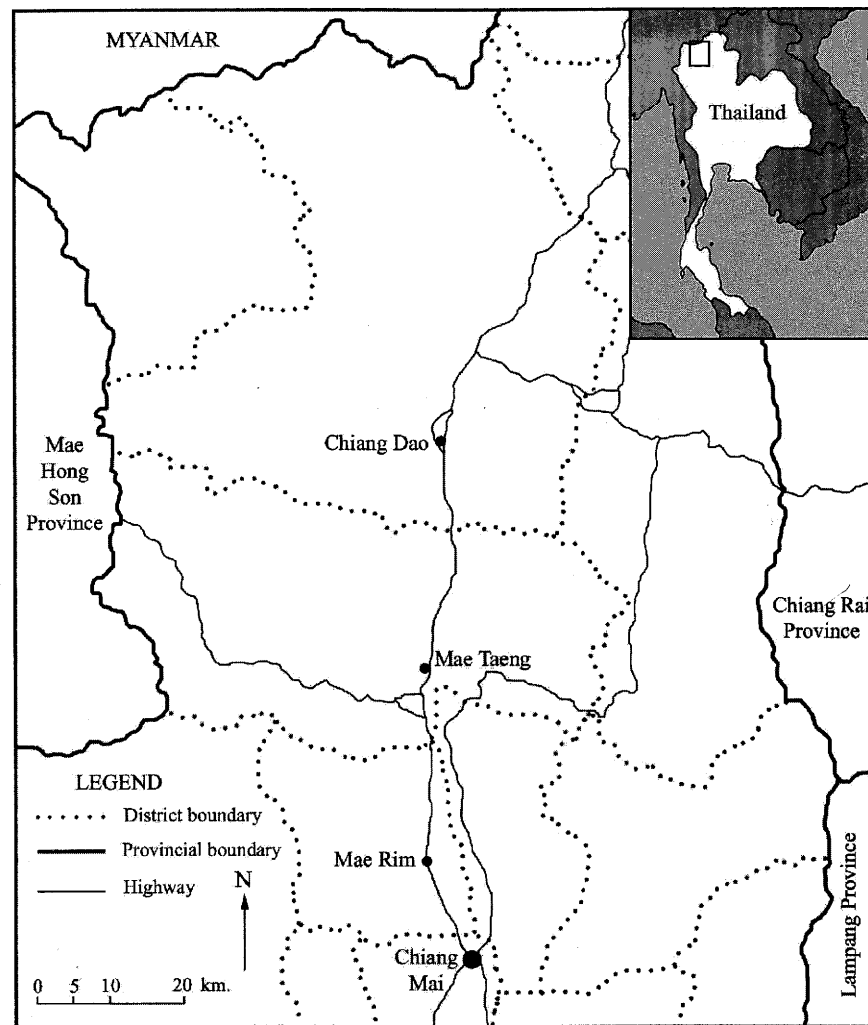


Figure 1 Northern Chiang Mai province, Thailand

elephant camps (Preechapanya, 2000). (In order to preserve the confidentiality of information provided by informants, quotations used throughout this paper are not attributed by name to specific individuals. Further, though interviews were conducted in both Thai and English, informant statements used in this paper are either the author's translations of the original Thai or are 'cleaned up' (i.e., grammatically correct) versions of original comments made during interviews.) In addition to interviews with experts and camp owners and managers, the author or his Thai research assistants made 45 visits to six elephant camps, resulting in many opportunities

both to observe the activities found at elephant camps, and to engage in informal conversations with hundreds of tourists and elephant camp staff members.

The Decline of the Thai Elephant

The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) has seen a dramatic decline in numbers over the past century. Since 1986, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has classified the Asian elephant as endangered on its Red List of Threatened Animals (IUCN, 2008). The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) estimates that there remain only 25,600 to 32,750 Asian elephants in the wild, with another 15,000 in captivity (WWF, 2008). The recent history of elephants in Thailand provides a microcosm of the general decline of the Asian elephant. In just over one century, the number of elephants in Thailand has declined precipitously, from approximately 100,000 in 1900 to roughly 4,450 today (Snow, 2008). Of these 4,450 elephants in Thailand today, only 1,000 or so are wild—found almost exclusively in the Khao Yai National Park and the Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries—while approximately 3,450 are domesticated.

