

Cultural aberrations in the management of captive elephants

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Abstract: This paper addresses the contradictions between cultural views on the management of elephants and the reality in the field. All methods used in the management of elephants in captivity originate from traditional practices developed in South Asia over the past 4,000 years. These methods were borrowed and adapted when elephants were exported to Europe and North America for the purpose of circuses and zoos, two forms of captivity that reflected the essence of colonial imperialism and caused the relocation of elephants outside their home range.

Since the 1970s the management methods used for elephants in the West became incompatible with the development of Animal Rights principles in North America and Europe and with the realisation that zoos and circuses were a complete failure in terms of elephant conservation. Consequently methods known as Protected Contact and Positive Reinforcement were adopted to address the moralistic concerns regarding cruelty to the animals, but without questioning the principles of captivity. Ironically these so-called new methods are now progressively being imposed into the elephant home range countries by Animal Rights organisations. The effect of this is to discredit the traditional methods and to compromise genuine long-term solutions for the conservation of elephants.

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank our SOAS colleagues for organising this Elephant Conference and CES for hosting it. I was at SOAS from 1992 to 1993 for a Masters in archaeology, anthropology and politics, and immediately afterwards I came back to India and focused on tribal communities who live and work with elephants. Soon my interest shifted towards these animals, and this has never wavered in 23 years.

Today, students and researchers working on elephants represent a vast community, but when I began in 1993 there were very few. There was of course Dr Sukumar whom I met in 1994, his team, and a few other people, all with backgrounds in biology or ecology, unlike the education in human sciences I had received.

However, I noticed two things, at that time:

1) First: only veterinary science and ecology focused on elephants. Veterinary science came first, probably with the work of G. H. Evans in 1910, following ancient Indian texts such as the *Gajashastra* and the *Hastividya*. Ecology logically focused exclusively on the species in the wild, and I realised with surprise that the minute an elephant was captured, it immediately ceased to be of any interest to the ecologists and fell into the competence (or incompetence) of the vets. Once captured, the endangered species is considered as cattle and can be seen referenced under this category in Forest Department archives until the 1950s and 1960s. Since 1972 and the Wildlife Protection Act, the vocabulary has changed, but the mentality has not evolved much regarding captive elephants. One example: until very recently, veterinary students were exclusively trained for cattle and pets and had no experience in wild species including elephants. So I realised that captive elephants were lost in a gap between two disciplines.

2) The second thing I noticed was that although biology and ecology are essential to understanding the specificities and requirements of elephants, and to defining a methodology in conservation, this is not what induces the general attitude of human society towards the species. Rather, it is a complex and often irrational mixture of emotional, cultural, ethical, aesthetic and economic factors that veil and distort scientific facts, create obstacles to the adoption of sound, logical methods, and often result in aberrant compromises. I felt that there was scope here for a study of the elephant according to an anthropological approach.

Contradictory characteristics of elephants

The common opinion about wild elephants is somehow clearer: they are wild and therefore should be kept in National Parks where they can occasionally be seen from a respectable distance. In people's consciousness, the word "wild" is synonymous with "dangerous", "ferocious", and "uncivilised". In the wild, a clear gap is marked between humans and elephants: physically and intellectually.

But the case of elephants in captivity is more confused. This confusion is reflected in the vocabulary: Are they domestic? Domesticated? Trained or tamed? Both wild and captive? Whatever the case, in captivity, the elephant becomes a human "property" – intellectually, first of all, as it is at the permanent disposal of people: it can be used or displayed at any time, captured photographically, touched, fed, washed, mounted, decorated, worshipped, and trained to perform tricks that mimic human behaviour. It loses its characteristic as a "ferocious", "uncivilised" animal and gains a degree of sociability.

Legally, even though the sale of elephants has officially been banned in India since 2002, the thousands of elephants that had been traded prior to that date still remain as private property. As a human property, the elephant gains a commercial value, becomes an asset and, as in any business situation, is expected to be a source of revenue over the years. That is where the problem arises, as the elephant owners face managerial difficulties over time: health and behavioural problems among elephants; difficulty of finding trained mahouts or caretakers; use of inadequate and even cruel practices due to a lack of experience; reduced longevity of the elephants; absence of reproduction. As a result, whatever the setup, it is impossible to maintain a healthy, viable captive population and more animals have to be taken from the wild, legally or illegally.

