



A Carol Buckley Project

ELEPHANT AID INTERNATIONAL
One World...One Elephant at a Time

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FROM: Carol Buckley, Founder, Elephant Aid International, USA

TO: Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary, Thailand

**Elephant Foot Care and Mahout Training Provided by Elephant Aid International:
Summary of Services Provided, Outcomes and Recommendations**

[Elephant Aid International](#) (EAI) provided elephant foot care, elephant training and mahout training at Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary in Thailand. All resident elephants were examined for foot health and conditioned for foot trimming. Several received pedicures. Due to limited time, one elephant--two-year-old--Mee Chok, was chosen for training. All mahouts and supervisors were tutored in elephant foot care and positive reinforcement target training.

This report addresses

- Current elephant foot health and remedies
- Current mahout elephant management and remedies

The recommendations provided are intended as a tool to improve elephant foot health and mahout management of resident elephants and to guide improvements in overall welfare.

Services

Services and supplies provided by EAI included:

- Evaluation of mahout management of resident elephants
- Instruction in Compassionate Elephant Management positive reinforcement target training
- Individualized training for one elephant calf residing with his adopted mother and aunt in a herd environment
- Conditioning elephants for pedicures
- Complete pad, nail and cuticle trimming
- Individualized tutoring for mahouts on the care of their elephants' feet
- Elephant foot trimming manual
- Foot trimming tools
- Written evaluation, photographic documentation and recommendations for improved foot care

The work was conducted under the direction of Katherine Connor, with assistance from the mahout staff.

Findings

Overall health

All of the sanctuary elephants appear well-fed and healthy. They spend their days on natural substrate with access to fresh water, live vegetation and shade during the hottest part of the day. They are playful, energetic, social with the other elephants and mahouts, and responded well to mahout instruction. None appear intimidated or fearful of the mahouts. Overnight they are tethered on a long front leg chain, on natural substrate, in the forest.



Foot health

In general, the elephants have healthy nails, cuticles and pads. With exception of the two youngest individuals--whose feet were near perfect--nails and pads were slightly overgrown with superficial nail splits and dry cuticles. The overgrowth is a result of lack of sufficient exercise to wear pads and nails.



Recommendations

- Allow elephants to continue spending ample time off chains to allow for natural posturing and movement, which has a direct impact on the wear pattern on their pads and nails.
- Establish a foot care program with regularly scheduled foot examinations and trimming to ensure that pads and nails remain healthy.

Mahouts

Mahout moral is high. They show a healthy respect for fellow mahouts, supervisors and the elephants, and demonstrate superior behavioral observation and management skills. Elephant hooks and other invasive devices were not detected. They enthusiastically participated in brainstorming sessions to create the training corral and foot trimming platform. Their intimate knowledge of their elephant proved invaluable.

Positive reinforcement target training

Each elephant that received a pedicure was conditioned to walk up a steep concrete ramp and present her feet for examination and trimming. The mahouts were skilled and patient, and receptive to instruction on the most humane way to condition their elephant.



Although target training is foreign to them, the mahouts showed sincere interest in mastering the skill. They willingly engaged in pre-training preparations as well as training sessions.



Recommendations

- Continue to provide positive reinforcement target training for all mahouts.

Conclusion

Comprehensive foot care and mahout training programs are vital components of an effective captive elephant management plan. Healthy feet and humane training techniques are key to an elephant's physical and psychological wellbeing, and ultimately his/her longevity. BLES currently provides a high level of care and management by employing knowledgeable and skilled mahouts. The organization demonstrates a sincere desire to provide a healthy environment for the resident elephants and is a model for progressive captive elephant care.

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