



A Carol Buckley Project

ELEPHANT AID INTERNATIONAL

One World...One Elephant at a Time

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TO: Elephant's World, Kanchanaburi, Thailand

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

Over a two-week period in February 2011, [Elephant Aid International](#) (EAI) provided elephant training, mahout training and elephant foot care at Elephant's World in Thailand.

The primary purpose for EAI's visit was to work with a four-year-old male calf. Jon was wild caught and trained brutally at a young age. He was purchased by Elephant's World in order to end his begging career on the streets of Bangkok. Aggressive upon his arrive one month before EAI's visit, Jon's dangerous behavior had continued to escalate.

Management was concerned for mahout safety and Jon's quality of life. A training corral was built for the thrice-daily positive reinforcement target training sessions. Jon and his mahout, Piza, received individual tutoring in an effort to encourage Jon to engage in non-aggressive behavior and Piza in non-abusive training.

All mahouts, the veterinarian, veterinary technician and supervisor were tutored in positive reinforcement target training and elephant foot care. The resident elephants, plus one recently confiscated calf, were examined for foot health and conditioned for foot trimming. Several received pedicures.

This report addresses

- Aggressive behavior displayed by Jon
- Mahout elephant management and remedies
- Elephant foot health and remedies
- Facility design
- Public access

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:

- Facility evaluation
- Mahout elephant management evaluation
- Instruction in Compassionate Elephant Management positive reinforcement target training
- Individualized training for one wild caught elephant calf and his mahout
- 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 Dr. Samart Prasitphol, DVM, and Agnas Verheek, with assistance from translators, the veterinary technician and the mahout staff.

Findings

- The elephants are tethered at all times when not in the forest with mahouts or in the river for twice-daily baths (weather permitting).
- The elephant stable area is nearly void of shelter from the midday sun.
- The elephants are tethered to the only remaining trees in the area. The trees are struggling to survive the injury caused by the chains used to secure the elephants.
- There is a well-designed vet clinic and a knowledgeable full-time veterinary technician on staff. The founder/veterinarian is on-grounds weekly or more often when needed.
- Mahout housing is adjacent to where the elephants are tethered, ensuring 24/7 security, but the close proximity creates a noise nuisance for the elephants because the mahouts are active during the night.
- The public is allowed to wander on-grounds, unsupervised, amongst the mahout housing, food prep area and elephant stabling area. They are permitted to approach, feed and pet elephants.
- The public is invited to ride atop an elephant into the river at bath time.

Overall health

The elephants' overall health was inconsistent. The young animals appeared healthier than the older. Most appear to be suffering from some stage of dehydration. All are chained the majority of the time, resulting in a display of stereotypical behaviors, aggression and a lack of social engagement. The geriatric females show signs of arthritis and weight loss. The adult male, who remained chained continually, engages in nonstop stereotypies. All the elephants live on natural substrate. They have inadequate access to shade under the midday sun and are provided with fresh water only under mahout supervision.



Recommendations

- Erect electric fencing to provide time off chains for normal posturing and physical activity.
- Create self-watering station so that elephants can drink when they are thirsty and remain hydrated.
- Provide adequate shelter from the midday sun.

Foot health

A newly confiscated female calf had a serious wound on one toe. An older female exhibited chronic nail problems, including a deep crack across the face of one nail and necrotic tissue in the bottom of another. The other elephants had reasonably healthy nails, cuticles and pads. 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

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

Mahouts

Mahout morale is high. All mahouts enthusiastically participated in brainstorming sessions to create a training corral and observe training sessions. The majority of the mahouts are young. They show a healthy respect for fellow mahouts and supervisors, but are less than respectful of the elephants. They are demanding and impatient, especially with the elderly elephants. Elephant hooks, spears, nails, slingshots and sticks are used to discipline and reprimand the elephants.

The mahouts are active and playful and like to show off for the visitors. During the scheduled bath time, the mahouts perform gymnastics on top of the elephants to entertain the public. When elephants attempt to disengage from the gymnastic activities, they are hooked, jabbed and forced to participate against their will.



Positive reinforcement target training

Mahouts show a sincere interest in learning positive reinforcement target training, voluntarily observing training sessions and participating in question and answer sessions.



Although target training is foreign to them, the mahouts show an interest in mastering the skill. They willingly engaged in pre-training preparations and supported Piza during his training sessions



Recommendations

- Provide positive reinforcement target training instruction for all mahouts.
- Ban the use of nails, slingshots, spears, hooks and sticks.
- Eliminate mahout gymnastics on elephants.
- Use your facility to teach the public how close-up encounters have a negative impact on elephant welfare.

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 well-being and, ultimately, his/her longevity. Elephant's World demonstrates a sincere desire to provide a healthy environment for the resident elephants and is in a position to become a model for progressive captive elephant care.

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