Elephant camps in northern Thailand generally feature fewer problems for elephants than circus venues, and especially illegal logging and urban environments, but there nonetheless exist ongoing problems in six areas: regulatory context, injuries, nutrition, social environment, training, and the declining quality of mahouts.

At the macro level, the lack of a coherent or appropriate set of laws governing the treatment of domesticated animals greatly limits the ability of interested parties to prevent the abuse and neglect of elephants. Unlike wild elephants, which are protected under the Wildlife Reservation and Protection Act of 1992, domesticated elephants fall under the Draught Animal Act of 1939, which classifies domesticated elephants as draft animals, along with mules, horses, donkeys, cows, and water buffalo (Phuangkum, Lair, & Angkawanith, 2005). As a law aimed at defining the rights and requirements of ownership, the Draught Animal Act allows domesticated elephants to be treated as private property with no particular provisions for animal welfare or protection (Lair, 1997).

Aside from the usual injuries common to all elephants, such as cuts and bruises caused by trees or rocks, elephants in camps also suffer injuries

related to giving rides to tourists. For example, the howdah (bench) used to carry tourists (usually two at a time) causes abrasions along the back from the shifting of the bench, and across the chest from the chafing of the strap needed to support the howdah (Khawnual & Clarke, 2002). Elephants can carry a maximum of 300 kilograms (661 pounds), but it is recommended that they carry no more than 200 kilograms (441 pounds). For those unfortunate elephants that get assigned a particularly heavy tourist tandem, then, the task becomes especially tiresome and potentially injurious due to the increased chafing and shifting. In addition to injuries caused by the howdah, the forceful or inappropriate use of the mahout's hook (ankus) can also cause painful puncture wounds.

Providing adequate nutrition to working elephants is difficult because of the quantity and quality of food that they require. Elephants eat between 100 and 200 kilograms (220 to 440 pounds) of food per day. Since time spent by elephants eating natural, rather than cultivated, sources of food is limited for the majority of working elephants, it is left to the discretion of elephants' owners to purchase an adequate amount of food. The quality of food is equally important. The bulk of an elephant's diet consists of grasses, but leaves, twigs, bark fruits, and vegetables are also consumed. As Phuangkum et al. (2005) point out, the quality of food in some tourist camps is insufficient because it features little variety (which is important for nutritional balance), incorrect ratio of staple foods (such as grasses) to supplements (such as fruits), and dangerous levels of toxic chemicals from pesticides, fertilizers, or insecticides.

Every hour spent giving rides to, or performing for, tourists means one fewer hour spent eating, a task that normally occupies up to 18 hours of an elephant's day. An interesting tradeoff thus exists whereby a booming tourist trade means more profits for elephant owners, and therefore (in theory) more and better food for elephants, but at the same time for elephants means more hours working, and therefore less time spent eating. Fortunately, elephants working in camps in Chiang Mai are blessed with the right geography: the forested settings of elephant camps in northern Thailand provide opportunities for elephants to graze on natural foods, which are not only free but also missing the chemical residues associated with cultivated crops.

The social environment of elephant camps is artificial in that herds are not naturally formed around matriarchal family groups, but instead manufactured as elephants from different parts of the country (not to mention

neighboring countries) are brought together in camps. Further, the turnover of rented elephants in camps from one month or season to the next interrupts the extended social bonding required by elephants. The confined spaces of elephant camps are also unnatural, and occasionally contribute to visible signs of stress when shelters are not built with adequate space or ventilation. In an attempt to improve and standardize the conditions of elephant camps, the Livestock Department in 2002 crafted a set of standards that provide guidelines on issues such as camp location, camp layout, elephant shelters, personnel management, food, safety, hygiene, and waste management (Department of Livestock Development, 2002). According to several informants, camp owners initially claimed to embrace the idea, but soon resisted because of the higher costs involved in implementing the standards and the more intrusive level of government intervention that enforcement would entail. In light of the lack of will or ability among government officials to enforce their proposed guidelines, little has been done to ensure that camp conditions meet a certain minimal level of standards.

