



Elephant rides and other direct contact tourist-elephant interactions are unacceptable

Recommendations by World Animal Protection on ABTA's Animal Welfare Specific Guidance Manual 'Elephants in Captive Environments'.

Background

In June 2013, the UK's leading travel association ABTA launched their Global Welfare Guidance for Animals in Tourism, and its six supporting guidance manuals. World Animal Protection applauds ABTA for providing businesses with practical knowledge and guidance for responsible animal welfare conduct in tourism. However, the ABTA animal welfare guidelines require crucial improvement in certain areas. The specific manual 'Elephants in Captive Environments' is a case in point. In this document World Animal Protection explains its position and signals specific concerns that need to be addressed with regards to elephants in captivity for entertainment and public display purposes.

General comments - the use of elephants for entertainment

Recognising the animal welfare concerns associated with the demand for wildlife in tourism, irrespective of whether the animals involved have been sourced from the wild or bred in captivity, World Animal Protection is opposed to the confinement, exhibition or performance of wild animals for commercial gain and/or entertainment.



All elephants used for riding and other entertainment involving direct contact with visitors are separated from their mothers and 'broken' at an early age in order to permanently establish human dominance over the elephant. This "breaking-in" process in all its local and regional variations is exceptionally cruel. It typically involves some form of physical restraint, beatings and the withholding of food and water. In many cases, severe pain is inflicted to speed up the process.

World Animal Protection does not consider the conservation claims by many venues that breed elephants for tourist entertainment to be valid. An ever-increasing captive elephant population composed of individuals that cannot be released back into the wild does not aid elephant conservation efforts. Reproduction rates of elephants are slow and do not meet the increasing demand for new elephants for the tourism industry. Research has evidenced that the laundering of wild caught elephants into the industry and the extremely high price paid for calves, fuelled by the demand from tourists, incentivises the poaching of wild elephants.¹ This is considered a major threat to the wild Asian elephant population, which has declined dramatically over the last century. The capture of elephants from the wild also causes pain and prolonged suffering. "Pit traps" used to trap calves result in disrupting natural herds, with protective mothers and other herd members of the young elephants often killed in the process.

Elephants' needs cannot be fully met in a captive environment, not only because it is very difficult or too expensive to replicate the wild, but also because we have only a rudimentary idea of their needs. Inadequate conditions for elephants, such as limited space, artificial substrates and reduced social interaction with their species leads to physical and/or psychological damage, manifesting itself in injuries or behavioural problems such as stereotypies, self-mutilation or aggression. Many progressive zoos and sanctuaries, with conservation and/or welfare remits, now try to address these issues by designing large enclosures that closely resemble natural habitats as much as possible, and by introducing extensive behaviour enrichment programs to keep the animals stimulated. Although these are important improvements for the captive animal, they can't fully replicate a wild environment.

Since tourism is one of the biggest drivers of elephants in entertainment, travel organisations are key in achieving change. World Animal Protection therefore welcomes the steps taken by the tourism industry to support and contribute to a better world for wild animals. In the case of elephants in entertainment, this should be geared towards a responsible phase out of all elephant entertainment venues and promotion of alternatives - viewing elephants in the wild, or in true semi-wild sanctuaries where their welfare is paramount. World Animal

¹ TRAFFIC (2004) 'An Assessment of the live elephant trade in Thailand'.



Protection has produced guidelines for the transition of existing elephant venues to best-possible welfare, as a tool to assist the travel industry in shaping a cruelty-free future for elephants in tourism.

