

Opinion : Elephants in Zoos, Elephant Camps, Rescue Centers in India Sally Walker*

In 2009, a dictat came down from above, that all zoos in India should send their elephants to elephant camps. For those new to the subject, most elephant camps (and surely the ones intended by government) belong to the Department of Forestry in all the states that have them.

Today only a few elephants have been transferred to the camps, which **can be** a more positive and healthy lifestyle compared to a bad zoo. Elephant Camp elephants are put to work and often spend the whole day tramping around, assisting the forest department in moving things, pulling over trees, etc. or bearing burdens of logs, sticks, bags, human beings, etc. Its not as good a life as that of a wild elephant but certainly better than of a zoo or circus elephant (in most cases, although some zoos have large areas and other amenities for their elephants and the animals get some freedom and other perks). In any case wild elephants don't have it so good themselves these days. Their habitat has been and is being usurped by development, and it is shrinking fast. Elephants trying to find food and water in this restricted habitat often conflict with human beings, some of whom have unpleasant ways to shooing away elephants, even fatal ways.

Two years after a few elephants have been "settled" in camps, there is a general knowledge that they do not work out so well there. Foresters in charge of camps do not want these elephants as they are accustomed to one kind of life in the zoo which doesn't fit so well in the camps. They have to re-trained and acclimatized to the camps which takes time and patience while the work of the camp has to go on. Many camp bosses have refused to take the zoo elephants.

Now, there is another alternative for these zoo elephants which is called "Indian Elephant Rehab". This method has been described and promoted by no less than Scientific America's Extinction Countdown where they feature a blog entitled [Unchained: Indian Elephant Rehab Center to Be a Model for Rescued Zoo Animals](#) by John Platt, January 25, 2012.

Frankly, although I became somewhat involved in the galata over the government's decision to remove all elephants from all zoos in 2009, I became convinced into complacency and hadn't thought much about this since the issue was hot. This was after naively thinking that, in the final analysis, this decision was intended to catch up the elephants in the worst zoo circumstances and place them in camps but in case of the better zoos with better facilities for their elephants, they would just let the matter fade away. I had very good reason to believe that, but it would not serve any purpose to elaborate now, because apparently it didn't happen.

The above mentioned blog woke me up. The elephant dilemma is more convoluted than we thought. According to the blog in Scientific American, last November the government approved a request from an American lady, Carol Buckley, who proposes to set up a model facility which can be emulated by government. According to the blog Buckley was about to leave for Bangalore where her nonprofit (Elephant Aid International) will construct the first Elephant Care and Rehabilitation Center. It is still in planning but when it materializes is supposed to house 7 former zoo elephants and serve as a model for other elephant centres. According to Buckley, "Once everything is working smoothly, the government will jump on and replicate this effort throughout India." (Wow! Really?) Also the article says that Ms. Buckley "expects the

government to take in hundreds of other privately owned elephant such as those living in temples." I just love this! Can you imagine the Government of India taking all the elephants from all the temples? Or even "jumping on" to replicate the effort at \$200,000 per centre. I appreciate Ms. Buckley's positive attitude but this is dreaming.

I would not blame the Government of India also. There is not enough tact and diplomacy in the universe to convince the temples to hand over their elephants, or enough police force to calm the religious riots, or enough political courage in the ruling party to push this effort. That would be a guarantee of that party not getting elected next time, or maybe ever! I jest, but not entirely. This whole problem has come about because of the Ministry of Environment's inability to stand up to one little feisty woman who loves to give commands such as "move all captive elephants to elephant camps!" Less said the better, but surely the senior forest officer who obeyed this dictum knew that it would not go 100% smoothly, but at least it got the lady to shut up for awhile (I think).

What I can't understand is why some of these zoos which have literally hundreds of acres of land at their disposal can't be inducted into keeping significant numbers of elephants. Buckley rightly said that "Life in the worst Indian Zoos can be quite horrible." Indeed that is the sad truth. But there are also good zoos in states that have the ability to take in some of these animals. There is a powerful Central Zoo Authority that has to turn in money almost every year and is supposed to be a sort of "Authority" over all the zoos. They can't dictate to the states but they can manipulate them. CZA has money and expertise. They created rescue centres for lions and monkeys and other animals in some of the zoos. Ironically these centres didn't allow visitors. I think the idea was that rescued animals needed privacy!

Just imagine a few well run zoos with space to spare took in "bad zoo" elephants and put up facilities for visitors to see the elephants from a large platform for the purpose high above the ground. The elephants could be seen behaving pretty much like elephants even though they would have to have mahouts and keepers to keep order between them. Visitors could be charged and extra fee for the privilege of seeing the elephants in this atmosphere and relaxing at picnic tables on the platform, spending enough time perhaps even to start appreciating the various behaviours of elephants. Foreign zoos or safari parks have such facilities for a number of their large animals and it is a very popular feature. It is not impossible that the facility could pay for itself over time.