All working elephants require a certain level of training to obey commands but elephants in tourism-related settings require especially skillful and prolonged training because their interactions with tourists must be made as safe and predictable as possible. For centuries, the method, known in Thai as *phajaan*, used throughout Asia to break or 'crush' an elephant has involved separating a calf from its mother at the age of three or four, and then confining it for days with ropes to a small wooden cage or pen as several men hit, stab, poke, cut, burn, and starve the calf into submission (Hile, 2002; King, 2005). The principal criticism of the use of elephants in tourism in Thailand relates to the use of *phajaan* to train elephants. Animal rights activists, particularly those outside Thailand, have heavily criticized *phajaan*. For example, after acquiring a videotape of a *phajaan* ceremony in 2002, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) called for a total boycott of tourism to Thailand until the Thai government enacted laws prohibiting the use of elephants for commercial or entertainment purposes (see <http://www.helpthai elephants.com/>).

Lastly, the declining quality of mahouts in Thailand has compounded many of the problems discussed above. A concern repeatedly conveyed to the author during interviews with camp owners and managers was high turnover among mahouts. What was once seen as a noble profession is now associated with low levels of status and self-esteem (Lair, 1997), and this is compounded by the already socially and economically marginalized

position of the indigenous hilltribe minority communities to which many mahouts belong. The principal reason for the high turnover of mahouts is economic. Most mahouts in Thailand today are poor young men who possess neither the extensive experience nor the lifelong interest in elephants common to mahouts in the past. Consequently, when better paying work comes along, mahouts will abandon their elephants since there was never a deep attachment or commitment in the first place. High turnover is bad for camp owners, since it requires additional resources for training, and is also bad for elephants since mahouts with insufficient skills and experience must resort to rough methods to control an elephant that does not have a long time to bond with a mahout. Mahouts with poor familiarity with an elephant are also often unable to notice when things are amiss with an elephant's temperament or health. This lack of familiarity between mahout and elephant, and the greater need for force that it engenders, leads to several mahout deaths each year in Thailand, including occasionally at one of the Chiang Mai camps.

Tourism to the Rescue

As challenging and occasionally dangerous that work in some tourism settings can be, every stakeholder interviewed for this research acknowledges that elephants in Thailand would certainly be much worse off without tourism. The key event that shaped the use of elephants in tourism was the logging ban of 1989. In November, 1988, a tropical storm caused massive flooding and mudslides in southern Thailand, leading to 334 deaths, 1,900 injuries, 435,000 destroyed homes, and \$122 million worth of property damage (UNDHA, 1988). In response to the disaster, caused largely by the effects of deforestation, Thailand in January 1989 banned the harvesting of timber within its borders. Since the transportation of goods and people, the dominant activity of domesticated elephants until the beginning of the 19th Century, was no longer a source of employment with the advent of modern infrastructure, logging had become the principal activity for Thailand's elephants. With logging no longer allowed in 1989, approximately 3,000 elephants were suddenly without work and the price of elephants plummeted as owners tried to sell them off.

Logging, of course, does not represent an ideal environment for elephants, but compared to the conditions associated with the illegal logging that came after 1989, elephants in the traditional logging industry fared quite well, living and working as they did in forested settings with natural food, and receiving the relatively decent care and centralized management associated

with state ownership of elephants (Lair, 1997). (Most of the elephant working in logging before 1989 were owned by the Forest Industry Office, a state-owned enterprise.)

Fortunately, at just the time when the economic value and utility of elephants was at its lowest, Thailand was in the midst of a dramatic period of growth in international tourist arrivals (Figure 2). Between 1984 and 1989, the number of international tourists visiting Thailand more than doubled, from 2.3 million to 4.8 million (TAT, 1998: 4). In the five years following the logging ban in 1989, tourist arrivals grew by another 28 percent. In the city of Chiang Mai specifically, international tourist arrivals experienced similarly rapid growth in the 1990s, going from 427,000 in 1991 to 941,000 in 1998 (TAT, 1991: 13; TAT, 1998: 67). For elephants made unemployed by the logging ban, this growth in tourism in northern Thailand—the region accounting for around 75 percent of all domesticated elephants in Thailand—represented a perfect storm of sorts, where elephants with little economic value were brought together with foreign tourists eager to experience creatures considered majestic, and encountered only rarely or from a certain distance in tourists' home countries.