The elephant has two contradicting characteristics: on one hand it can be tamed; on the other hand, it cannot be domesticated, that is: "bred in captivity". This antagonism must have caused a lot of frustration as humans failed fully to possess the species in the same way they have able to do with horses. Consequently, as we know, wild horses have practically disappeared, but there is no doubt that wild elephants have been protected until today in order to be captured, since they could not be domesticated.

However, the insistence, the obsession, of keeping elephants in captivity has survived history up to the present day in many countries, including outside the elephant's home range, in spite of the knowledge that the species is endangered, and this has led to conflicting views on the various methods of management, resulting in completely aberrant situations.

This often-heated debate is simultaneously naive and profound. It is rooted in the fantasy of the domination of the elephant by man, a fantasy partially realised in Asia; its westward journey that began 2,000 years ago and its return to Asia after 4,000 years, with distortions but no solutions, which leads to a clash of opinions.

This is what I want to explore briefly with you today, based on two cases, which I have deliberately chosen from among very recent setups for captive elephants in India designed according to so-called "new" concepts.

Landmarks in human relations with elephants

In order to put the case studies into historical perspective, I would like to recall some historical landmarks, not to trace the history of the elephant in civilisation, but rather to throw light on the fantasy operating in the human relationship with the elephant.

On a seal from the Indus Valley civilisation (2500-1500 BCE), one of the earliest evidences of the human capacity to tame elephants, the representation of the animal is realistic. One can feel the assurance of the artist, who must have worked from a live model. The accuracy of the depiction even suggests that the elephant was tamed. One fully recognises an Asian elephant: the general proportions, the shape of the skull, the lower lip, the musculature of the front legs are particularly well studied. It is a male elephant. His short tusks suggest a young specimen. And on his back we notice two things: a saddlecloth with a stylish cut, and what appears to be a pattern of embroidery. This cloth is placed on the elephant's shoulders, at the spot where the mahout sits, a habit that is still alive today: Tribal mahouts often put a sack on the elephant's back and a rope around its neck before riding the animal.

Then, behind, is another larger saddle pad, elegantly cut, suggesting the possibility of accommodating a passenger, maybe a dignitary. Yet the characters are not represented. It is the elephant that is honoured. It is probably sacred, and therefore it cannot be shown mounted by a mortal. This representation reflects a fact that seemed important for the civilisation that produced it and took great pride in it. Above, the signs are not decrypted, but the message of the realistic representation of the elephant has reached us with a poignant clarity: "We are the people who succeeded in taming the largest land mammal."

This was indeed an achievement and a step forward in terms of civilisation. It is no longer the feat of a tribe of hunters who manage to kill an elephant – which in itself was undoubtedly an achievement at that time. Man has realised that by taming rather than killing, he is doing an act of greater importance, materially and perhaps spiritually. If the characters are not shown, this may be due to the fact that the only passengers worthy enough to be represented on an elephant are gods that have yet to be imagined. However, the feat and the fantasy of power that it conveys remained an Asian affair, at least until Alexander the Great and his 4th century BCE campaign in northwest India which marked the first encounter of Europeans with war elephants.

Elephants in the West

The second landmark coincides with the arrival of the fantasy in the West, as a war trophy brought back to Europe, the seat of colonial imperialism. Then, it was inevitable that the United States, the first world power in the making, should want to monopolise this symbol of power by importing elephants on its soil.

Asian elephants were probably imported first, since they were already tamed and trained, but it is likely that at the time, as it is still the case today, the public was not concerned by the differences between *Elephas maximus* and *Loxodonta africana*.

In Judeo-Christian society the animal is used primarily for entertainment purposes, devoid of the sacred value, which contributed to its protection in Asia.

Jumbo remains a symbol of this period. This African specimen presented as "the largest and heaviest elephant ever seen by man either wild or in captivity" was imported by P.T. Barnum and his name – probably the second element of the idiomatic expression

"mumbo-jumbo" – has become virtually synonymous for elephant. Today, journalists often use "Jumbo" instead of "elephant". The elephant died when a train hit him in 1885, and its British trainer went into a depression.

