

Elephant Madness ? or a better future for elephants ?

An Op Ed Rant

The announcement of 7 November 2009 that the Central Zoo Authority had decided to ban elephants "from collections throughout (India) with immediate effect" (which appeared in the press 12 Nov.) sent waves of confusion around the country and even around the world when this news reached the press.

For some, including this writer, it was not so much the ban itself, but the suddenness and coldness of the announcement, the seemingly thoughtless impatience to just do something and the uncertain wisdom of the announced plan to move 140 captive elephants to elephant camps. It looked careless and cruel, without consideration of special elephant cases, and lacking provision for adjustment from a zoo or circus to a forest camp. Animals accustomed to a particular environment may be traumatised even by improvements (!) if they are very different from what they are used to.

The welfare of elephants in captivity has been agonizingly discussed and pondered by the many individuals working in institutions holding elephants for decades. Many people know that very special care has to be taken to insure that captivity is not cruelty to these large, sensitive animals.

Because we had no background of this news, many of us assumed that the Ministry, pressed by extreme animal welfare activists just caved in and agreed to their demands without having done the necessary evaluation, research and analysis required. Turns out that was wrong.

It seems that some very careful, systematic and scientific research has been going on for some years, and in the last 18 months has been embraced by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, whose Secretary (Meena Gupta) chaired a meeting on the subject and listened to a presentation by the researcher.

I now have a whole collection, thanks to Surendra Verma, the lead researcher, of several reports on elephant facilities in different states, on circuses, etc. etc. There is a list of the same at the end of this article.

I will try and summarise some of the clever methodology and comparative mechanisms used by the researcher in the 2005 All India survey with a small Table I created with data from the report. I think it illustrates the ground situation regarding captive elephants in all of the different types of holding institutions throughout India. However it is not to be taken at 100% seriously as it is meant to

give just a gist, not a scientific imperative, in this short Op Ed piece.

The report listed three parameters for each captive situation, e.g.

- Existing conditions suitable for elephant keeping
- Negative conditions of elephant keeping and
- Recommendations

Looking at the Table below, note that of the different holding institutions, only two had several "conditions suitable for elephant keeping", Forest Camps (8) and Zoos (5). All the rest had no (zero) conditions suitable for elephant keeping. All of the facilities had several negative conditions for elephant keeping and several recommendations for improvement. In welfare status, only the Forest Camps ranked Moderate to critical in their range of conditions. Zoos and Private owners ranked Critical to moderate, and temples, begging elephants and circuses ranked Critical. I could quarrel with the way these conclusions were drawn but I won't ... I believe that this model still gives a sufficient gist or overview using systematic methodology.

In April 2008 the aforementioned MoEF committee chaired by its Secretary heard a report from this study and held extensive discussions. Apparently at that time the Ministry was interested in banning elephants from Temples and Private owners but discussion concluded that temples and private owners would take the issue to court and the process of banning any elephants from captivity would be delayed or totally derailed for a long time.

It seems all members felt initially circus and begging elephants could be banned and researcher were asked for a report on the status of circus elephants in India, which was written and duly submitted. Here the story becomes a bit hazy but when 7 November circular went out to zoos and a news item came in TOI that Govt of India was banning both circus and zoo elephant, researchers thought that it was a strategy of government not to target one institution so the zoos were included along with the circuses. Researchers felt only 2-3 zoos in India were in a

	Existing conditions suitable for elephant keeping	Negative conditions of elephant keeping	Recommendations	Welfare status
Forest camps	8	9	8	Moderate to critical
Zoos	5	5	5	Critical to moderate
Private owners	0*	7	7	Critical to moderate
Temples	0	8	9	Critical
Beggingelep.	0	7	8	Critical
Circuses	0	8	8	Critical

* With 2 exceptions

truly good state and that banning zoos may be the message of government itself setting its house in order : *no elephant should be kept in captivity*. The massive task of taking on temples and private owners could be done slowly and with a lot of tact and thought.

