

# ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Lee, Phyllis C. and Lindsay, W. Keith (2020) A “halfway house” for improving captive welfare. *Animal Sentience* 28(14)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1574

Date of submission: 2020-04-06

Date of acceptance: 2020-04-15



---

This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact [wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org](mailto:wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org).



## A “halfway house” for improving captive welfare

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

**Phyllis C. Lee**

Psychology Department, University of Stirling  
Amboseli Trust for Elephants, Kenya

**W. Keith Lindsay**

Amboseli Trust for Elephants, Kenya

**Abstract:** It is certainly time to aim for higher quality management strategies for Thailand’s captive elephants, and to engage with sustainable livelihoods for traditional mahouts. Baker & Winkler’s proposal to rewild Thai elephants by placing them under the guardianship of Karen mahouts is recognized as not “wild” since it remains a form of management requiring elephants to live under the control of human caregivers. We applaud the positive welfare aims of this proposal; however, we caution that few of the long-term consequences for elephants or habitats can be known, and further considerations of elephant population dynamics and forest ecosystems are required if these proposals are to be successful for conservation and elephant welfare.

[Phyllis Lee](#) is the Director of Science for the Amboseli Trust for Elephants, and Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Stirling. She has studied behavioural ecology of wild African elephants for almost 30 years. She has also been active in issues involving captive welfare in the UK. [Website](#)



[W. Keith Lindsay](#) is a conservation biologist and environmental consultant based in Oxford, UK, and affiliated with the Amboseli Trust for Elephants. He has over 40 years’ professional experience with elephants as well as natural resource policy and practice. His interests include wild ecology and captive welfare of elephants across Africa, Asia and North America. [Website](#)



Baker & Winkler’s (2020) (B&W) proposal for “rewilding” Thailand’s captive elephants approaches the issues of captive elephant management sensitively, especially in two key contexts: the appalling ongoing welfare experienced by many captive elephants in Thailand and the need for sustainable livelihoods among the Karen Hill peoples as an alternative to deforestation through farming. A transition to an extensive management system, where the elephants are permitted to roam in forests, and contact with tourists and other forest dwellers

are managed by keepers (mahouts), provides choices for elephants and people that must be an improvement – a halfway house “to the wild” – compared to most existing captive elephant facilities in Southeast Asia. Current uses of Thailand’s elephant population (the vast majority of which is “owned” and entirely human-managed, as B&W show) are untenable and inhumane, so a transition to a better managed extensive captive context would be a vast improvement.

However, this is not elephants “in the wild”, as B&W clearly note. Wilding (and rewilding) is a controversial topic, based on assumptions that often violate principles of environmental justice. Given the long and complex indigenous and colonial history of much of Southeast Asia, it is unlikely that any forests, rivers, or lands are wild in the sense of being unaltered by human activities. These areas have been occupied by a variety of peoples, with many different cultures and relationships to forests and wildlife. As other commentators have noted (Kopnina, 2020; Paukatet, 2020; Suter, 2020), using elephants to help restore the ecosystem suggests we already know what processes they will affect. Wild Asian elephants typically live in forest fragments, possibly preferring the more productive secondary vegetation (Sukumar, 2003). Many current wild Asian elephants live at the human-forest interface, where we see changes in patterns of elephant aggregation (Srinivasaiah et al., 2019), aggression and retaliation between humans and elephants, and low human tolerance of crop losses or risks to life and livelihoods (see Gubbi et al., 2014).

If they are not constantly managed and moved, will the rewilded elephants have ecological impacts on the small residual forests of Thailand or on the livelihoods of local human residents? It is this perceived need for active management, both of elephants and people, that is proposed to provide livelihoods for traditional mahout families. Generations of elephants living in forest fragments – if a self-sustaining wild population is effectively created – will have nowhere to go given the rapid deforestation occurring throughout Asian elephant range countries (Leimgruber et al., 2003). Is this fair for either elephants or humans? It is critical to ensure that people living alongside elephants have sufficient knowledge of elephants to promote coexistence; the people need sensitisation to living with elephants if both are to remain safe. Systems of elephant ambassadors, where local people are trained and paid to facilitate human-elephant coexistence, could provide further livelihood support as well as tolerance of elephants roaming in human-dominated ecosystems.

A number of challenges associated with the concept of elephant rewilding remain to be addressed. Among the managed timber elephants of Myanmar, populations are not self-sustaining and rely on wild capture, which has profound implications for survival and fertility over the long-term (Lahdenperä et al., 2019). The population management of the Thai elephants rewilded under B&W’s proposal needs careful consideration; is it the intention that elephant numbers be self-sustaining with natural reproductive processes? If successful, the populations could actually grow, which is great for Asian elephants on the IUCN critically endangered Red List but perhaps less great for the forests or people farming nearby, as noted above. In the African context, the mantra of “Too many elephants, too few trees” has led to managed decimations of populations in Uganda (Laws, Parker, & Johnstone, 1975) and southern Africa (see van Aarde et al., 1999), and debate continues today (Henley & Cook, 2019). Resilience to growing elephant numbers needs to be built into these proposals.

