

Adaptation/Rehabilitation of Captive-Held Elephants

By Carol Buckley



Elephants' age and life experiences play significant roles in determining the time it will take for them to adapt to physical freedom, autonomy, soft release and/or full freedom, in that order. Individuals in the same age group — I=infant (birth-4), C=child (5-10), Y=youth (11-17), YA=young adult (18-25), MA=middle age (26-45), M=mature (46-60), S=senior (61+) – will show similarities in their rehabilitation process. But each elephant's unique life experiences have a profound impact on her/his resilience and ability to rehabilitate. Therefore, each elephant must receive a full, individual evaluation before or directly upon arrival to the rehabilitation facility. The more that is known about the individual prior to arrival, the better s/he can be served.

An elephant accepted into a Rehabilitation Program (RP) may be suffering psychologically, mentally or physically, or a combination of the three. The essential components of rehabilitation are:

- the elephant's perception of physical safety and comfort
- trusted compatible companionship and
- autonomy

Elephants not suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can recover quickly in a suitably designed facility with skilled practitioners, the absence of human dominance and the freedom to make all personal decisions, including where they want to be, with whom and for how long; what to eat and when; and where to sleep, walk and swim.

PTSD

PTSD can cause elephants to act out in a deadly manner without any warning (precursor), making them extremely dangerous. Elephants with PTSD must be managed in a way that protects them and their caregivers from their potentially deadly outbursts.

Isolating the elephant is not a constructive approach to aberrant behavior. The affected individual is fearful, even if her behavior suggests differently. A compatible other is most important for the affected individual to feel safe and gain behavioral stability.



Additionally, it is imperative to understand that with the exception of musthing males, all aggression exhibited by elephants stems from fear. Once an elephant feels safe and his/her needs are being met, s/he will choose to avoid acting out in aggression. Conversely, if an elephant acts out aggressively, she is feeling insecure about something in her environment, her management or the others around her, causing her to be fearful.

Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan (CRP)

The First Step: Evaluation

The following issues should be thoroughly explored and the findings documented and noted in the elephants' personal history file:

1. Why has the individual been accepted into the RP?
2. What is the individual's estimated age?

3. What is the individual's past, including:
- captive born or wild caught
 - if wild caught, at what age
 - raised by elephants, by humans or a combination of both
 - lived in a herd and/or solitary situation
 - significant events or traumas in his/her life
 - known health issues and treatments
 - known injuries and treatments
 - personality
 - social skills
 - behavior
 - foraging abilities

TEAM Approach

Before designing an individual comprehensive rehabilitation plan (CRP) and setting a realistic goal for the expected level of rehabilitation, a team of experts in captive-held elephant behavior and rehabilitation must study each individual's history file and spend time silently observing the elephant. Together the TEAM must agree upon a CRP and regularly scheduled times to reconvene and reevaluate as the elephant progresses toward the rehabilitation goal. There must be flexibility in the CRP to allow for the animal's rehabilitation to progress in elephant time, faster or slower than anticipated.



The CRP should include protocol to deal with possible problems that may arise during desensitization and confidence building sessions, which will precede each breakthrough. Anticipating possible problems and knowing how to address them will be key to the elephant's sense of security and trust in the practitioner. Throughout the rehabilitation process, the practitioner acts much like a therapist, evaluating the elephant's state of mind and responding appropriately.

Facilities

Looking to nature we can create facilities that mirror an elephant's natural habitat.

1. The enclosure must
 - be spacious and chain-free
 - include trees for browsing, scratching and shade and a variety of specie specific edible live vegetation
 - have a water(s) source for drinking and self-directed bathing and playing
 - have diverse natural substrate for foot and joint health
 - offer the elephant an ability to occupy an area out of sound and sight of humans
2. A protected contact training wall must be incorporated in the facility design to allow for non-invasive husbandry practices, including positive reinforcement training, veterinary procedures and foot care.



3. Calves are curious and nimble. They can slip through fencing and get tangled in places larger elephants will avoid. Attention to detail when designing facilities for calves is all-important. They will scratch and chew on fencing hardware, climb over and under horizontal barriers and fail to see the danger in their activity. Once outside an enclosure the calf can eat or drink harmful substances or become frightened, then scream hysterically. This will send the adult females into a frenzy as they attempt to break out of the enclosure to rescue the calf.

Enrichment

Elephants live in vast spaces with dense woods, sparse trees, open grasslands, abundant water sources and varied terrain and substrate. Behavioral enrichment is required only in captive situations when these features are lacking. Due to the elephants' large complex brain, which require and thrive on continual and varied stimuli, producing effective artificial enrichment is a constant challenge, one that is seldom satisfactorily met through man-made objects.



Facility design must provide natural behavioral enrichment. The goal should be to provide a habitat that resembles the natural environment of the species. Elephants are awake and active 20 hours a day. They are psychologically, mentally and physically designed to engage with their habitat and family members almost constantly. The healthiest enrichment for captive-held elephants is a complex space consisting of a vast area made up of diverse topography, multiple species of trees, grasses and other vegetation, multiple water sources and varied substrate, with access to other compatible elephants.

Upon Arrival

An elephant new to a RP may display a wide range of behaviors and emotions, including fear, aggression directed at humans and/or other elephants, self-mutilation and depression.

The best approach is to be patient and not react, as elephants are highly sensitive to the emotions of those around them. The overall goal should be safety for everyone concerned. Facilities should be designed to enable elephants who act out aggressively to do so without hurting themselves, others or their facilities, and to be separated from those they might focus their aggression on.

