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Future of Thailand's captive elephants

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

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Abstract: Removal from natural habitat and commodification as private property compromise elephants' broader societal value. Although we support Baker & Winkler's (2020) plea for a new community-based rewilding conservation model focused on mahout culture, we recommend an expanded co-management approach to complement and enhance the regional elephant conservation strategy with additional local community stakeholders and the potential to extend across international borders into suitable elephant habitat. Holistic co-management approaches improve human wellbeing and social cohesion, as well as elephant wellbeing, thereby better securing long-term survival of Asian elephants, environmental justice, and overall sustainability.

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Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic has currently put over a thousand captive elephants in Thailand out of work, and potentially out of food as well (Paddock & Suhartono, 2020). The pandemic exposes the vulnerability and unsustainability of wildlife in captivity and illustrates the need for a new and sustainable conservation strategy. Baker & Winkler (B&W, 2020) recommend a 3R model (Rescue, Rehabilitate, Rewild) for captive Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) that could benefit both elephants and humans. B&W propose rewilding captive elephants, facilitated by traditional mahout-guardians who patrol the forest, monitor elephants, reduce human-elephant conflict, and develop ecotourism in their communities.

We recommend taking B&W's approach further: a large-scale, co-management initiative to connect wild elephant habitat by incorporating "trophic" rewilding principles ("rewilding"¹ elephants as a strategy to restore trophic interactions and ecological resilience; Svenning et al., 2016), where elephants will no longer be under direct human control, yet local communities access the benefits of living with elephants. This can promote elephant conservation, ensure sustainability, and enhance socio-economic development.

Conservation outcomes: Integrity of nature

Fragmentation and loss of habitat play a major role in the decline of both Asian and African (*Loxodonta africana*) elephants, with increased human-elephant conflict (Hoare, 2015; Robson et al., 2017; Van de Water & Matteson, 2018; Shaffer et al., 2019). In Thailand, most elephants currently live in small, isolated populations, often below the minimum viable 500 breeding individuals (Sukumar, 1989; Suksawang, 2018). Thailand's 272 protected areas (PAs) cover about 20% of the country, but elephants inhabit only 69 PAs (Suksawang & McNeely, 2015; Kitratporn & Takeuchi, 2020). Only 45% of available wild land in Thailand has been declared PAs (Leimgruber et al., 2003). Although not all areas will be suitable as elephant habitat, there is wild land available for increasing habitat for elephants, creating and enhancing corridors for connectedness, and improving the long-term viability of Thailand's elephant populations.

The Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) gives priority to connectivity between elephant populations, and promotes the Managed Elephant Range (MER) approach to achieve such corridors. MERs provide areas managed for elephants, where sustainable and compatible human use is allowed without the need for creating or enlarging PAs (AsESG, 2017). Creating new MERs through targeted captive elephant rewilding can increase the integrity of elephant habitat, provide alternatives for the unsustainable status quo of elephants in captivity, boost elephant numbers in high-deficit elephant areas, and set an example for other elephant range states in innovative elephant conservation (Robson et al., 2017). Reintroduction of elephants into historic ranges has shown positive results in Asia (Baker & Winkler, 2020; Thitaram et al., 2015) and Africa (Garai et al., 2004; Millsbaugh et al., 2007; Pinter-Wollman, Isbell & Hart, 2009). Rewilding entire

¹ We are aware of the problems with the term "rewilding," as raised by other commentaries (Lee & Lindsay, 2020); we use it as shorthand for managed and monitored rehabilitation and reintroduction of a species to its "wild" habitat.

social groups, including calves, into suitable habitat helps to create and maintain stable social networks and reduce stress (Jachowski et al., 2013; Thitaram et al., 2015).

Human outcomes: Social cohesion

In addition to long-term elephant conservation, the main goals of rewilding elephants should align with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2014). A holistic approach ensures that mahouts, elephant owners, local communities, and broader society all derive benefits from the conservation of the national elephant population in wild habitat. Mahouts are crucial for a rewilding scheme (Baker & Winkler, 2020), but the planning and implementation of conservation corridors (MERs) for rewilded captive elephants needs to include other local people as stakeholders to share in the enhancement of wellbeing and livelihoods. The development of skills and alternative livelihoods is critical for achieving overall sustainability (Suksawang, 2018). This includes planting crops that are less attractive to elephants on nearby agricultural land (Gross et al., 2017) and implementing extensive habitat restoration programs (Sitompul et al., 2011) as well as other sustainable human-elephant conflict measures.

Following COVID-19, the tourism landscape will be very competitive. Tourists who visit reserves with rewilded elephants would not only enjoy sightings of elephants in their habitats and “reconnect with nature” (Parker, 2008); they can also experience Thai culture as connected to elephants. The elephant, the national animal of Thailand, can function as a link between the integrity of nature and the wellbeing of the Thai people, reinforcing feelings of pride and ownership, as well as historic cultural, symbolic, and religious values (Ribó, 2017). Broadening B&W’s focus on rescuing both the elephants and mahouts will engender more participation and buy-in from local communities, conservation agencies, the government, and Thai and global society in general, moving beyond “compassionate conservation” (Bekoff, 2013; Baker & Winkler, 2020) to self-sustaining “convivial conservation” (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019).

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