Can elephants be “rewilded”? Can individuals bereft of families, of the social context for their development and responses to the world, lacking generational knowledge and memory of

safe spaces, of resources, of routes between forests, actually thrive in a wild context? The small number (104 according to B&W) released into forests have not been monitored for reproductive or social health over the long term. The number of “orphans” released from the Elephant Transit Home in Sri Lanka is tiny, and again their long-term survival and success is unknown. Orphaned wild African elephants can form what appear to be functional families (Goldenberg & Wittemyer, 2017), and the David Sheldrick’s Wildlife Trust orphans have notably been successfully released, but again long-term monitoring of their futures is only beginning. To their credit, B&W call for more research into the effects of their and other interventions.

It is indeed timely to focus on how to achieve higher quality management strategies for Thailand’s captive elephants. The use of the emotive conservation term “rewilding” attracts our attention, but how many of Thailand’s captive elephants will benefit from this programme? Attention is still required about where and how to create safe extensive management facilities for the captive elephants not included in this proposal, as their welfare and wellbeing remain compromised.

B&W recognise the importance of good practices in captive management, and this context informs their admirable aims to improve captive elephant welfare. As they also document, better management requires legislation across the board: on ownership, on appropriate captive conditions, on breeding, on trade and on human-elephant interactions. Any legislation also requires a good, well-funded, regulatory regime. Such changes need to come from state actors, in combination with local keepers of elephants. No amount of support for indigenous cultural practices with elephants can fully succeed without a strong regulatory regime. Change happens when it is driven by those at the base – at the “elephant end”, from visitors and mahouts – but will only be effective when the state supports best practice in welfare and management regimes. Establishing what is best practice for captive Asian elephants is still a work in progress, and B&W’s target article contributes to that work. It is perhaps worth noting that placing elephants in the guardianship of Karen mahouts remains a form of management; it requires elephants to live under the control of human caregivers, and it could remove some of elephants’ autonomous choices about where to roam to ensure that elephants remain tolerant of ecotourists and mahouts. These conditions are, however, far better than many existing systems, if still not ideal for truly wild elephants.

## References

- Baker, L., & Winkler, R. (2020). [Asian elephant rescue, rehabilitation and rewilding](#). *Animal Sentience* 28(1).
- Goldenberg, S. Z., & Wittemyer, G. (2017). Orphaned female elephant social bonds reflect lack of access to mature adults. *Scientific Reports*, 7(1), 1-7.
- Gubbi, S., Swaminath, M. H., Poornesha, H. C., Bhat, R., & Raghunath, R. (2014). An elephantine challenge: Human–elephant conflict distribution in the largest Asian elephant population, southern India. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 23(3), 633-647.
- Henley, M. D., & Cook, R. M. (2019). The management dilemma: Removing elephants to save large trees. *Koedoe*, 61(1), 1-12.
- Kopnina, H. (2020). [Of elephants and men](#). *Animal Sentience* 28(2).

- Lahdenperä, M., Jackson, J., Htut, W., & Lummaa, V. (2019). Capture from the wild has long-term costs on reproductive success in Asian elephants. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 286(1912), 20191584.
- Laws, R. M., Parker, I. S., & Johnstone, R. C. (1975). *Elephants and their habitats*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Leimgruber, P., Gagnon, J. B., Wemmer, C., Kelly, D. S., Songer, M. A., & Selig, E. R. (2003). Fragmentation of Asia's remaining wildlands: Implications for Asian elephant conservation. *Animal Conservation*, 6(4), 347-359.
- Paukatet, J. V. T. (2020). [A psychological perspective on rewilding](#). *Animal Sentience* 28(4).
- Srinivasaiah, N., Kumar, V., Vaidyanathan, S., Sukumar, R., & Sinha, A. (2019). All-male groups in Asian elephants: A novel, adaptive social strategy in increasingly anthropogenic landscapes of Southern India. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 1-11.
- Sukumar, R. (2003). *The living elephants*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Suter, I. (2020). [Rewilding or reviewing: Conservation and the elephant-based tourist industry](#). *Animal Sentience* 28(3).
- van Aarde, R., Whyte, I., & Pimm, S. (1999). Culling and the dynamics of the Kruger National Park African elephant population. *Animal Conservation*, 2(4), 287-294.

# Call for Papers

Special Issue of the *[Journal of Consciousness Studies](#)*

*Plant Sentience: Theoretical and Empirical Issues*

**Guest Editors:** Vicente Raja (Rotman Institute of Philosophy, Western University)  
Miguel Segundo-Ortin (School of Liberal Arts, University of Wollongong)

In this special issue, we address the issue of plant sentience/consciousness from different disciplines that combine both **theoretical** and **empirical** perspectives. Some of the questions to be addressed in the special issue include the following:

- Plants exhibit interesting behaviors; does this entail that they are conscious to some extent?
- What are the requirements for a living organism to be conscious? Do plants meet these requirements?
- What does the possibility of plant sentience/consciousness entail for the study of the evolution of consciousness?
- Is it just a categorical mistake to attribute consciousness to plants?
- Can we talk about different levels or degrees of consciousness?

## How to submit?

Deadline: **June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

Please submit your papers (max. 9000 words including footnotes, references, abstract, etc.) to [vgalian@uwo.ca](mailto:vgalian@uwo.ca) with subject "Paper Special Issue JCS".

For more information, including bibliography and more detailed descriptions of the topics and questions to be addressed in the papers submitted to the special issue, please contact the guest editors at [vgalian@uwo.ca](mailto:vgalian@uwo.ca) (Vicente) or [mso693@uowmail.edu.au](mailto:mso693@uowmail.edu.au) (Miguel).