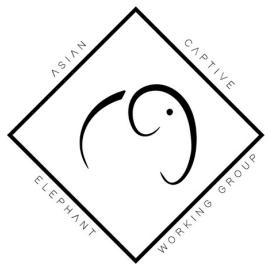




# ACEWG

ASIAN CAPTIVE ELEPHANT WORKING GROUP



2017 UPDATE

# Addressing a Giant Problem in Southeast Asia

The welfare of captive elephants is a topic of intense debate among animal managers, conservationists, scientists, the general public, animal welfare/rights groups and the media. Common concerns, especially on welfare, raised about elephant tourism in particular are complex in their nature and impact, and call for urgent scientific evaluation as well as for realistic solutions to ensure the sustainable and ethical management of captive elephants in the future.

The interaction between elephants and people has a long-standing cultural and commercial history and elephants continue to play a role in the economy. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) there are approximately 13,000 Asian elephants in captivity used for tourism, logging and transport throughout the Asian elephant range countries (AsERSM, 2006). The use of elephants in tourism camps is increasing; an estimated 2,700 elephants from an estimated total captive population of 4,500 are used for such purposes in Thailand (Pintawong et al., 2014).

For the tourist camps in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, there are currently no acknowledged and/or widely used guidelines for best practices for the management and care of elephants. This has resulted in a large number of facilities operating with an insufficient capacity to manage captive elephants. Such facilities are extremely vulnerable to criticism, creating false assumptions about proper captive elephant management and undermining the reputation of good facilities.

Recognizing the urgent need to create more awareness about both the problems and the possible solutions as well as provide recommendations to improve health care and management practices for captive elephants in the ASEAN countries, a group of regional elephant specialists, veterinarians, researchers and conservationists formed an **Asian Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG)** in June 2015.



# The ACEWG Acknowledges:

- 1 Closing all elephant tourism camps is not a realistic option for a variety of reasons, including the lack of alternative livelihoods for both people and elephants. Releasing captive elephants back into the wild should be explored, but is currently not a realistic option for a large majority of captive elephants due to a lack of suitable habitat within elephant range countries, the high levels of human-elephant conflict (HEC) across Asia, and the risks – real or perceived – that releases will result in increased HEC.
- 2 There are a variety of opportunities or uses for elephants in tourism facilities including, but not limited to activities such as riding, bathing, interaction with tourists, shows, mahout experiences, and zoo style viewing of elephants in a landscaped area. In addition, these facilities have the potential to provide favourable conditions for studying and offering education about elephants.
- 3 The relationship between humans and elephants has existed for thousands of years. The elephant tourism industry provides an opportunity to maintain the knowledge and historic cultural value of elephants in ASEAN range countries, and showcases the deep human-elephant bond that encourages an understanding and appreciation for elephants.
- 4 With limited possibilities for raising the significant income required for elephant food and care, an increasing number of captive elephants now depend on employment in the tourism industry.
- 5 Elephants are intelligent and mobile animals with a highly developed social structure. They have complex needs and in captivity require professional management and care protocols
- 6 Elephants have the capacity to be fatally dangerous to humans and other elephants in both captive and wild situations and must be managed accordingly.
- 7 The use of elephants in tourist camps has raised global concerns and public debate. It is evident that although there are no simple solutions, more research is required to scientifically guide the development of protocols to appropriately address welfare concerns and to further improve management systems.
- 8 Wild elephant populations continue to be threatened, and thus the removal of elephants from the wild for any reason, but specifically to meet the needs of the tourism industry, is a major concern to the global conservation community.
- 9 To ensure better welfare for captive elephants, modern techniques of animal training should be developed and introduced gradually to adjust or supplement those traditional training and handling practices that cause severe discomfort or suffering.
- 10 The majority of captive elephants in ASEAN countries are owned or cared for on a daily basis by people adhering to a management culture that has been passed down over thousands of years. Efforts are currently underway to improve the quality of captive elephant management but understanding, adopting and enforcing the need for new management practices within local culture will take time.



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A formal elephant registration program, particularly in those countries without an existing program, is urgently needed and will help to reduce the illegal capture and trade of elephants. Existing formal elephant registration programs must be properly enforced.

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Effective animal management requires systematic registration, health management and record keeping for all individuals in a population. Such databases can track reproduction and mortality, thus providing valuable information on genetic diversity and demographic stability of the registered population.

13

Different management systems have to be carefully and scientifically assessed as releasing elephants into the wild or large managed habitats does not automatically address welfare concerns appropriately.

14

The term sanctuary is often misapplied to, or by, some captive elephant facilities in an effort to differentiate them from other places with alternative management styles. At present, no tourism-funded ASEAN elephant facility meets all the requirements that define a true sanctuary. A full understanding of the limitations of elephant care and welfare as well as different elephants' individual needs in any facility is needed before any such designation can or should be applied.

15

A certification program for elephant tourism camps is urgently needed. This has the potential to encourage the development of a much-needed registration system for all captive elephants, enforce best practices for welfare, improve training opportunities for mahouts, and provide a means by which camps that follow best practices are rewarded by greater financial viability.

As a group of **elephant specialists, veterinarians, researchers, camp managers** and **conservationists**, we recognize the urgency to, proactively and with sound scientific knowledge, address the current situation of elephants in tourism in ASEAN countries.

## The goals of ACEWG are to:

- ❖ Ensure sustainable populations are only created from already existing captive elephant groups.
- ❖ Promote a high quality of life for captive elephants in ASEAN elephant range countries by supporting positive elephant welfare practices, ensuring that the physical and mental needs of elephants are met, and promoting proper environmental stimulation, enrichment and social group living.
- ❖ Eliminate the capture of wild elephants for any commercial purpose whatsoever from within ASEAN countries.
- ❖ Bring together knowledgeable/experienced parties to address all matters related to ensuring a sustainable quality of life for captive elephants in ASEAN elephant range countries.
- ❖ Improve captive elephant welfare by supporting quality mahouts and protecting elephants from abuse and misuse by humans.
- ❖ Support the creation of an Elephant Welfare Standard for captive elephants in ASEAN countries providing camp managers and the public with a baseline for elephant care as well as guidelines & support for camps to exceed this standard.
- ❖ Identify sustainable means for covering the costs of captive elephants while encouraging ethical management and conservation.
- ❖ Maintain the traditions and culture surrounding elephant care while developing effective and humane elephant management plans that respect mahout tradition and its cultural history and significance.
- ❖ Encourage good business practices, and strengthen business models for captive elephant management based on high welfare standards.
- ❖ Enhance education and awareness of issues related to wild and captive elephants, and recognise the opportunities the captive populations present for species conservation.
- ❖ Encourage tourism facilities to use accurately researched and conveyed science and education to promote wild elephant and habitat conservation and good captive elephant welfare practice to the public.

## References:

AsERSM (2006). Report of the Asian Elephant Range States Meeting, January 2006, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. IUCN-SSC.

Pintavongs, W. et al. (2014). Domestic elephant population structure and health status in Thailand. Journal of Kasetsar Veterinarians. 24(1): 16-24.



This statement of the **Asian Captive Elephant Working Group** is supported by the following entities:



Smithsonian Conservation  
Biology Institute



GOLDEN TRIANGLE  
ASIAN ELEPHANT FOUNDATION



conservation biology  
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