The most spectacular death of an elephant was certainly that of Topsy, who was born in the wild around 1875 in Southeast Asia and secretly smuggled into the United States. She was named after a slave character in the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After killing a man during a tour and further difficulties, she was put to death by sending through her body 6,600 volts of the newly invented electric system. Ironically, the rigging apparatus had been inspected and approved by agents of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This scene took place in 1903, the dawn of the 20th century, the era of modernity. The message sent is both naïve and disturbingly absolute: "We are the people who succeeded in electrocuting the largest land mammal." It echoes a scene from another time, when early tribes succeeded in killing an elephant, but the technology and the justification have changed.

It is in this context that appear the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, first founded in England in 1824 and in the United States in 1866. Yet the import and use of elephants in circuses and zoos continue till this day in conditions that flout minimum welfare standards. Despite decades of attempts, involving scientific experimentation and the deployment of substantial resources, the reproduction of elephants in zoos remains problematic and the contribution of these institutions to the conservation of the species has been a failure.

Not a single calf was born in North America from 1918 until 1962, when the Washington Park Zoo produced the first of a series of 25 calves through the year 1991, including the first second-generation calves to be born in North America, as reported by Richard Lair in 1999.

A 2012 chart based on information provided by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums shows that the situation is not improving in spite of an "aggressive artificial-insemination program". Since 1962, "elephant deaths in US zoos have outstripped births by a ratio of 2-to-1"; "54% of successful artificial inseminations have resulted in miscarriages, stillborn births or premature deaths". Consequently, projections show that unless more elephants are brought from the wild, the entire population of zoo elephants in the world would have disappeared in 40 to 50 years. After more than a century of experimentations of all kinds, the only contribution of zoos towards the elephants has been the opportunity for veterinary experimentations.

With the perspective of these few landmarks, let's now have a look at two setups recently designed in India, which have been presented as modern solutions for the management of captive elephants.

[1] **Haathi Gaon, Jaipur**

Over a hundred elephants have been kept in Jaipur for many years for tourism purposes. I had personally gone there in 1997 and checked on the conditions of those animals. They were made to walk morning and evening in the traffic between the Pink City and Amber Fort, then up and down to the fort with loads of tourists. At night, they were tied in tiny parcels of the poor section of the city.

Obviously the situation was unsustainable, in the various meanings of the term. Several NGOs began to voice objections, with the hope of banning elephants from the city. The conditions of these animals were not defensible in any way, and no adequate solution on the spot was possible as the desertic climate and vegetation of Rajasthan are not viable for elephants. There was a possibility that the supporters of the elephants might have won the case and that the elephants would have been relocated to a suitable area.

Instead of that, the Government of Rajasthan called for an architectural competition: The project was "to provide a natural park-like shelter for elephants with extensive plantation, a well-equipped veterinary hospital and proper sewerage facilities". It envisaged "basic comforts for the pachyderms, besides creating several attractions for tourists. A museum and a cafeteria were also planned for visitors who could view the elephants from an elevated gallery."

The architect who executed the project, Rahul Mehrotra, a graduate from the School of Design at Harvard University, developed the project according to purely human perspectives.

The material used was local stone masonry for the walls, light corrugated metal sheets on a structure of mild steel for the roofing, both materials that absorb the heat rather than insulate.

The only provision to insulate the elephant from the extreme heat of Rajasthan (often over 40° Celsius) is "to store the fodder on top of the thin metal roof". But here some questions need to be asked. How much weight can this "thin metal roof" actually support? Does it make sense to store the fodder under the sun? How is the mahout supposed to lift the daily quintals of fodder up to the roof? Is he expected to take the fodder up to the roof and then down again to feed the elephant? Why not then make a permanent thatch roof?

The justification written by the architects reveals the degree of fantasy into which they are themselves caught. I quote "The establishment of a balanced ecosystem in this degraded site formed the crux of the design, an approximation of the natural habitat of elephants. Zone-wise interpretation of vegetation, such as definition of the perimeter and microcosms of grasslands and wetlands are characteristics that modulate visual access to the elephant habitat."

"Balanced ecosystem"? "Natural habitat of elephants"? "Modulate visual access"? The intellectual verbosity eclipses basic common sense.

What about the limited space where the elephants are tied all night? What about the absence of free access to a suitable body of water? Where are the recommendations of the elephant experts taken into account? Why so much ignorance and contempt of available scientific facts?

In the view of some, the problem of the Jaipur elephants has been solved. The truth is that it has only been hidden behind a façade based on pure aesthetics, meant to justify exclusively economic interests, with no advantages for the elephants. In result, the beneficiaries of this activity can continue to sell to tourists the fantasy of riding an elephant like a maharaja for a few minutes (despite, among other things, the known problem of the impact of hard surfaces on the elephants' feet). But the most serious consequence is that this concept of the Elephant Village now blocks any attempt to bring a real solution.

