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Elephants at work

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

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Abstract: Baker & Winkler (B&W) propose rewilding Asian elephants in a model in which they are rescued, rehabilitated and then given work with their mahouts in ecological restoration and ecotourism. In a sympathetic critique, we explore the status that B&W's analysis accords to *work*. Types of work and working conditions need to be differentiated. We caution against a model of conservation that would make the future of life conditional on participating in the workforce.

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In their vision for elephant rewilding, Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) propose a three-part trajectory for captive Asian elephants: rescue, rehabilitation and then rewilding. B&W's vision diverges from the spatially constrained and exploitative relations commonly found in the region in favor of giving elephants more space and more autonomy. B&W seek means of protecting the livelihoods and expertise of mahouts in this transition, for a future in which mahouts would work with free-ranging elephants under models of ecotourism. Neither of us is expert on the status of elephants in Thailand. We are social theorists concerned with the shifting logics of conservation in the Anthropocene. We offer some reflections on the idea of elephant wildness and elephant work in B&W's proposal.

B&W acknowledge the slipperiness of terms like “domesticity” and “rewilding,” especially when applied to elephants and the forest landscapes of Thailand. They caution against an approach in which wildness means just the absence of human influence. They acknowledge that the Anthropocene makes such a distinction difficult. In the long, fraught histories of human-elephant entanglement in South-East Asia, there are no pristine forests to which any de-domesticated elephants might return. Humans, forests and elephants have co-evolved, and livable futures for all three will require new modes of entanglement. To this end, B&W seek more nuanced, qualitative measures of elephant wildness.

B&W focus on finding a role for work – both human and elephant – in their proposed transition to rewilding. Wildness and work are often counterposed in Western sociology. Protestant ethics celebrated the role of work in disciplining unruly desires, enabling productivity, and improving both society and nature. A darker manifestation is the “work sets

you free” slogan of the Nazi concentration camp. For some, wildness has been evoked in a romantic reaction to modernity. It is also hailed by those who seek a primitivist or hedonistic life outside of work. Modern societies permit a little wildness during the weekend or holidays, but citizenship is increasingly predicated on participating in the workforce.

In animal studies, there is a growing interest in the concept of work and of animals as workers. This literature examines how animals generate value for those who own them (Collard 2014; Barua 2019) and how the politics of work might be used to improve animal welfare (Porcher 2017). Developing Lainé’s (2020) commentary on B&W, we draw on this literature to examine the changing forms of work done by elephants and mahouts in Thailand and examine what the concept of work adds to our shared interest in elephant welfare and conservation.

Elephants’ resistance to captive breeding and thus domestication has meant they have escaped becoming *metabolic labour* (unlike the chickens, pigs and cattle who convert grain to meat; Beldo 2017). Until the logging ban, elephants had long been providing *physical labour* as draught animals. They also performed *affective labour* in religious processions, at war, on safaris, and lately in the tactile personal encounters of ecotourism (Lorimer 2012). In B&W’s proposal, elephants primarily perform *ecological labour*: providing ecosystem services such as dispersing seeds and disturbing vegetation. They join the ranks of keystone species like beavers used as water engineers or fast-growing trees planted to sequester carbon, providing value through “nature-based solutions.”

On the surface, this transition might appear heartening: working conditions for elephants and mahouts might well be better when they become ecologists tramping through extensive forests and nonhuman safari performers entertaining ecotourists. But there are two problems with this scenario.

First, what the analysis of nonhuman (and human) animal work really tells us is that the nature of the work matters less than the economic conditions under which it is performed. Both Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt observed how workers become alienated when they lose control over their means of production and work becomes routinised and automated. Elephants have become commodities in Thailand, their labor exploited by remote owners. The economic status of the mahout is very low. The economic need for tourist visibility can generate unvarying routines akin to those performed by theme park hosts and hostesses. Creating meaningful and valued work for mahouts and elephants will require economic reforms in the tourism industry as well as changes to the property status of elephants.

Second, even in a utopian future with self-employed rewilded elephants and their mahouts employed as autonomous ecosystem engineers for ecotourism, their survival remains conditional on their ability to work. Such a vision – increasingly common in efforts to link rewilding with the idea of ecosystem services – naturalizes work (Besky and Blanchette 2020) as requisite for planetary survival, reducing forests to workplaces. It amounts to “an ecological-economic tribunal” over the future of life (Dempsey 2016; cf. Treves et al. 2019). A more radical vision might be to imagine a future for elephants and mahouts at least partly outside the sphere of work. One model for compassionate conservation of elephants might be based on play or creativity (Wemmer and Christen 2008), but recent experiments suggest that play can be induced by boredom and hence may not be a reliable indicator of elephant welfare (Webber and Lee 2020). A focus on creativity might perhaps be used to justify the production of paintings and other marketable products by elephants, but more research is needed to better understand elephant leisure and what makes an elephant’s ‘life worth living’ (Mellor 2016).

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