I kind of like the idea of Carole Buckley training mahouts in her [compassionate elephant management technique](#). It could be tried and if it works well it could be adopted...BUT, Buckley's plans to replace the ankus with apples, using food and "positive reinforcement" and "building a relationship" between the Mahouts and elephants sounds like pie in the sky in one way and kind of dangerous on the other. Mahouts already have relationships with their elephants in their own way ... it will be a big jump for both. It also might backfire. Depending on the severity of that, the hue and cry that would follow would be catastrophic. Elephant management the western way of positive reinforcement is not guaranteed to be safe. Mahouts who have been

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controlling elephants for centuries may find it difficult and insulting to be made to take up new methods that cannot be guaranteed any safer than what they know. Buckley describes her plan in the blog: "I have a very clear vision about fencing, what elephants should be allowed to do, and how much freedom they need to thrive." She will "walk the land" meant for the new facility and decide where to construct fences, etc. An Indian NGO "Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation", a partner organization will work with her so that she learns to work with Indian contractors. Buckley wants shade structures, corrals for doctoring and resting or sleeping, a vet lab and administrative office and housing for staff. She plans to recruit the Mahouts herself but the vets will be assigned by government. Buckley admits that when she started and ran her facility in USA (Tennessee) she didn't have to consider human welfare ... it was only the animals. But in India she has developed programs which have a strong education component ..."addressing the public welfare of the mahouts and their families" !!! This will, according to her, "ensure that they will be there to take care

of the elephants' needs" True enough...except when the mahouts are drunk or stoned which is part of their culture. Actually there are instances of elephants taking care of the mahouts when they imbibed too much! Higher salaries will provide much comfort to the canny mahouts. Buckley just might be in over her head!

Buckley's NGO Elephant Aid International is raising the \$200,000 estimated to raise this first "model" centre. Where is the Government of India going to get the crores of rupees to duplicate it dozens or maybe hundreds of times.

Interestingly, at the Tennessee elephant facility in USA, Buckley is said to have annoyed her own Board so much that they threw her out of her own organisation. She has a reputation for being hard to get along with.

It will be interesting to watch her interact with the Indian bureaucracy! God bless **both** Buckley and the MoEF so that at least the mahouts and elephants will benefit.

Opinion: Zoos vs Rescue Centres

Heidi Riddle*

Managing captive elephants whatever the country and culture is too often guided by emotion rather than realistic and practical decisions. For captive elephant management in any given environment to be truly successful there needs to be a clear strategy, long term goals, and a plan that realistically addresses operational protocols, animal care standards, and staff policies.

Overall, discussions and controversy have led to increased efforts to address captive elephant concerns by improving care, husbandry, handling, and training techniques through the development of professional guidelines and standards, and by identifying welfare parameters important for captive elephant management.

Practical standards need to be developed to address the physical and social environment of these animals, as well as individual situations such as the need and use of the elephants, number of animals, type of environment (physical, work, social), personnel support and training, and animal welfare. Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms need to be considered to ensure successful implementation of standards. Written protocols are important to enable successful and consistent elephant management programs. Reviewing these protocols periodically ensures that standards are met and even improved where needed.

In the case of a country like India, elephants are managed in a wide variety of environments (i.e. forest camps, zoos, circus, temples, private owners); this variety offers a unique opportunity to set high standards of captive elephant management across all of these different types of environments, rather than being selective and only attempting to address the welfare of elephants in one type of environment, i.e. zoos.

Regarding the 2009 CZA directive to move zoo elephants to forest camps, it would be important to identify the biggest concerns about zoo elephant management - is it only the space in zoos? the elephant housing in zoos? the handling in zoos? the staff experience in zoos? all of these topics should be discussed, as all can be improved. Unless and until there have been attempts to rectify specific management problems in the zoo environment, moving elephants from that environment to another may only be moving the problems and not rectifying them.

There has also been discussion about establishing facilities called "elephant rescue centers". Creating a center for "rescued" elephants without first identifying and addressing captive elephant management problems in all facilities is short sighted. Any new facility will also have the same operational, animal, and staff issues as zoos, so efforts and resources should focus on helping all captive elephants in the country, not just a select few that may be housed in these centers.

If indeed enhanced captive elephant welfare is the objective, there needs to be a better assessment of captive elephant management from all sides, an identification and discussion about specific concerns, and a holistic strategy to best direct efforts and resources to reach this common goal.

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