[2] **Bannerghatta Biological Park**

The second case is in a radically opposed context: the South of India, in a National Park of 102.74 sq km that is home to wild elephants and therefore naturally meets the adequate vegetation and climatic conditions. Today, part of the park is occupied by a zoo called Bannerghatta Biological Park, near Bangalore and for years this zoo has presented some elephants to visitors. These elephants were all born in Bannerghatta, except a couple from Forest Department camps, and were all trained and managed by mahouts in the traditional free contact manner. These elephants were left to free-range in the surrounding National Park during the night, where they could graze and interact with the wild elephants. In the

morning they were brought to the zoo by the mahouts, given their daily ration and then led to an enclosure in the zoo for the enjoyment of the visitors.

A few years ago, the vet in charge correctly pointed out that it was unnecessary to keep all the elephants in the enclosure all day long, and it would be better to leave only a few, in rotation every day, so that others could graze in the park during the day, especially as their number had increased, mainly due to natural births. The proposal was good and was adopted.

In 2014, the remarkable efforts of the NGOs PETA & CUPA finally won an order from the Supreme Court of India for the release of a 14-year-old male elephant named Sundar from a temple in Maharashtra. The project was to relocate the animal in a "sanctuary" or "rescue centre" for elephants to be created in Bannerghatta. Subsequently, a space of 49.5 hectares was selected and a large amount of money was spent to build an electric fence and other structures. Up to that point, the project was sound and laudable.

However, in the process, it was decided that all the Bannerghatta elephants were to be placed in that enclosure and the rescue-centre would be turned into an elephant-park where tourists would be taken by jeep. Eventually, the former zoo elephants that were let to free-range in a 102 sq km National Park and allowed to interact with the wild elephants, found themselves restricted to an area of only half a square kilometre. By then, their number had reached 19. The mahouts were directed by the management to remove the drag chains and hobbles from the elephants, then hide themselves to create the illusion of a wild setup for the tourists. But the chains were to be put back again after visiting hours.

Certainly, the release of the elephant Sundar from the temple is an example of what could and should be done for many temple elephants, but in the meantime, the situation of the 18 other elephants has regressed, since they are now restricted to an enclosure, whereas earlier they had been allowed to free range in the National Park.

I was called by the Banerghatta Biological Park Director to take a look at the elephant setup and found out that 12 of the 19 elephants, those born in the park, were not only related but were all descendants over four generations from one single female, Kokila, now dead, a fact that seems to have gone unnoticed by the decision-makers. This specific social structure was not a problem as long as the elephants were able to interact with the wild population. Now, however, it becomes a serious managerial issue as they are confined to an enclosure.

"Protected Contact"

Removing an elephant from permanent tethering is an obligation, but removing the drag chain from a free-ranging elephant and keeping it in a small enclosure is a regression, a deep misunderstanding of elephant management. The risk is that out of simplification, most free-ranging elephants may be brought into a regime that proves inferior to their existing status or even opposite to the expected goal.

Although the elephants concerned had already been trained in the traditional "free contact" method, American zoo experts came to build steel structures and to train the Bannerghatta mahouts according to a technique which is known as "Protected Contact".

This technique was first devised by an American woman named Pat Derby, who died in 2013; a professional animal trainer specialised in performing animals for television and cinema in Hollywood. She had initially used methods that has been developed in circuses, but later campaigned against the abuse prevalent in animal training, and had opened the first sanctuary for exotic animals in the US in 1985.

At that time the profession of an elephant keeper had become the most dangerous in the United States. Fifteen people died in elephant-related incidences in North America between 1976 and 1991. The reason is that elephants are kept in intolerable conditions that alter their natural behaviour to a degree that behavioural science is incapable to evaluate at this stage. Forest Department mahouts who have handled elephants rescued from circuses, zoos, temples and other forms of intensive captivity, all agree that their behaviour is particularly erratic and dangerous. "Protected Contact" represents a meaningful step for the safety of zoo personnel for a simple reason: the solution is to interact with the elephant through a cage that protects the personnel from possible aggressions by the elephant. However, in spite of promoting a "chain-free" management and a "non-dominant attitude" from the handlers, the Protected Contact method employs other drastic methods to control elephants with a psychological impact that is impossible to evaluate at this stage.