Each elephant rehabilitation progresses at an individual rate. It can happen rapidly within a few days of arrival. Seldom does it take longer than a few weeks unless conditions are not conducive to the elephant feeling safe, having compatible companions or experiencing autonomy.

Progressive Levels of Rehabilitation

Not every elephant will progress at the same rate nor reach the same rehabilitation goal. Practitioners should be familiar with the different levels of rehabilitation and be able to recognize the signs and symptoms that indicate the elephant is either ready to move forward or needs to remain at his/her current level.

An elephant's personality and life experience will affect not only his/her response to the situation s/he is in, it will also influence what level of rehabilitation can be achieved.

There are five general levels of rehabilitation and management:

1. No anticipated release and limited physical freedom due to physical (lameness) or psychological (PTSD) problems: [Compassionate Elephant Care](#) (CEC)
2. Physical freedom/captive situation: limited human management/Compassionate Elephant Care (CEC)
3. Autonomy/captive situation: no human control/Compassionate Elephant Care (CEC)
4. Soft release/semi-wild situation/full autonomy: no human control/limited exposure to humans; monitored by mahout-ranger
5. Release/wild situation/full autonomy: human observation, no human control or exposure to humans

The Practitioner Relationship

The human practitioner directly responsible for implementing the CRP plays a key role in the resulting success or failure of the effort and therefore must be confident in his/her skills, not controlling. The elephant's perception of the practitioner's skill level and practical experience will have a direct impact on his/her recovery.



The more skilled the practitioner, the more promise the process holds. Equally, an unskilled practitioner can actually cause the elephant to distrust the process, which will hamper rehabilitation to the point of preventing a successful outcome.

Each practitioner should be highly knowledgeable in captive-held elephant care and management based on a philosophy that supports elephant autonomy. A strong background in protected contact is valuable but even more important is an extensive background in Compassionate Elephant Care (CEC), the free contact non-dominance approach to elephant care.

Practitioners must strive to develop a strong, respectful relationship with the elephant. They must not control, dominate or impose their own will on the elephant. The practitioner's goal should be for the elephant to gain independence, not to become reliant on the practitioner.

Example: An elephant is afraid of water after accidentally falling into a water-filled ditch. Her rescue was traumatic: it involved a huge backhoe, lots of noise from the rescue equipment and a crowd of screaming people and no other elephant to comfort her. Now the elephant is afraid to cross a shallow stream.

Only by breaking through his/her fear can the elephant make progress. There will come a moment when the skilled practitioner recognizes the possibility of a breakthrough. Only the elephant's trust in the practitioner or another elephant will enable her to push through her fear and, when she does, she will be on the fast track to recovery/rehabilitation.

The practitioner's observational skills, knowledge of elephant behavior and sensitivity to the elephant's fear and trust level will enable him/her to recognize this pivotal moment. Simply, the practitioner senses from the elephants' behavior and attitude that it is the right time to request something of the elephant, such as encouraging the elephant to voluntarily step into a "frightening" puddle of water.



Verbal encouragement and food reward are powerful motivators for elephants. But for either motivator to be effective, the elephant must trust the practitioner completely.

It must be emphasized that the relationship must be one of mutual trust, not dependency. By gaining trust, a practitioner can convince an elephant to voluntarily do most anything that has frightened him/her in the past. The practitioner's timing is critical. Making a request of the elephant before s/he has developed trust in the practitioner can cause the elephant to retreat and refuse to participate. Waiting too long — missing the window of opportunity — can result in the elephant losing trust in him/herself and again retreating, no longer interested in making the effort to break through the fear.

The first breakthrough is key to success. Once the elephant breaks through the first fear block, a new positive psychological path has been created, enabling him/her to make marked progress.

Finally, to ensure ongoing success, the elephant must perceive the breakthrough as his or her own. This builds self-confidence and increases the likelihood that s/he will willingly continue to participate in the rehabilitation process. The practitioner can help the elephant to perceive the breakthrough as a personal accomplishment with verbal praise, food reward and a visible show of pride.

Calves

It is important that calves are comfortable with practitioners but every effort should be made to ensure they do not become obsessively dependent on them. Elephants, especially calves, should always be housed with other elephants, including elephants several years older than themselves.



It is very important that a calf feels safe and secure. Although a human caregiver can fulfill some needs for a young calf, it is best to ensure that young calf has her/his mother, siblings or an allo-mother to bond with. In many cases healthy senior females,

even nonrelated individuals, serve as attentive, caring allo-mothers and often will produce milk for a calf.

Autonomy is the key to the development of a healthy, well-adjusted elephant. Providing autonomy at an early age builds character, confidence and the ability for an individual to adjust to life in the wild. Practitioners should recognize the value of non-dominance and refrain from trying to control any elephant, including calves.

Pre-release Conditioning

The CRP outlines the steps to be taken prior to deeming an elephant rehabilitated and a candidate for release. Each and every stage of rehabilitation must be successfully completed prior to releasing an elephant into a wild environment.



The elephant will demonstrate her readiness for release when s/he:

- interacts sociably with numerous other elephants, preferring their company to isolation
- has developed a strong bond with at least one other elephant
- is able to select and collect vegetation to maintain optimum body weight
- engages in migratory activity daily
- successfully searches out available water sources
- does not search out humans and human activity