

Walk (on eggs) with elephants



July 2017

To better understand the elephant topic within a tourism context, it is important to recognise the difference between *domesticated* and *wild* elephants.

DOMESTICATED ELEPHANTS

Domesticated elephants were originally wild elephants poached and trained by their masters to work in the logging and mining industries and to work in the fields. Elephants were also taking part in wars and invasion campaigns.

Elephants in Asia have also played a key role in ceremonies and parades. They are considered to be an intricate part of the Southeast Asian culture and history. With industrialisation and the increased use of machines, elephants have been replaced.

New regulations, such as the 1989 Thai government ban on elephants working in the logging industry, have created a situation where both the elephants and their masters have no work.

The situation became complicated for the elephant owners and mahouts (note: mahouts are in charge of an elephant on a daily basis from birth to death) who, without regular income, started to beg in the streets or were looking for alternative employment.

An elephant can live up to 70 years and more. Elephants require good care and a vast amount of food (between one and three hundreds kilogrammes each day, depending on size). The food cannot be found in the jungle as these elephants are not allowed to roam freely. So it needs to be purchased from local markets.



WILD ELEPHANTS



One of the major challenges facing wild elephants is the competition for territory with humans. Wild elephants require large spaces to walk every day and gather the large amount of diverse food needed for their diet. The combination of urbanisation, population growth and agricultural expansion has exacerbated the situation to a degree where conflicts in Asia between humans and wild elephants are frequent, leading to casualties in both camps.

This is also a reason why releasing domesticated elephants is much more complicated than it seems. Elephants are social mammals living in herds. Relocating such herds is not an easy task. Once relocated, these elephants may then resort to foraging for food in the fields of local farmers – leading to more unfortunate conflicts between man and beast.

In a nutshell, the domesticated elephant population faces difficulties in finding meaningful work to be self-sustained and the wild population has ever-receding spaces in which to survive.

■ Elephants and the tourism industry: an opportunity?

The tourism industry provided a potential solution as the first elephant camps welcomed tourists from the mid 1970's. This was seen at that time as a promising opportunity for the elephants and their mahouts. Camps began to flourish all over Asia and remained in business for many years.

This trend is continuing in countries such as Myanmar and Lao PDR where elephant camp activities are being offered as a tourist experience.

The problems began more than a decade ago when tourists, animal welfare organisations and industry professionals started to highlight the fact that the welfare of elephants was at stake in many camps.

Living conditions in camps were amplified via social networks, prompting international campaigns and facilitating tourists' reviews about elephant welfare. Images and videos showing mistreatment of elephants were circulated. Travellers formed opinions about the social and economic issues surrounding these camps based upon information provided by stakeholders. However, the voices of the mahouts – an important stakeholder group – were not heard.

As a result, questions on issues such as the use of hooks and chains to 'train' and to control elephants were not being addressed.



There is no doubt that a deep bond develops over time between a mahout and the elephant but poorly managed elephant camps did not secure these important bonds. There are camps that would employ 'mahouts' with little or no experience in handling elephants, resorting to the use of force rather than developing the all-important bonds that lead to a safe working relationship.

■ Genesis of the project

In 2015 concerns grew about elephant welfare among tourism industry stakeholders. Tour operators and hoteliers faced a dilemma when their clients and guests requested elephant tours. Tourists were reporting bad practices and this impacted upon their business reputations. Animal welfare was becoming an increasingly important topic.

European visitors were noticeably sensitive to the issues surrounding poor elephant welfare. At the same time, destinations across the Asia Pacific region were accommodating increasing numbers of Chinese tourists. However, whilst campaigns for animal welfare in Europe, North America and Australia had been taking place for many decades, there was not the same degree of sensitivity and concern expressed by visitors from China and some other Asian source markets.

It was decided to focus only upon elephants. Individual challenges exist for each specific species used for tourism attraction purposes and it was important therefore to seek a tailor-made solution to problems associated with elephants in captivity.

■ Pioneers

Buffalo Tours, EXO Travel and Khiri Travel led the call for improved elephant welfare. These companies were trying to obtain detailed information about the camps in order to be sure that the elephants were being well treated.

Other tour operators were also planning to go down a similar road. They had already created their own sets of criteria with questions to be answered by elephant camp managers when tour operator representatives made site visits to these 'attractions'.

Whilst this process was essential to ensure a level of quality delivered by the attraction provider it was also highly inefficient as each tour operator tended to ask identical questions. Each tour operator was protecting its own research and was not sharing the results of these evaluations with other operators.

Within the framework of the PATA – Travelife tour operator sustainability working group, Buffalo Tours, EXO Travel and Khiri Travel discussed how to create common, practical standards for elephant camps that were feasible across Southeast Asia and remain independent. These standards would be checked by an independent auditor.

■ Animal protection and welfare

At the same time, concerns were also voiced loudly by animal welfare groups and NGOs. The World Animal Protection (WAP) started to campaign against Thomas Cook, requesting that they stop promoting and selling elephant rides and shows in its catalogue. This online petition collected almost 175,000 signatures, forcing Thomas Cook to abandon such activities at the end of 2015. It was a victory for the NGO but with diverse consequences. It also created room for 'tricky' questions.