This is not a perfect solution by a long shot ... but I request readers who are unhappy to consider the scope of the problem and, at least for a time, give government the benefit of doubt.

I was furious with both government and animal welfare lobby when I first read the press reports. Now having communicated with the researchers who have been slogging away on this since 2005 and considered the plight (YES! plight) of government, which, all said and done, does seem to want to do the right thing, I have seen a different face of the problem. Despite its obvious flaws, this is not a disaster (yet) ... it is progress of a sort. I have hope for captive elephants in India.

I still feel that the circular sent around to justify banning elephants in zoos was lame and unconvincing, however, hence my suspicion that it was a rush job without much merit. I will comment later on a verbatim version of the circular.

I also feel that IF government is going to make headway with the worst of the worst cases, e.g. the temples and private owners (including begging / itinerant elephant users) it is going to have to find more homes for elephants than forest camps. Forest camps also have their negative conditions and one of them, not mentioned in the report, is that the forest department does not need more elephants in the camps and may not be able to make the camps into ideal environments for so many elephants.

I think the zoos, which earned a score of 5 under having suitable conditions for keeping elephants as opposed to the 8 given forest camps; and a score of 5 negative conditions as opposed to the 9 given forest camps should be looked upon again, not as hopeless rejects for elephant keeping but as among the potential future homes for the hundreds of displaced elephants. There are many zoos now which have vast acreage out of the cities that could be turned into elephant rescue sanctuaries, available for the education and entertainment of visitors, but from far off, as it is in real forests and sanctuaries. These larger zoo are under the control of and run by the Forest Departments, so what is the difficulty of creating something akin to forest camps in them.

Let's look at the circular which supposedly justified the ban on elephants in zoos. This was on MOE/ CZA letterhead, Fil No. 7-52006-CZA (Vol.II) Dt. 7 November 2009.

CIRCULAR

Sub: Banning elephants from zoo collection.

Time and time again it has been brought to the notice of this Authority that the housekeeping of elephant in zoos leaves a lot to be desired, causing trauma to the animal. Elephant is a large megaherbivore, which is free ranging, cruising over long distances. There are very few zoos in the country which have adequate space to permit free movement of elephants, as a result of which they are kept chained for long hours, causing stress to the animal. Further, more often than not, such captive elephants in zoos hardly breed. There are instances of zoo elephants coming in Musth causing serious threats to visitors. The zoo management also has tremendous financial liability for the day-to-day maintenance/house-keeping of elephants. There is very little scope or *ex-situ* to *in-situ* linkage in the context of zoo elephants in India. Signed by Rajesh Gopal, (Acting) Member Secretary.

The rest of the circular consisted of directives for disposal of the elephants from zoos throughout the country with immediate effect to be rehabilitated in elephant camps...and the like. Instructions for transporting should follow CZA guidelines and CZA will bear the cost.

As it stands, the circular contains some little irony, contradictions, and mistaken pronouncements. The primary irony is that zoos were targeted first for a ban which should have prioritised temple and privately owned elephants, although we now understand the problem with that method. Nonetheless, for the most part, ONLY the small zoos or zoos which allocated only a small area to their elephants should have been included, leaving the larger zoos to improve further and possible taking in some of these elephants.

According to the pronouncement, the decision was based on the above rationale or reasons, upon which I would like to comment one by one:

The first reason stated the obvious needs of elephants for space due to size and free-ranging habits and the space constraints of zoos which lead to elephants being chained for long hours, to wit "***the housing of elephants in zoos leaves a lot to be desired, causing trauma to the animals.***" Nobody disputes that elephants need space, but there are a few zoos in India that have good space. It seems the ban was applied to ***all*** Indian zoos more for political reasons, to avoid targeting only one institution, e.g. circuses, and to get a leg up on taking action without messy and tedious lawsuits which were anticipated by temples and private parties.

