



# The elephant in the park

*Elephants never forget ... But can they forgive? We take an in-depth look at how a new wave of ethical tourism is building in response to elephant abuse and cruelty.*

Words & photography JOCELYN PRIDE

For centuries, Asia's largest land mammal has been trained to work for humans. Revered for their sheer size, strength and intelligence, elephants are a cornerstone of Asian history. From the "tanks" of ancient battlefields, to the "trucks" of logging companies, symbols of cultural and religious ceremonies and centrepieces of circuses, they've given their all.

However, the species is now at crisis point. Statistics from a study carried out in 2017 by World Animal Protection (WAP) estimate that in Thailand alone, numbers of wild elephants have dwindled from 100,000 to between 2500 and 3000 in the last 100 years. There are now more elephants living in captivity in Thailand than wandering free. And with that comes myriad problems.

When logging was banned in Thailand in 1989, a period of limbo began where owners and mahouts (elephant trainers) had to look for new ways to keep themselves and the elephants employed. Sadly, it wasn't a matter of setting the elephants free. Ironically, through hauling logs, the elephants had contributed to destroying their habitat, so there simply wasn't enough natural forest left to support elephants that eat up to 10 per cent of their body weight every day.

And so began a niche tourism market, an economy literally riding on the elephant's back. From elephant rides and polo matches to watching elephants paint pictures, kick soccer balls, play music and perform tricks like wiggling their ears,

throwing darts and even riding bikes, elephant entertainment, particularly in Thailand (where there are twice as many elephants in tourism than in all other Asian countries combined) is lucrative. A survey conducted by WAP in 2014 found 36 per cent of tourists in Thailand had or were planning to ride an elephant during their visit. In 2018, 38.27 million tourists visited Thailand, and projected figures for 2019 are more than 41 million.

"It's a paradox, people want to interact with elephants because they love them, but to do this the elephant has had to submit to cruelty," says Ben Pearson, senior campaign manager at WAP. "No elephant is ever a pet — they are wild animals that live in a complex herd structure."

## The ugly truth behind how elephants are trained

With demand comes the need for supply. In Thailand, illegally captured elephants (usually smuggled across the Myanmar border) can bring around US\$40,000, a baby elephant even up to US\$60,000.

Separating the calf from the herd is the beginning of a life in captivity. Like humans, maternal instincts run deep, and when a calf is poached, the mother and even the aunts are often killed because they'll stop at nothing to protect their young. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for every calf taken from the wild, two to three elephants die.

Although localised regions may have slight differences in specific training

methods, "breaking the spirit" of a baby elephant to submit to humans is the basic premise.

Originating in the highland tribal communities of India and Southeast Asia, the ancient ritual known as the *phajaan* or simply "the crush" restrains the elephant in a cage or shackles, where it's denied food and prevented from moving until deemed "broken". Through the use of bull hooks, sticks and other pain-inflicting tools the elephants

## Five traits elephants share with humans

### ~ Empathy

From rescuing a baby elephant stuck in the mud, to squirting dirt to help heal a wound, there are many recorded examples of elephants offering support and comfort to one another.

### ~ Family life

When a calf is born, it's raised and protected by a close-knit family.

### ~ Self-awareness

Elephants can recognise themselves in a mirror.

