

Elephant welfare in Thailand: a growing ethical, political, and cultural concern

written by Mark Cogan | June 16, 2022



Photo by The Isaan Record

Thailand's tourist industry has long profited from inhumane and exploitative techniques in handling elephants. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed new pressures on human-elephant relationships. The elephant tourist industry is on the brink of collapse and wild elephant habitats are coming into closer contact with humans than before. How can Thailand better protect its elephants while bringing attention to elephant welfare with advocacy? Guest contributor Mark S. Cogan looks into the issue.

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, the tourist-driven economy elevated the use of elephants for the amusement of visitors and the profits of owners. In the space between the pandemic and slow economic recovery, several stories have emerged about the plight of elephants, both those privately owned and in the wild.

In 2019, a baby elephant named Ploy in the training village of Ban Ta Klang in Surin province [was photographed in chains](#), with its trainer holding a daunting rod, supposedly used in training the animal to perform a variety of tricks. Earlier this year, also in Surin, a baby elephant named Pho Jai [was forcibly made to dance](#) at a monk ordination ceremony.

In Chiang Mai, Surin, Pattaya, and other provinces, elephants are often brought into major

population centers to elicit donations from both locals and tourists, where the elephant provides a performance in exchange for tips.

According to World Animal Protection, a UK-based animal rights group, Thailand has almost 75% of the number of elephants used in tourism in Asia. There are roughly 3,800 captive elephants in Thailand, and the number of wild elephants is estimated to be [slightly lower than that figure at 3,300](#).

As the pandemic spread, many of Thailand's privately-owned Asian elephants fell into dire straits as the coronavirus stripped their owners of their livelihoods. Elephant handlers, or mahouts, have had to resort to [desperate measures to care for their animals](#).

With tourist income no longer coming in to feed the elephants or pay the trainers, tourism in Thailand's broader association with elephants requires a major revision. Critical to that revision is the relationship between elephants and humans, which is complex and crosses over political, social, and cultural lines.

Part of the problem is related to animal rights. Many advocacy groups have alleged abuse, where trainers punish the animals with crude weapons intended to break the spirits of the elephants. Researchers at Chiang Mai University recently discovered that [almost 60 percent of the elephants at several Thai tourist facilities have nervous tics](#), reflecting their anxiety, frustration, and boredom. The elephants developed repetitive behaviors as coping mechanisms in order to deal with stressful situations, such as being separated from family members or being restrained in heavy chains.

These concerns include cultural ties that Thailand has had with elephants for centuries. A [white elephant was gifted to King Maha Vajiralongkorn](#) just prior to his coronation. These rare white elephants are a symbol of kingship and are often worshiped as deities. At Vajiralongkorn's coronation, 11 elephants, [painted in white kneeled before the Thai king](#), with their bodies and tusks decorated in royal tribute.

Deeply ingrained into Thai history, [elephants have led Thai kings into battle](#), adorned the national flag until 1917, and are now common on postage stamps, traditional artwork, and local architecture. In the Thai language, Earth's Milky Way galaxy is referred to as *thang cháng phùeak* or "the white elephant's way."

In contrast, animal rights activism and education about the ethical treatment of animals is in its infancy. Very few Thais understand the terrible conditions and conservation status of the Asian elephant in their own country. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has [repeatedly warned](#) about a dramatic decrease in elephant populations throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The joining of cultural history and shifting socioeconomic conditions in Thailand has led to compromises in ethical behavior.

Elephants were once commonly used for logging purposes. When that practice was [banned in 1989](#), humans found that the [tourist elephant trade could be also lucrative](#).

To address ethical and animal rights concerns, a combination of awareness and conservation status by a civil society is needed. Having private industries and the government address these concerns may also be helpful, as well as adapting to changes in economic and structural conditions.

More scientific data, for example, could help reduce [cases of human-elephant conflict](#), evidenced by a recent report where an elephant crashed through a woman's kitchen wall in Kaeng Krachan

National Park in Phetchaburi. Greater public understanding and education is needed to avoid situations where elephant habitats are compromised or restricted, or where elephants [routinely come into contact with human populations](#).

In a bright spot, Thailand's Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation (DNP) [developed a 10-year action plan](#) to reduce human-elephant conflicts, particularly in areas where humans and elephants compete for the same resources and share habitats, especially near rice, corn, and cassava fields. This often leads to the unnecessary deaths of elephants [due to electrocution](#) or gunshots.

However, the Thai government also lags behind civil society on matters of conservation of Thailand's domestic and wild elephant population. While the Asian elephant is listed as a "preserved animal" under the Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act of 2019 and elephant tusks are protected by the Elephant Ivory Tusks Act of 2015, there are different classifications and protections for domesticated elephants.

World Animal Protection [recently advocated for a bill](#) that would close some of the weaknesses in Thai animal protection laws, including those that apply to elephants in captivity, as well as those regarding commercial breeding.

Political parties have used designated days, such as "Thai Elephant Day," March 13, as a vehicle for advocacy. Chart Thai Pattana [recently used that day](#) to raise awareness about the welfare and situation of Thai elephants.

At the center of the solution to Thailand's struggles to conserve and protect its Asian elephant population from human exploitation and abuse is the philosophy and practice of sustainability. Conservation measures, even among United Nations agencies, remain painfully slow.

As of 2005, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), tacitly recommended the transition of domestic elephant populations from the logging industry to the tourism industry, once [putting out a handbook for local mahouts](#). The handbook narrowly advocates the use of the bull hook, which if misused, can cause significant injury.

Greater investment is needed in the area of population management and control, as well as enforcement of current laws on the books that are supposed to help curb human-elephant conflict.

While the issue of economic diversification is a lingering issue and beyond the scope of this article, protections are needed for elephants that may continue to face the consequences of shocks to Thailand's economy. It will be some time before Thailand returns to an environment where tourism can account for as much as 12 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

What is needed is a restoration of the balance between human and elephant. Market forces are turning traditional human-elephant relationships, [even among the Karen people](#), where trained elephants are sold for up to two million baht. Rented elephants bring as much as 30,000 baht per month.

Some have urged a return to a more eco-friendly cohabitation, where elephants and people depend on one another equally. Traditional practices though, if not sustainable or violate ethical boundaries, have no place in a modern society.

Thailand's treatment of Asian elephants must evolve, which means that corrupt, inhumane, and exploitative practices must end. That means refraining from training elephants, rather than allowing tourists and locals to walk or commune with elephants in a more natural state. A more sustainable

practice should encourage more local handicrafts or ancillary products to support the care and well-being of domestic elephants.

To accomplish these aims, it will take aggressive advocacy at the local level, education and training among Thai civil society, as well as greater political will.

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