Another irony is that when these 140 odd elephants are transported to their new home, e.g., a “camp”, national park or other PA, they will still be chained. If they can be trusted or trained to return to camp, be allowed to roam in the forest at night to graze and breed but they will still be hobbled. Camp conditions vary ... some of the elephants may be worse off in camps depending on the local practices. What about the local forest divisions and camps that don't want or need more elephants. Were all consulted about their capacity?

The circular stated that the elephants **“should be rehabilitated in elephant camps/rehabilitation camps /facilities available with the forest department at National parks/Wildlife Sanctuaries/Tiger Reserves for departmental use.”**

So some of them will become working elephants and maybe even tourist riding elephants. It is a little bit of a stretch to understand how their condition has been improved if they are from Mysore Zoo, Chhatbir Zoo, Hyderabad Zoo, Arignar Anna Zoo which have good enclosures and large, well vegetated yards to move around in? Some of them, undoubtedly will be worse off.

It is disturbing to imagine the difficulties the elephants will face also of perhaps having to change Mahouts, endure long transport, etc. They are being moved from one captive facility to a supposedly higher quality and lesser captivity facility ... but it is still captivity unless there is a plan to return them to real wild. If that is the case it is really scary ... I would hate to live within hundred of miles of that wild if it held formerly zoo elephants with their long memories of perhaps unpleasant experiences with human beings. These problems are not fanciful ... the Guidelines of the Reintroduction Specialist Group focus on such problems of any returned to wild, wild animal that has spent a significant period of time in captivity.

Another anomaly is that nowhere does the circular refer to the fact that the temperament of each individual zoo elephant is individual! Some may easily adapt to the camp situation but others won't and that will lead to more suffering and perhaps more travel. Further, no mention has been made of disease and health risks. It is entirely possible that many zoo elephants have contracted TB from their mahout or other humans or animals in a zoo. Is it safe health-wise to move zoo elephants to the forest camps? ... “With immediate effect” doesn't allow for sufficient security from disease transmission--to the resident elephants and to the whole forest ungulate population.

Most scary of all, what of the African elephants in Indian zoos? Will they too be allowed to roam in the parks as a foreign species?

Another rationale from the Circular reads: **“Further, more often than not, such captive elephants in zoos hardly breed.”** This is because zoos don't put the male and female animals together, or because they lack a male, so there is no formal breeding program. The need for such breeding programs can be evaluated and implemented where needed.

“There are instances of zoo elephants coming in ‘Musth’ causing serious threats to visitors.”

It is very rare that a zoo visitor has been injured or killed by a Musth elephant. If there are instances, it is probably because the visitor was in the wrong place and doing the wrong thing. A Musth elephant in a wildlife park situation is much more likely to injure a visitor than one in a zoo setting where it does not have close contact with the visitors.

“The zoo management also has tremendous financial liability for the day-to-day maintenance-housekeeping of elephants.”

And the camps don't ? Yes, elephants eat a lot and are high maintenance, it is true; but elephants are one of the most popular animals at the zoo. Some visitors come to the zoo over and over just to see the elephants, so the elephants are self-supporting. Gate money in most Indian zoos goes back to government, not to the zoo anyway. It is not that the elephants create liability – it is politicians in government who insist on keeping gate fees low to please voters.

“There is very little scope for ex-situ to in-situ linkage in the context of zoo elephants in India.”

Ex-situ /in-situ linkage within India is not currently necessary when human development is consuming elephant habitat so completely that the elephants we already have are losing their special trails and corridors and competing with human beings. More elephants are not needed for strengthening wild populations *right now*. What we need *right now* is greater public awareness of the importance of elephants and all other flora and fauna.

Zoos can be made to insure their animals are conservation relevant through high quality education of the public. High quality education can and should bring about behavioural and attitudinal changes in visitors, changes that would impact the state of nature. That is justification for keeping elephants in captivity, but only in zoos that have sufficient space to display and manage them appropriately, to give them a good quality of life.

Also whatever the ground situation, it is good conservation to keep back-up populations on other continental areas, in case of a regional or national disaster. Today AI, Artificial Insemination for Asian elephants has been perfected. There is every reason to share genetic material with other

countries for India's own benefit in future... that is also *in-situ* /*ex-situ* linkage.