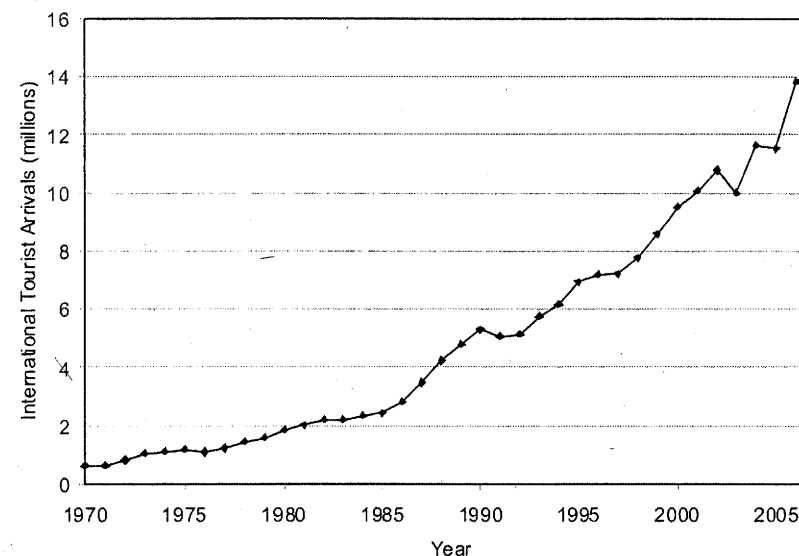


Fig. 2: International tourist arrivals in Thailand, 1970-2007

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) (1998: 4); TAT (2008).

Based on information gathered by the author through interviews, observations, and informal conversations with stakeholders such as tourists, elephant camp managers and owners, Thai academics, and tourism officials, it is clear that tourism, and work in elephant camps specifically, has contributed to the welfare of elephants in numerous ways. Most importantly, it creates a demand for domesticated elephants, and this in turn leads to better care and protection than would be the case were the value of elephants to plummet again, as they did immediately after the logging ban. Regardless of their cultural and religious significance in Thai history, the fate of elephants today is tied first and foremost to market forces. Due to their legal status as draft animals, domesticated elephants are considered private property and therefore possess value only if they can create a financial return for their owners. In a Thai animal rights context that favors the utilitarian values of animals over their intrinsic worth as living creatures (Gershon, 2006), it is therefore imperative for the well-being of elephants that their financial value remains high. When tourism sags, as it did after the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2003, the price of elephants drops, resulting in more owners seeing their elephants as financial burdens and consequently selling them to entrepreneurs with little genuine interest in elephants as anything other than investment tools.

The welfare of individual elephant is largely dependent on the financial success of camp owners, mahouts, and elephant owners. Without the revenue generated by the hundreds of thousands of tourists that visit Chiang Mai's elephant camps each year, elephants would surely suffer due to the high costs associated with their care. In interviews, every camp owner and manager admitted that elephants that are no longer needed during the low season often end up wandering urban streets. For owners and mahouts of elephants, more income means better veterinary care, a greater quantity of food, and a better range of food sources. On average, elephant camps in the Chiang Mai area pay 5,000-7,000 baht (\$141-\$197) per month to rent an elephant; this income, derived from tourism, is valuable in the absence of other viable alternatives for elephants to earn profits for their owners. In those cases where mahouts are hired to handle elephants owned by others (including the camps themselves)—roughly half of the mahouts working in the camps surveyed do not own their own elephant—tourism represents a welcome source of income, especially given that mahouts are on the whole poor, uneducated, and socially marginalized. In addition to earning 3,000 to 5,000 baht (\$85-\$141) in monthly salaries, mahouts working in Chiang Mai elephant camps reported in informal conversations with the

author that they are also able to earn between 200 to 1,000 baht (\$5.5-\$28) per day in tips from tourists. While this extra income is not necessarily spent on elephants by mahouts who simply work in camps with elephants owned by others, heightened mahout income does benefit individual elephants because this income reduces the economic incentive for mahouts to seek supplemental employment outside the camp. This, in turn, means more time spent by mahouts bathing, feeding, and becoming familiar with their elephants.