The protection cage is a replica of the traditional kraal used in India and South Asia for the initial training of wild elephants. The wild elephants are kept inside the kraal for a few weeks and then taken out; however in Protected Contact, the option of taking them out of an enclosure is no more possible.

Elephants reputed as particularly dangerous are prevented even from reaching their trunks out of the cage by a steel mesh. A yellow line on the floor is strictly not to be crossed by the staff except during specific sessions. Elephants should not be touched, except by means of the sticks called "targets". I have presented photographs from modern zoos to experienced mahouts who have spent their entire lives with elephants. First of all, they could not believe that people could resort to such drastic methods and disproportionate equipment to achieve something so simple; they were also clear that such methods would surely alter the natural behaviour of the elephant, as well as projecting the animal as disproportionately aggressive and dangerous.

For veterinary treatment or invasive procedures such as the collection of semen that requires the introduction of an electrode in the rectum or artificial insemination, a procedure that may involve multiple attempts, the elephants are usually placed in a crush-cage that prevents them from any movement. Knowing the poor results of artificial insemination, the justification of such procedures is hard to defend in terms of welfare. Nevertheless, in zoos breeding is forced upon young females as young as 6, whereas in the wild the average age of first delivery is 18 to 20.

As regards daily routines, the training procedure known as "Positive Reinforcement" also replicates the methods inherited from Asian mahouts (except that it is done through the cage). This consists in giving titbits jointly with verbal commands (or other sounds such as a whistle or a clicker) until the elephant understands what is expected from him. Later on, when he hears the sound, the animal executes the desired behaviour and each time, he receives the titbit as a reward. In zoos, these methods allow performing standard procedures without the use of bull-hooks or electric prods, although sometimes both are used.

However, it implies that the animal remains in intensive captivity for the rest of its life, while in the traditional method, after a few weeks, the wild elephants are taken out of the kraal, trained to follow the routine of the camp and let free to graze in the forest and to interact with wild elephants.

These methods have the side effect of discrediting the traditional methods from which they originated, and marginalizing traditional mahouts. Although some handlers have excellent skills, these methods represent a compromise which is moralistically more acceptable to the human consciousness, but of little benefit to the elephants. By dissimulating economic justifications and unsustainable practices behind the façade of aesthetic appearances, this strategy hinders further debate and progress on the real issue.

The real issue is the principle of captivity itself. Whether or not elephants should be taken outside their home range, outside their natural habitat, and placed into intensive captivity is the first and main issue that should be discussed.

Conclusion

When studies demonstrate the multiplication of health and behavioural problems, sterility, premature deaths of elephants, accidents among staff, in intensive captivity (leaving aside the economic cost) whereas in free-ranging status most of these problems are naturally resolved (and at a much lower cost) one realises that those who do not want to face this evidence are still pursuing the naive fantasy of dominating elephants, a notion that belongs to the dawn of civilisation, and in the process are preventing others from taking the next steps.

The confusion between human priorities and animal requirements, the simplification of analysis, the quick formulas made to close critical discussions, the aesthetic arrangements to hide the economic justifications, lead to aberrations. It is also essential to question why the management of captive elephants has not evolved in India (and is therefore subject to valid criticisms). In many aspects, the conservation of the species in the wild depends on the conservation of its habitat. Likewise, the notion that the forest may not be the exclusive privilege of wild elephants, but should in part be accessible to captive elephants, most of which were captured from the wild or born in forest camps, should evolve, because the elephants can only thrive in their natural environment.

CV: Prajna Chowta was born in 1970 in Ghana. She completed her secondary education in Bangalore, then a degree in London and a Masters in archaeology and anthropology at SOAS. In 1994 she returned to India and spent several years with tribes in various regions, researching the traditional techniques of capturing and taming elephants.

In 2000 she created the Aane Mane Foundation and began researching the migration of wild elephants between Burma and India, a study funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2002 she readapted captive elephants to a forest in Karnataka. She also trains young tribal mahouts, and researches the modernisation of traditional techniques on principles in line with recent scientific research.

She published the *Elephant Code Book* (2010) on captive elephant management with the Asian Nature Conservation Foundation and the Ministry of Environment (New Delhi), and has participated in various films and documentaries.

In 2014 she released the book *Enfant d'Elephant* with Elytis Editions in France.

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