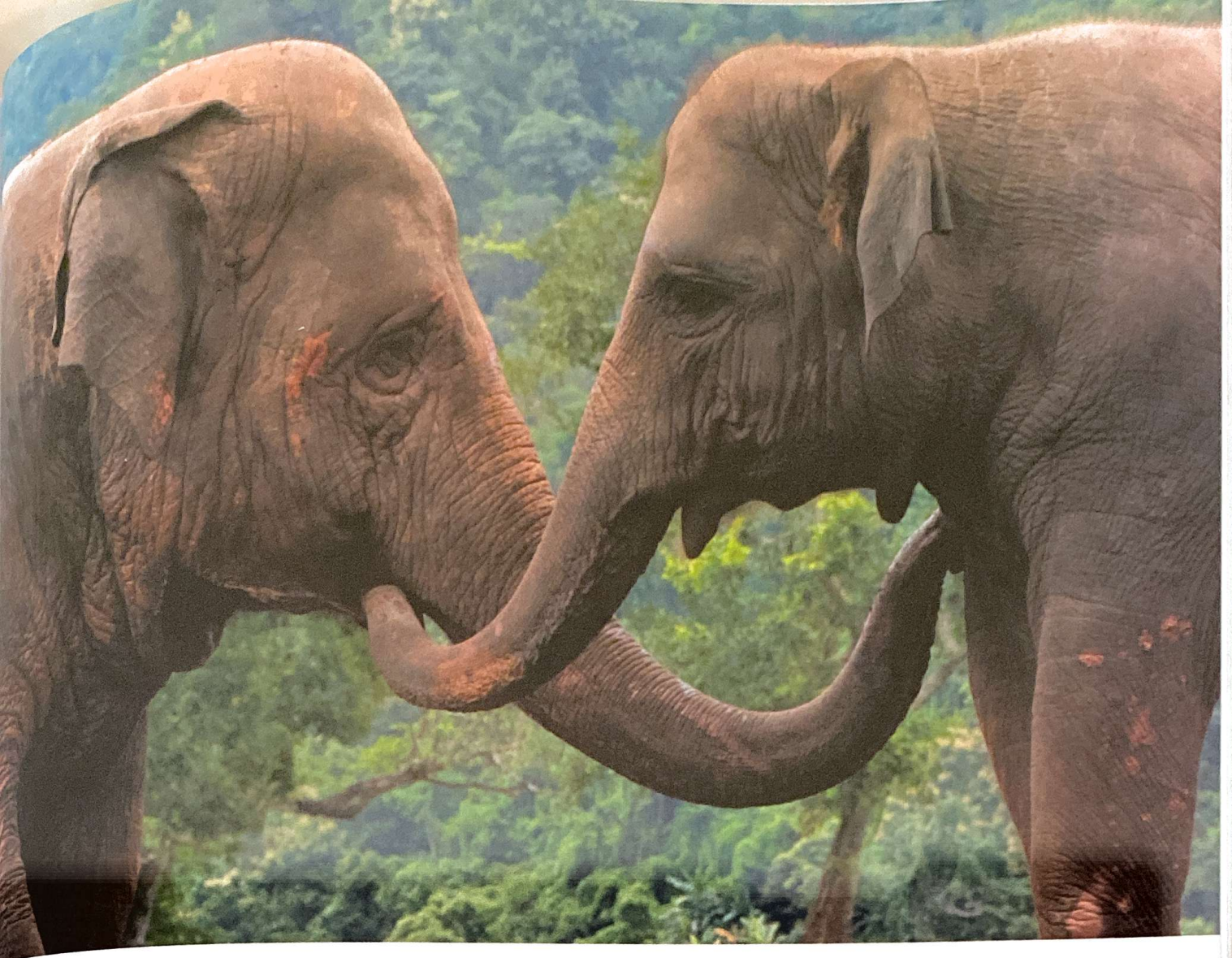
### ~ Mourn and honour their dead

When an elephant dies, other members of the herd caress the body with their trunks and feet.

### ~ Communication

In addition to their ears, elephants have the ability to hear vocalised and vibrated sounds through the sensitive nerve endings on their feet.





*At Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, the elephants are free to wander, form bonds, bathe, play in the mud and rummage for food.*

are then taught to obey signals through fear and humiliation.

"Many tourists don't realise the cruelty behind every brushstroke, musical note or ride," says Pearson. "Even taking a selfie with an elephant means it has had to succumb to inhumane treatment."

Fortunately, people are now starting to understand. Over the last five years there's been a shift that's starting to gather momentum.

### **Elephant steps towards a new wave of ethical tourism**

"I admit, I've ridden an elephant," says Geoff Manchester, co-founder of the Intrepid Group, the first company to exclude elephant riding from its itineraries in 2014.

"Back when we started taking travellers to ride elephants in Thailand, we didn't know the dark side. There's now no excuse."

Although WAP's first study in 2010 concluded that "strong concerns must be raised regarding the situation for wildlife used in entertainment venues in Thailand", Intrepid was still nervous that

a ban on elephant riding would see people turn away from the company.

"It was a dilemma. We had big debates in the office. But as a responsible tourism provider, we knew it had to be done."

The Intrepid Foundation then helped support WAP's second study of 2923 captive elephants in 220 venues across Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and India during 2014–2016. Results of this comprehensive study identified three in four elephants kept in venues offering elephant rides were living in "poor and unacceptable" conditions.

Bringing elephant abuse to the attention of the world has resulted in more than 200 companies including Trafalgar, World Expeditions, G Adventure and Contiki following Intrepid's lead in banning elephant riding.

The problem behind elephant tourism is the tourists themselves. There's no such thing as a "good" elephant ride, painting or trick.

"Ultimately it would be ideal if there wasn't a need for elephant rescue parks, but I guess realistically there'll be a need

### **Who's doing it right?**

#### **In Thailand**

**Elephant Nature Park** — Founded by Lek Chailert and renowned as the leading example of caring for rescued elephants.

**Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary** — A family-run sanctuary that focuses on using only voice commands with the elephants.

**Elephant Haven** — Linked with Elephant Nature Park in a more remote part of Thailand.

**Elephant Hills** — A luxury tented safari experience globally recognised for high standards in sustainable tourism.

**Burm and Emily's Elephant Sanctuary** — A refuge for elephants to simply be and for visitors to observe natural behaviour.