I was really happy to see all the copies of the Reports on the Welfare of Elephants that have been brought out by Surendra Verma and his colleagues. I don't think such a mass of good work has been done on the welfare of captive elephants any where else till now. And this is the work of just one team of people. Surendra Verma has permitted me to quote from any of these reports and has shared them also with some of my colleagues abroad, so I don't think he will mind if our readers request these publications and use them for the purpose intended, that is, quite simply, to improve elephant welfare.

I am sorry the elephants have been banned from (some) zoos. I have seen the elephants in several large Indian zoos and I don't believe they were treated badly, quite the opposite. I believe that Indian zoos with space can learn all about what elephants need and create appropriate environments for them. I regret the loss of zoo visitors and what they might learn about elephants and habitat as well as the delight in seeing such a magnificent animal.

I hope government, having made a point, will backtrack and let the larger zoos with a passion for elephants and their conservation and welfare, take some of the elephants today living in terrible conditions. I hope these zoos will avail of all the amazing literature on elephant care being published in different parts of the world.

I hope the Ministry will insist that the concerned persons responsible for moving the elephants attend the animals individual circumstances personalities, and mind the impact on individual elephants. There is no scope for "one size fits all" when it comes to elephants, who are just as individual and sensitive as human beings in their needs.

No doubt and I hope *some* zoos will have to part with their elephants, as will the temples, circuses, private owners. I hope government will relent and permit the bigger, better zoos to be guided to develop and expand their existing elephant facilities and conservation direction, and be judged good enough to take in some of the suffering elephants from small zoos, and the rest of the substandard facilities holding them.



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ZOOS' PRINT Magazine

List of recent Reports on the Welfare of Captive Elephants in India

ALL INDIA SURVEY OF CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS & THEIR MAHOUTS, Captive Elephant Survey Report 4 Nov 2008[1], Surendra Verma.

Welfare Assessment of the Elephant Girija Prasad, An Investigation into the welfare status of the Elephant Girija Prasad (Manikantan). Pre-& Post Seizure Status, Surendra Varma, Elephants in Captivity: CUPA/ANCF - Occasional Report No. 2.

Captive elephants in Maharashtra: Population status, management and welfare significance Surendra Varma, Sujata, S. R and Nilesh Bhanage Welfare and Management of Elephants in Captivity

Proceedings of a Workshop on Welfare Parameters and their Significance for Captive Elephants and their Mahouts in India. Editors: Surendra Varma and Deepika Prasad

Captive Elephants in Circuses: A scientific investigation of the population, status, management and welfare significance. Surendra Varma, S.R. Sujata, Suparna Ganguly and Shiela Rao, Elephants in Captivity: CUPA/ANCF - Technical Report No. 1.

Captive elephants of Andhra Pradesh: An investigation on the population status, management and welfare significance. Surendra Varma, Sujata and Mahesh Agarwal Elephants in Captivity: CUPA/ANCF - Technical Report, pp 83.

Captive elephants of Gujarat: An investigation on the status, management and welfare significance Surendra Varma, Sujata, S.R, and Snehal Bhatt. Elephants in Captivity: CUPA/ANCF - Tech Report 4.

Wandering Elephants of Punjab: An investigation of the population status, management and welfare significance. Surendra Varma, Suparna Ganguly, S.R. Sujata and Sandeep K Jain. Elephants in Captivity: CUPA/ANCF - Technical Report No. 2.

Welfare and Management of Elephants in Captivity. Proceedings of a Workshop on Welfare Parameters and their Significance for Captive Elephants and their Mahouts in India, Editors: Surendra Varma and Deepika Prasad.

Note : Thanks to Heidi Riddle for reading this Opinion and giving suggestions. Thanks to Surendra Verma for sharing his numerous reports with me and giving some background and context to what earlier looked like an impulsive and meaningless action by government. There is work being done by both Heidi and Surendra that is leading to real solutions for captive elephants.