Elephant camps operate in fixed locations that are clearly marked and easily accessible, and this, according to several animal rights activists interviewed for this research, makes it much easier for veterinary care to be delivered to elephants. Compared to elephants in illegal logging, or fly-by-night jungle trekking operations, elephants in camps are in constant public view and are therefore much more easily monitored by veterinarians and government officials. This perhaps helps to explain why in a study measuring the health and welfare of working elephants in several locations throughout Thailand, Chatkupt et al. (1999) found that elephants in 'permanent,' rather than seasonal, tourist camps in Chiang Mai specifically exhibited the greatest signs of health, as indicated by alertness, responsiveness, frequency of ear, tail, and trunk motion, and body condition.

Just as important as their public visibility to veterinarians and government officials, elephants in camps remain in the daily sights of foreign tourists, who are not shy about expressing their opinions. In 1993 alone, for instance, 372 foreign tourists lodged complaints to the Tourism Authority of Thailand about the treatment of elephants (Lair, 1997: 191). A staff member of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) office in Chiang Mai reported to the author that the TAT office receives about two letters per month regarding complaints about elephant welfare, and oral complaints to the staff of the TAT office occur daily.

If one had to choose a single reason to advocate for tourism as a means of employment for Thailand's domesticated elephants, it would be the need to provide an alternative to urban street wandering (often called 'begging' in newspaper or magazine articles). The incongruity of seeing an enormous elephant wandering the streets of an urban area has produced both wonderment and grief among foreign visitors to Thailand, leading to a profusion of stories in the international press (Chadwick, 2005; Fuller, 2008; Levett, 2006; Snow, 2008). Street-wandering elephants walk the streets,

usually at night when the pavement is not dangerously hot for their feet, while their mahouts earn money by selling food to onlookers wishing to feed the elephants. To many Thais, the site of the majestic and historically-revered elephant wandering the streets with its mahout for food on urban streets is a source of embarrassment, and local officials have tried several times to prohibit elephants from Bangkok (Pimmanrojngool & Wanghongsa, 2002). Yet, while some elephants are part of a nationwide syndicate that leases elephants, especially calves, for the purpose of street wandering, many elephants in Bangkok and other cities are there only because of the sheer economic need of their mahout-owners or because of the lack of suitable natural sources of food in regions such as northeastern Thailand (Isaan). Tourism therefore offers an attractive, if not perfect, alternative to the depravities of urban life for elephants, and the economic incentive to bring elephants to cities would surely increase in the absence of elephant camps.

No Easy Solutions

It is clear that the promotion of more tourism, not less, is currently the most expedient and realistic way to improve the welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand. However, aside from being an imperfect solution, especially from a pure animal rights perspective, tourism produces several intriguing dilemmas that illustrate the lack of easy solutions to the problems facing elephants in Thailand. This final section will examine two such dilemmas: the difficulty of enforcing legal standards, and the harmful consequences of excessive tourist demand.

For the casual observer, particularly one living in a society featuring environmental awareness and government regulatory intervention, the need for legislative solutions to the problems encountered by domesticated elephants would appear to be obvious and indispensable. As mentioned earlier, the only legal protection afforded to domesticated elephants in Thailand comes from their inclusion in the Draught Animal Act of 1939, which classifies domesticated elephants as draft animals, and therefore as private property with few rights.

In response to this insecure legal situation, some have argued that captive elephants should be included in Thailand's Wildlife Reservation and Protection Act (WPA) of 1992, which offers a measure of protection for wild elephants (Lohan, 2002). Lair (1997: 183) points out, however, that many good arguments can be made against the inclusion of domesticated

elephants in the WPA: the lack of punitive provisions and mechanisms in the WPA to prevent acts harmful to domesticated elephants; the impossibility of enforcing, in domesticated populations, WPA stipulations on breeding, selling, and moving protected species; and the difficulties that WPA restrictions would create for elephant owners and mahouts trying to make a living. Thus, while including the domesticated elephants that work in tourism in the WPA would prevent some of the most egregious examples of cruelty to elephants, it would also create its own set of problems.