#### **In other Southeast Asian countries**

**Green Hill Valley Elephant Park** — A family-owned refuge in Myanmar.

**Elephant Valley Project** — A highly respected registered NGO in Cambodia.

**Tiger Tops Elephant Camp** — Where visitors can stay surrounded by elephants in a tented camp in Nepal.

**Elephant Conversation Centre** — A centre in Laos for elephants rescued from the logging industry.

**Elephant Transit Home** — Specialising in caring for orphaned baby elephants to release back into the wild in Sri Lanka.





for them over the next 50-plus years. It's all about lessening the impact on the animal and creating a more engaging, authentic experience for tourists," says Manchester.

Pearson agrees. "We need to show businesses ways to make money from rescued elephants without interaction. It's a transitional process."

### The shining light inside Elephant Nature Park

Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai is a leading example of a place where rescued elephants can live in peace. Founded in the 1990s by renowned "elephant whisperer", Lek Chailert, whose work has been honoured by *Time* magazine, Hillary Clinton and the Ford Foundation and featured in numerous documentaries and articles, it continues to strive to create a business model that engages tourists without interactive experiences.

At Elephant Nature Park, tourists come for a day or a multi-day residential volunteer program that assists the mahouts with the day-to-day running of



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#### Things to look for to help pick an ethically Asian elephant experience

##### What's on offer for tourists?

Wording can be confusing. Words like "sanctuary", park and refuge are often used in the titles of providers. Find out the history of the company and exactly what the tour entails in order to make an informed decision.

##### What are they eating?

Elephants need a truckload of food, but they also need a variety to remain healthy. Access to a free-range area with bamboo leaves and grass is preferable to supplementing a diet of bananas, watermelon and other sweet treats.

##### Can they bathe?

As well as drinking, elephants need to give themselves a mud bath and splash around in a river or large dam.

##### Do they have friends?

Socialisation is the key to a happy elephant. They need the freedom to choose their own companions.

##### Is there shade?

Elephants need to shelter from the heat of the day. Structures made of natural materials are the most ideal.

##### Are there any baby elephants?

If this is the case, it's highly likely the elephant has been recently poached.

##### How are the elephants handled?

Mahouts play an important role in the health and safety of both the elephant and visitors. A good mahout shows respect for the elephant and doesn't punish with force.

##### If you were an elephant, would you be happy living there?

It's as simple as that.

the park. There's no use of hooks, only words of love and bananas. The elephants are free to wander, form bonds, bathe, play in the mud and rummage for food.

Over time, the park has stepped down tourist-elephant interaction. In 2018 the park phased out visitors helping bathe the elephants, and by 2020 there'll be no more hand feeding.

"The more elephants do by themselves the more they're living naturally," says Atichart Chatpistchaikul (known as Tong), a guide at the park.

The success of Elephant Nature Park has helped turn the tide on elephant tourism. Places in the residential volunteer programs book out up to a year in advance, and Lek and her staff are currently enlightening many other venues across the region.

"If you want to know how an elephant feels, listen to your heart," says Tong.

Being surrounded by around 70 pachyderms in approximately 100 hectares of the Elephant Nature Park is a humbling experience. Every elephant has a raw, heart-crushing story to tell. Victims of abuse from illegal logging, street begging, circuses, trekking camps and landmines, they bear scars of shredded ears and twisted limbs, sightless eyes and sunken backs.

"Jokia was an illegal logging elephant," Tong explains with quiet reverence as we watch the gentle giant snuffling her trunk along the ground. "One day she miscarried while hauling logs and wasn't allowed to stop to see if her calf was alive or dead. When she refused to work, the mahout slingshotted a rock into her eye." After being sold

to another logger, Jokia suffered from depression and still wouldn't work. "So her new owner fired an arrow into her other eye."

At 60 years of age, Jokia, which means "eye from heaven", relies on her best friend Sri Prae to be her eyes. Limping through irreparable damage to her left foot as a result of a landmine, Sri Prae helps Jokia navigate a world safe from the horrors of their old lives.

It's through spending time in places like Elephant Nature Park that people gain understanding. There's no need to ride on an elephant's back, splash water all over them or pose for a selfie. Instead look into their eyes and see hope. 🌱

*Jocelyn Pride is an award-winning freelance travel writer/photographer based in Melbourne. In 2016, she was awarded Best Responsible Travel story by the Australian Society of Travel Writers for an article in WellBeing. The same story was also awarded an international prize at IPW in Washington DC in 2017 for the Best US Destination story. W: [jocelynpride.com.au](http://jocelynpride.com.au)*

#### How you can help

- ✓ Speak up and be an advocate for animal welfare.
- ✓ Support the work of accredited venues.
- ✓ Join an elephant volunteer project.
- ✓ Make a donation to a registered fund.
- ✓ Post on social media and warn other travellers if you see animal abuse.
- ✓ Buy locally produced environmentally friendly products.