

## **Rewilding or reviewing: Conservation and the elephant-based tourism industry**

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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**Abstract:** Baker & Winkler (2020) provide a detailed examination of elephants in captivity, from an historical perspective to modern-day concerns. Concerns include the poor level of mahout skills and subsequent captive elephant welfare issues in the Thai elephant tourism industry. Rewilding is proposed as a method of rehabilitation and a way to include mahouts in the conservation process. This commentary argues that the tourism industry is making positive changes and mahout skills can be utilised successfully without the arduous task of rewilding. Animal rights groups and the transfer of misinformation surrounding captive elephant welfare are also examined, as these typically fail to acknowledge the socio-economic and geopolitical complexities of elephant conservation in the least developed and developing nations.

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As discussed by Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W), the rewilding of captive Asian elephants is often viewed as a solution to the myriad of problems faced by captive elephants working in the elephant-based tourism industry. B&W make a good case as to why more captive Asian elephants should be considered for rewilding. Successful reintroduction into the wild while utilising traditional mahout knowledge is possible, as shown in the current rewilding program run by the Elephant Conservation Center, Sayaboury, Lao DPR (Bourke 2020).

But from a population management perspective, the purpose of rewilding needs further examination. If the goal is to repopulate wild areas, then currently rewilding is an expensive, prolonged task that benefits only a small handful of elephants, and it's ethically questionable. This view is supported by Oomenn et al. (2019), who find that the ideals behind compassionate conservation fail to acknowledge the complexities of real-world issues. If the goal of rewilding is to improve welfare conditions, to respect the intrinsic "rights" of captive elephants, and to genuinely include mahouts in the conservation discourse, then there are more cost-effective, efficient and replicable methods available. B&W have done a comprehensive analysis of the human-elephant relationship, but fail to acknowledge and recognize current efforts by stakeholders in the elephant-based tourism industry to improve elephant welfare. This commentary will examine some issues raised by B&W regarding the role of tourism and mahouts in conservation management and will argue that there is emotive transfer of misinformation by animal rights groups.

**1. The roles of tourism and mahouts in conservation management.** B&W write: “*There is little evidence that the elephant tourism industry has had any positive effect on wild populations and habitat recovery*”. From an historical perspective, this may be the case, but today elephant-based tourism is changing. B&W themselves acknowledge the advent of microchipping and DNA testing, as well as the tightening of registration loopholes for all captive elephant calves in Thailand. These actions alone have certainly curtailed the smuggling of wild elephants from once porous borders. These are just legalities relating to the livestock industry, but they show that collaborative efforts are indeed being made by government departments to aid wild elephant populations. The elephant-based tourism industry is not one mass conglomerate but a collective of small-scale family enterprises, large businesses, state-run camps, private-public partnerships, NGOs and government departments. B&W’s statement also overextends the levels of power and governance that a typical tourism stakeholder would be expected to have over any wild elephant habitat, associated land, agricultural concessions and a multitude of other geopolitical and economic capacities (Bramwell & Lane 2011). Wild elephant conservation consists of a diverse range of actors, and the tourism industry is only one sector involved. I argue that the tourism industry is correcting historical issues and is improving practices (Suter 2019).

Many private elephant camps and organisations work alongside governments and local communities to provide positive, site-specific solutions for wild elephant habitat and the communities living therewith. This includes the Lao Elephant Conservation Center (Lao PDR), Mason Adventures (Indonesia), and the Golden Triangle Elephant Foundation (Thailand), to name just a few. In November 2019 the Tourism Association of Thailand hosted a discussion panel at the World Tourism Forum, London, examining elephant welfare and the role of tourism. Keynote speakers included representatives from the Association of British Travel Agents, Pacific Asia Travel Association and, Chiang Mai University School of Veterinary Studies, as well as me (TAT Newsroom 2019). There are efforts to reform poor industry behaviors, and these efforts should be acknowledged and supported (Hampton & Teh-White 2018).

There is no doubt that the decline in individual mahout skills has led to many captive elephant welfare problems. Shifting industries, mahout age and locality all play a role in job satisfaction (Suter et al. 2013). B&W believe that private elephant ownership is an impediment to captive elephant conservation. I would argue the opposite: private elephant ownership is an untapped advantage for conservation (Gajah 2019). Working with individual elephant owners, mahouts and camps, it is possible to improve mahout education and skills in a way that directly improves elephant welfare. As stated by Lair (1997), the historical form of mahoutship is over; it’s time to formally qualify the trade as exactly that. Conservationists need to work with camp managers and encourage them to provide a living wage, health insurance, sickness benefits, training and other basic entitlements to ensure that mahouts care enough about their duties to provide high standards of elephant welfare. Camps should have strict parameters for chains, living quarters, socialisation, diet and all other essential elephant welfare needs. These are all practical, replicable criteria that can be independently evaluated through third-party accreditation schemes (Asian Captive Elephant Standards 2020). Many elephant camps see the benefit of inviting independent scrutiny and evaluation, as tour operators and destination management companies have strict criteria about which camps they refer to clients (EXO Travel 2018).

With appropriate mahout education and strong camp welfare, elephants can still live a safe and content existence alongside humans, bringing many benefits to the captive population as well as local communities (Cameron & Ryan 2016; Suter 2019). This is supported

by a recent study demonstrating that elephants residing in camps with high welfare standards are less stressed than elephants in no-contact camps (Bansiddhi et al. 2019). Elephant-based tourism is an industry that is here to stay and should be viewed as a contributory tool for positive change rather than a hindrance to conservation or elephant welfare.

**2. Animal rights groups and emotive discourse.** Despite the benefits that tourism can bring to the elephant population, an impediment is the animal rights movement and transfer of misinformation. Animal protection/rights groups typically fail to take into consideration the very real and complex circumstances of elephant conservation in the least-developed and developing nations, thus creating mistrust and prejudice between eastern and western cultures. An example of this is the World Animal Protection report (Schmidt-Burbach 2017) cited by B&W. This is a non-scientific, biased report aimed at western tourists, demonising almost the entire southeast Asian elephant-based tourism community. Through emotive imagery and misinformation, the report has gained traction without being subject to any critical analysis or academic rigour. B&W themselves use emotive terms throughout their paper to describe captive elephants, including the phrases “*Grim conditions*” and “*Living a life worth living*”. In her commentary, Kopnina (2020) too seems to suggest that all elephants living in captivity face significant oppression as a result of anthropocentrism. A detailed discussion of elephant anthropomorphism and sentientism is beyond the scope of this commentary. But as proposed by Gray (2018), captive animal welfare and conservation need not be contradictory.

Rewilding certainly has its place in Asian elephant conservation. But through education, training and improved camp welfare, elephant-based tourism is in a prime position to facilitate a great deal of positive change for elephants in human care. The camp isn't the problem, it's the level of welfare at the camp, including mahout welfare. Fortunately this is something that can be changed, and is changing. The elephant-mahout tradition of over 4,000 years should not have to face cultural extinction because a handful of western stakeholders demand it. Working with mahouts, camp managers, communities and other decision-makers can provide positive welfare outcomes for elephants in captivity. I suggest that the next wave of elephant conservation focuses on present realities rather than striving to achieve what is currently unattainable for the majority of captive elephants. Creating positive welfare changes to elephant-based tourism and the way elephants live in human care is vastly more practical than attempting to change major geopolitical, economic and societal conditions.

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