Similarly, the creation and enforcement of stringent management standards for elephant camps intuitively makes sense and appeals to those concerned about elephant welfare. It is true that guidelines and minimal standards related to elephant shelters, food, safety, and hygiene would unquestionably, if followed, improve the conditions of many elephant camps throughout Thailand. But regulations on businesses almost always bring about higher costs in the immediate term. This is the reason that the owners of elephant camps in the Chiang Mai area initially embraced, and then soon ignored, guidelines for elephant camps drafted by the Livestock Department in 2002 that established standards on issues such as elephant shelters, camp location, waste management, food, and safety (Department of Livestock Development, 2002). Imposing standards would improve the welfare of elephants in the larger, better managed camps, but elephants in the majority of camps would actually suffer because camp owners would respond to rising business costs associated with standards by cutting corners wherever possible. When asked whether government standards would benefit elephants, one camp manager gave the following answer:

If the government told us what to do, and forced us to build shelters this high, or give elephants this much food, or only let elephants work this many hours, then it would be very expensive for many camps. The good camps take care of their elephants. They have to because if elephants are too tired or look bad, then tourists will complain. If small camps close down because they can't afford to follow the government's rules, then this hurts Thai people. It is easy for people to say the government should interfere with elephants or in the tourism industry, but Thai people need jobs. If government rules are difficult for camps to follow, then we would have to make more money from our elephants. I don't think this would be healthy for our elephants.

Since competition limits the ability of camp owners to raise their prices, they would instead have to squeeze more work out of elephants and skimp

on things like veterinary care, the quantity and quality of elephant food, and the salaries of mahouts. So, an interesting dilemma arises whereby, on the one hand, the enforcement of higher standards drives some operators out of business and forces surviving businesses to cut costs, while on the other, the absence of enforceable standards means no guaranteed protection at all for elephants working in tourism.

Despite not offering an ideal life for elephants, tourism is the best available route to their welfare due to the utility and value that come from tourist demand. Excessive tourist demand, however, can be harmful for elephants. The ease with which entrepreneurs are able to open an elephant camp, needing only a regular business license to operate, means that when demand for elephants is hot, as is in periods of rapid tourism growth, many elephant camps and jungle trek operations spring up out of nowhere. Many such businesses are tucked along roadsides or in pockets of jungle and consist of a handful of elephants that give rides to tourists and perform the occasional impromptu show. The dilemma that this creates is that tourism is fundamental to the continued utility, and therefore welfare, of elephants, but if that demand grows too fast, then it results in a proliferation of operators, leading in turn to the intense competition that characterizes other sectors of Thailand's tourism industry.

A high level of competition between elephant camps and trekking operators is harmful to elephants in many ways. First, it suppresses prices charged to tourists because of increased supply, particularly from small, temporary operators that undercut the market and drive down prices in order to capture market share. Not only do cheap prices reduce the profits necessary to maintain expensive animals such as elephants, but the inability of operators to raise prices encourages cost cutting in ways damaging to the health and wellbeing of elephants. Second, competition between camps offering similar products encourages owners to introduce a higher number of activities and a greater range of elephant 'tricks.' Given that quality is more difficult to improve than quantity, elephant camp operators are inclined to pack in more action during every tour. Thus, all major camps in Chiang Mai now offer bamboo rafting, oxcart riding, and souvenir shopping. Some camps in Thailand—not so much in Chiang Mai but more so in other tourist resort destinations such as Pattaya and Phuket—also now offer frivolous circus-style stunts meant to anthropomorphize and infantilize elephants. Third, pressure to squeeze more profit out of the same number of elephants leads to longer working hours and more shifts for elephants.

Competitive pressure to pack in many activities into each elephant camp tour means that mahouts must hustle elephants along and prevent them from taking breaks for rest, food, or water. The only way to do this, especially for inexperienced or impatient mahouts, is to use their hooks more frequently and with more force. As one informant explained,

When business is high and there are many tourists, the elephants need to stay on the path and move quickly. If they stop to eat plants or walk too slowly, then the mahout needs to shout more and hit them with the hook. The tourists don't like to see the mahout use the hook, especially on the elephant's head or ear, but the elephant needs to be controlled and the tourist can get hurt if the mahout doesn't control the elephant. The problem is that some mahouts don't have enough experience with elephants so they have to use the hook too much. If the elephants take too long to give tourists their rides, the mahout gets in trouble from the manager because tourists have a limited schedule and have to rush from one activity to the next.

