

Best Practices for Nepal's Captive-Held Elephants

By Carol Buckley

Shelters

Shelters are where elephants are kept when not working. By design a shelter must provide protection from the elements such as sun, cold, wind and rain and allow elephants to engage in species specific behaviors such as dusting, playing, walking, grazing, sleeping and socializing. Elephants should not be kept in chains.

1. To ensure an elephant engages in specie specific behavior the shelter must be chain free, enclosed with fencing designed to contain an elephant, while being harmless to the elephant, wildlife and domestic animals.
2. The shelter must be of sufficient size to enable an elephant to move about freely.
3. If the shelter does not have mature trees to provide natural shade, a physical shade structure must be built.
4. Each shelter must have a fresh drinking water source available to the elephant at all times.

Hygiene

Proper hygiene is essential for the wellbeing and health of a captive-held elephant. Both a soil replacement plan and waste disposal plan are required.

Each shelter must:

1. have natural, well-drained, hygienic substrate such as sand and clean fill dirt. Concrete should never be used as flooring inside an elephants stable
2. be cleaned daily. All dung and feed grass completely removed from the shelter area
3. ensure proper drainage of urine and wastewater to avoid contaminated soil and insect infestation
4. find an alternative to burning dung and grass. If burning continues it should be done at monthly intervals (not more often). Elephants should be away from the shelter during the burn and the grass and dung should not be allowed to smolder

Mahout Welfare

Mahout welfare must be elevated to healthy standards. When staff provisions are inadequate work performance and moral suffer. Unappreciated staff is difficult to motivate. The level of care provided an elephant has a direct correlation to the manner in which staff is treated.

To ensure the proper care and management of elephants, mahouts must be adequately compensated for their skill and risk taken working with this dangerous, wild animal.

Improvements must be made to:

1. living conditions – housing must be appropriate, safe and comfortable
2. salary – mahouts are deserving of salary standards set by the government and should be rewarded for being in a dangerous profession
3. work hours – a maximum number of working hours needs to be set
4. holidays – following government and industry standards
5. Provident fund, medical insurance and medical testing for tuberculosis
6. safety from wild hatti
7. Problem solving – the establishment of a labour-management committee will act as a forum for communication, information exchange, debate, and joint problem-solving.

Elephant Welfare

Elephant Welfare should be of primary concern for owners. The health and longevity of an elephant directly impacts an owner's profits. The healthier the elephant the more productive and longer lived he/she can be.

Elephants who are overworked, underfeed, deprived of proper nutrition, live in unhygienic living conditions, are continually exposed to the elements, are beaten, fearful, chained, and deprived of companionship, result in a reduced return on investment.

At a minimum every elephant must:

1. be fed a proper diet of good quality fresh green grass (not rice straw) and haga, molasses and salt, daily. Paddy, corn stock and sugar cane are unnatural foods for elephants. They add unnaturally high levels of starch and sugar that turns to fat and fail to provide proper nutrition. Elephants on their last set of teeth or those shedding teeth should never be fed banana trees as the fibrous plant is not well chewed nor digested and can cause colic and death.
2. have access to fresh water in their stable at all times
3. be bathed and allowed to submerge in clean water daily
4. receive a bi-annual veterinary check-up

5. be microchipped to trace origins and enable medical follow up
6. receive professional bi-annual foot trims
7. work a maximum of 6 days per week/ four hours per day
8. carry a maximum of two riders per safari with no howdah, just a pad
9. be exempted from working mid day due to increase temperatures. Elephants retain 56 to 100 percent of their body heat internally. Four hours of exercise in the direct sunlight could prove to be fatal. *Journal of Experimental Biology*. [M.F. Rowe et al., [Heat storage in Asian elephants during submaximal exercise: behavioral regulation of thermoregulatory constraints on activity in endothermic gigantotherms](#)]
10. be exempted from work at first sign of an injury or any sickness such as colic, lameness, abscesses, loss of appetite, etc
11. be free of chains
12. be free of beatings by mahouts
13. be trained in a humane manner
14. be allowed to socialize with other compatible elephants
15. be over the age of 13 years before being used for safaris. Elephant are relatively slow growing, long lived mammals. They reach physical and mental maturity at 20 years of age. Forcing an immature elephant to carry weight on their back for prolonged periods can negatively impact the elephant's physical development and health
16. have a mandatory retirement age of 58

Safari Management

If elephants must be used commercially attention must be given to the conditions under which they are forced to work. Elephants are not a domestic species; they are a wild animal living in a captive environment. Attention must be paid to their wild behaviors and to public safety.

To ensure elephant welfare and public safety certain parameters must be set:

1. safari trips must be limited to 2 – 2 hour trips per day
2. a limit of two riders per safari
3. no howdah
4. the elephant must not walk on hot tarmac to any safari loading location

5. the elephant must not walk more than 2 kilometers per day to and from the safari loading location
6. any elephant that does a safari is not allowed to do the public bathing on that same day
7. public must not be allowed to mount the elephant during public bathing

Elephants with the following conditions should not be allowed to provide safaris:

1. under or overaged
2. sick
3. at any stage of tuberculosis or tuberculosis treatment
4. pregnant in her third tri-mester
5. mother with suckling calf (up to five years)
6. lame and/or injured
7. with signs of mistreatment, head and leg wounds, abscessing, puncture wounds, cracked nails, sloughing pads, etc