Specific comments on the ABTA Manuals

With regards to the ABTA specific guidance manual 'Elephants in Captive Environments' as well as the Manual on Unacceptable and Discouraged Practices, World Animal Protection notes that:

- The 'minimum requirements' for elephants in captivity outlined in the manual do not prevent elephants from being mistreated. They only provide for basic physical needs (e.g. fresh water, nutrition) and ignore the complex physiological welfare needs of elephants.² Elephants are highly intelligent, social and complex wild animals. A life in captivity for entertainment purposes severely harms their psychological and physical wellbeing and prevents them from accessing even the basic five freedoms of animal welfare.
- The recommendations in the different sections on minimal requirements, best practice and unacceptable practices in the ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines are inconsistent with research in other sections describing the potential impact of different training methods:
 - The section on the potential impact of the use of certain husbandry techniques for elephants points out that 'free contact' will always require training to maintain some level of direct control, linked to punishments and pain experiences (e.g. applying painful or aversive stimuli, such as the ankus/bullhook). 'Protected contact', where the elephant and trainer do not share the same space may allow some humane training (positive reinforcement techniques), but the ABTA guidance itself notes that "elephants cared for under a protected contact regime "cannot be used for any activity involving safe direct contact between visitors and elephants." Therefore, any attractions with direct interaction between tourist and elephants, such as riding and shows require aversive training methods to allow 'free-contact', always involving the use of noxious stimuli (e.g. physical and/or verbal punishment) to ensure direct control, to safely offer these attractions.³
 - The section in the elephant manual describing 'best practices' related to elephant riding, mahout training courses and other activities, seemingly ignores the above points on training and suggests these activities that require direct contact can be carried out in acceptable and humane ways through only exercising 'protected

² ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Specific Guidance Manual 'Elephants in Captive Environments', P12

³ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Specific Guidance Manual "Elephants in Captive Environments", p9-10



contact'.⁴ This is not consistent with the earlier claim in the manual that protected contact methods do not allow for direct contact between elephant and trainer, let alone between elephant and tourist.

- Following the above, the claim in the manual that "In elephant keeping, protected contact has replaced the hands-on, free contact approach" is evidently not the case.⁵ This claim may only apply to more progressive zoos and sanctuaries, rather than all captive elephant facilities. In contrast the vast majority of elephants kept in captivity for tourism purposes are trained using 'free contact' methods.
- The manual on Unacceptable and Discouraged Practices states that "Training methods should not be harmful or abusive to the animal – for instance, training through food deprivation, use of physical force or emotional coercion. These techniques may lead to abnormal behaviour or cause injury, disease and early mortality. These training techniques are unacceptable."⁶ However, this criteria is not reflected in the "Elephants in Captive Environments" manual - positive reinforcement techniques are simply not possible when allowing tourists to interact with elephants directly – which represents a tourist health and safety hazard. Elephants are dangerous animals and people are killed by them every year. In Thailand alone, there have been two fatalities each year over the past three years.⁷
- Welfare concerns around elephant polo, categorised as an 'unacceptable practice',⁸ should also apply to elephant rides and all other attractions involving direct interaction with humans. Claims that welfare is compromised due to adverse training techniques at a young age, as well as the reference to negative reinforcement training, aversive conditioning and physical restraint to control such a large animal do not just apply to elephant polo, but also to elephant rides and all other attractions involving direct contact with humans. This is not reflected in ABTA's animal welfare guidelines, as it does not categorise elephant rides and other human-elephant interactions for entertainment as unacceptable.⁹

Conclusion

Taking into consideration all of the above, it is imperative that any practices involving direct contact with elephants in tourism, such as elephant rides be classified as 'unacceptable'. By doing so, ABTA's 'Global Welfare Guidance for Animals in Tourism' will encourage travel companies to take significant steps to decrease demand and raise standards, with the goal to responsibly

⁴ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Specific Guidance Manual "Elephants in Captive Environments", p29

⁵ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Specific Guidance Manual "Elephants in Captive Environments", p10

⁶ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines: Unacceptable and Discouraged Practices, Page 6

⁷ World Animal Protection, 2015

⁸ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Unacceptable and Discouraged Practices, Page 7

⁹ ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines, Unacceptable and Discouraged Practices, Page 7



phase out the use of elephants in captivity for entertainment. The only humane way to see elephants is in their natural habitat or in places that hold elephants with their best interests at heart, such as genuine rescue centres and legitimate sanctuaries or wild-release programmes.