Wild elephants in Thailand are affected only negligibly if at all by the use of domesticated elephants in tourism, but several experts and at least one camp owner interviewed for this research believe that elephants in neighboring countries such as Myanmar are hurt by excessive tourism demand in Thailand. Tourist fascination and affection for 'cute' baby elephants has led to an inflation of their price, and this in turn has encouraged the smuggling of elephant calves from Myanmar into Thailand ("Stamping," 2001). (Smuggled calves are also used for street wandering.) Tourism demand that exceeds Thailand's capacity of available and suitable domesticated elephants creates incentives for both smugglers and camp operators. For smugglers in Myanmar, calves with little value in logging can now be sold for large amounts to Thai agents in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces. Meanwhile, some Thai elephant camp and trekking operators find it more convenient and certain to purchase a smuggled calf than to devote the resources and time needed to maintain an elephant workforce through natural reproduction. It could be argued that the small number of calves (50-100) smuggled each year into Thailand represents a small percentage of the total population of wild elephants in Myanmar (which has the second largest population of Asian elephants in the world after India). However, for those individual smuggled calves that are prematurely and often violently separated from their mothers, excessive tourism demand in Thailand has indeed proven harmful, even as it has contributed to the overall welfare of domesticated elephants in Thailand.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that tourism represents an imperfect solution to the complicated problem of elephant welfare in Thailand. In the grand scheme of things, many people would agree that it is regrettable that the majestic elephant, one of the most complex and fascinating creatures on earth, has been domesticated at all. Being put to use for such seemingly trivial and anthropocentric purposes as giving rides to tourists, twirling hula hoops on their trunks to the sound of music, and kicking soccer balls seems especially unfortunate. Life for elephants in tourist camps throughout Thailand is imperfect at best, and hazardous at worse, but the absence of tourism demand would make life even more difficult for Thailand's remaining domesticated elephants.

In light of the issues raised throughout this paper, there are lots of ways in which different stakeholders can help to improve the fate of elephants in Thailand. Domestic and particularly foreign NGOs interested in elephants or animal rights more generally have hurt their cause by unnecessarily antagonizing elephant camps with the strident tone and inflexibility of their criticisms. In a social environment such as Thailand's that rewards cooperation and condemns direct confrontation, NGOs would be more effective working with the more receptive camps and assisting in research that would help to ascertain the degree to which tourists really do desire experiences that necessitate activities such as elephant shows, and even elephant riding. As Patanakorn (2002) and Lohanan (2002) argue, NGOs also need better cooperation amongst themselves if they wish to advance the interests of domesticated elephants. There are at least 12 national organizations in Thailand that focus on the problems faced by domesticated or wild elephants, and too often, personal rivalry or divergent beliefs on strategy has resulted in a lack of coordination and cooperation.

The stakeholder most important to current elephant welfare is the Thai government. Since the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is powerless to monitor or enforce standards among elephant camps—because camps are not technically tour operators or travel agents—the TAT should at least more rigorously endorse those camps deemed to be most professional and ethical in terms of human resource management and animal welfare. Promotion of tourism as a whole is essential to elephant wellbeing overall, but TAT endorsement would add an additional incentive for camps to operate in ways beneficial to elephants. The TAT should also make tourists more aware of the TECC, a facility that features excellent veterinary care and

working conditions for approximately 50 elephants, and relies on revenue from tourist visitation to operate an elephant hospital and mobile veterinary clinic.

At the national level, a new law covering domesticated elephants in Thailand is badly needed. Virtually every person interviewed for this study commented that the existing 1939 law covering domesticated elephants is inappropriate and ineffective for elephants today. As neither wild animals nor typical draft animals such as cattle and water buffalo, elephants working in camps belong to a special category that demands special legal consideration (Lair, 1997). Assuming that habitat loss and fragmentation will continue to plague Thailand's remaining wild elephants, tourism demand and greater urgency and coordination by the Thai government are the only feasible ways of improving the welfare of Thailand's domesticated elephants.

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