Why was elephant riding considered cruel? What about feeding and bathing elephants? These two questions were particularly relevant as they only take place with domesticated elephants.

The question was also posed as to whether there were scientific studies that proved conclusively that riding an elephant had a negative impact on the physical wellbeing of the animal.

The question then remained as to other solutions for domesticated or captive elephants if they were prevented from working in the tourism industry but could not be released back into the wild?



■ Shifts in public opinion

Thanks to NGO campaigns, public opinion among European travellers demonstrated the view that it was ‘not so cool’ to ride an elephant or to be a spectator at elephant shows. These travellers recognised that they should be more careful when considering activities involving wild or domesticated animals.

It was an important victory with regard to the education of tourist masses. Some owners of elephant camps took steps to improve the quality level of their respective activities. There were also camps that ceased elephant rides and launched new projects such as walking, bathing or feeding the elephants.

As the size of groups visiting the camps decreased, the cost of these activities increased. The shift away from the old circus-type activities provided another level of experience with the elephant, sometimes with closer contact.

In October 2016 TripAdvisor launched its ‘no touching of wild animals’ policy, no longer selling tickets to attractions where travellers came into physical contact with captive, wild or endangered animals including elephants.

There are other consequences to consider. Elephant camps require tourism income since the costs related to caring for elephants (e.g. food and veterinary) are considerable. If an increasing number of European tour operators boycott the elephant camps or tourists decide to avoid the camps for reasons stated above, it could lead their owners to find tourists with lower levels of expectation in terms of elephant welfare. The consequences could be dire. In the short term, there could be a double market regarding the elephant camps, comparable to the way we consume food.

With the ‘fast food’ elephant camps experience, tourists would spend a very short time with the animal, take a few ‘selfies’ and add this experience to their bucket list. The elephant activity would be part of a one-day excursion and last for just one or two hours.

The ‘gourmet’ experience with an à la carte menu would provide tourists with quality interactive experiences with elephants. One successful example is ‘Be a mahout for the day’ where the tourist spends one full day with the elephant and its mahout. The tourist learns how to feed the animal and be part of its daily routine as part of a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



THE NEXT STEPS

We first summarized all the different questionnaires, assessments, criteria, done by the previous stakeholders. We created a first draft of the standards and asked the specialists to review it. This task was undertaken by a group of scientists, academics and elephant camp owners. The analysis was then shared with animal welfare NGOs for further review.

The result, inevitably, was a compromise in which we were seeking to ‘walk on eggs without breaking them’. With the first version of the proposed new standards completed at the end of 2016 a pilot phase was launched.

Ten elephant camps were visited with the support of Buffalo Tours, Khiri Travel, EXO Travel, Club Med, and Go Vacation – the tour operators involved in the process. This was an essential step to ensure that the camps could achieve and maintain the new standards. The issues were also discussed in detail by members of the PATA Tour Operator Sustainability Working Group.

The overriding mission was to not only recognise the efforts of the most responsible elephant camps but also encourage other camps to make essential improvements in animal welfare and to improve the visitor experience.

We are also respecting different positions regarding riding or not riding but if one of these activities is proposed it should follow strict guidances. The best practices collected are useful to reach a greater quality level. Those best practices are de facto a synonym of better welfare for the elephants and quality experience for the tourists.

We aim to be ready for the 2017-2018 season. We will then officially launch the standards publically – so keep your eyes and ears opened and next time you decide to book or sell an excursion involving elephant make sure that they respect the standards!





Author's bio

Nicolas Dubrocard started his international career in 2005 while participating in different programmes to improve tourism in Armenia as well as in training young tourism professional from Israel and Morocco. In 2007, he then created his own company and moved to Morocco leading programmes such as Every Drop Counts for The Travel Foundation and conducting environmental audits in the oases for the UNDP. In 2011, he accepted the position of Director at Green Key and moved to Copenhagen. During his time leading Green Key, he provided support and guidance in more than forty countries involved in the international hotel eco label. In 2013, Nicolas moved to Thailand to work with Kuoni in developing the Kuoni Water Champion Programme. Following the successful launch of the Kuoni Water Champion Programme, he moved to Malaysia and worked for Wild Asia tourism consultancy in Kuala Lumpur. He spends his time between Europe and Asia, holding lectures on sustainability and facilities management at the Institut Paul Bocuse in Lyon and IUBH School of Business and Management in Bonn, Germany. Nicolas is also an auditor for the Green Globe and Travelife eco labels.

Company profile

Audit Diagnostic Solutions Tourism (ADSTourism) is a consultancy company based in Hong Kong and operating worldwide. We are specialising in sustainability for the tourism sector and resource efficiency strategies for the hospitality industry.

Our team has been working in more than 25 countries around the world and look forward to new challenges in new destinations.

<https://www.solutionstourism.com>

Visitor Economy Bulletin is published ten times per year online and is made available in hard copy at supported events.

July 2017 Edition
Writer **Audit Diagnostic Solutions Tourism**
Design & Layout **Thanaporn Sae-Lee, PATA**

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