



A Carol Buckley Project

# ELEPHANT AID INTERNATIONAL

One World...One Elephant at a Time

## ELEPHANT PEDICURE REPORT

### Elephant Foot Care and Mahout training provided by Elephant Aid International March 2011 through April 2015

#### Summary of Services Provided, Outcomes and Recommendations

A comprehensive foot care program is a vital component of an effective captive elephant management program. Healthy feet are key to an elephant's mobility and ultimately his/her longevity. In the case of working elephants, foot health plays an important role in physical performance and psychological attitude. By addressing diet, stable sanitation, work load, mahout handling and foot care, foot health is enhanced, resulting in healthier, more contented elephants.

Elephant Aid International (EAI) conducted an introductory five-week foot-trimming clinic in Sauraha, Nepal from March 7 through April 12, 2011. In collaboration with National Trust for Nature Conservancy (NTNC) and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), EAI provided foot health evaluations and full pedicures for more than 60 elephants used for elephant rides and conservation activities. Half of the elephant who participated in the clinic were privately owned. The other half were anti-poaching patrol elephants owned by DNPWC.

Following the initial clinic EAI developed and continues to implement a bi-annual Foot Trimming Program in Nepal. As of April 2015, EAI is provided foot trimming services, free of charge, to nearly 200 private and government owned elephants.

#### Services

Elephant Aid International provides free foot trimming services for:

- National Trust for Nature Conservancy, BCC
- Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
- Private elephant owners

The work is conducted under the direction of Carol Buckley, EAI and assisted by Dr. Kamal Gairhe, Kiran Rijal and Chitra Khadka, DNPWC

### Services provided include:

- documentation and evaluation of the condition and cleanliness of the hattisar where each elephant lives: construction, drainage, substrate, shade, waste removal, sanitation and the location and condition of leg chains and hobbles.
- photographic documentation of all four feet
- visual examination and evaluation of elephant foot health
- complete pad, nail and cuticle trimming
- training of two veterinary technicians in the most up-to-date methodology of foot trimming
- individualized tutoring for mahouts on their individual elephants' feet
- follow-up re-examinations for elephants experiencing serious foot health issues
- reports for owners, including evaluation, photographic documentation and recommendations for improved foot care

### Findings

Elephants who spend their days on natural substrate in the Chitwan National Park with access to live vegetation, water, under the cover of the forest canopy during the hottest part of the day, with limited weight of only one or two mahout riders, have healthier feet than their counterparts who provide a full day of safari rides, with multiple riders and walk on hot asphalt in the heat of the day.

*In the majority of cases, the nails and pads of the NTNC and DNPWC elephants were healthier than that of the privately owned elephants.*

### **Forest Dwellers**

The NTNC and DNPWC elephants spend the majority of their day in the forest and do not walk on pavement. Generally speaking, their nails and pads are less overgrown and the nails are supple---not too dry---with fewer cracks.



Chronic nail problems, such as cracks, abscesses and bacteria growth, were limited to bulls and geriatric cows.



**Private Elephant--** elephants used for tourist rides and not given access to Chitwan National Park

Privately owned elephants spend all day providing tourist safaris, heavy with riders. They make multiple trips from their stable to the safari staging area daily on hot asphalt. When not giving rides they are chained by two legs, on unnaturally hard, bacteria infested surfaces such as concrete or hard packed dirt.

Most share the same chronic conditions; severely overgrown and infected nails; cracked pads, nails and cuticles; and pads that range from bruised and thin to overgrown. These conditions are harmful and even life threatening, causing pain and lameness. Left untreated, foot infections can develop into osteomyelitis, an incurable terminal disease.

Without exception the ride elephants display poor foot health.





The major factors contributing to the poor foot health of this group of elephants are their time spent hauling heavy loads (tourists), walking on asphalt, poor diet and unsanitary stable conditions.



## Recommendations

- maintain a foot care program with regularly scheduled foot examinations and trimming to ensure that pads and nails remain healthy
- provide more time off hobbles to allow natural posturing and movement, which have a direct impact on the wear pattern on the pads and nails
- monitor adult males and geriatric cows to prevent their nails from becoming necrotic
- improve stable sanitation, remove contaminated dirt and replace it with clean fill dirt
- limit time spent walking on asphalt, especially in the heat of the day
- reduce the weight load of safari rides and the number of hours worked for young and geriatric elephants
- provide nutritious food, including live vegetation, such as grasses and browse

## **Conclusion**

Foot trimming and mahout education are important components of sound welfare for Nepal's captive-held elephants. Some advancements have been made over the past 4 years including NTNC and DNPWC converting their hattisar to chain-free. Freedom to move at will improves foot and joint health and mental attitude. But ride elephants continue to be overworked and poorly cared for. The majority continue to suffer from damaged nails and pads as result of being overburdened, excessive exposure to asphalt, unclean stables and poor diets. By establishing a set of welfare standards elephant health and wellbeing can be ensured. Educating mahouts in elephant biology and psychology will increase their understanding of elephants, which can result in sustainable improvement to elephant welfare.

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