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# Elephant Rides: A Brief Examination

With a 20 year background in elephant management encompassing free contact, protected contacted, global consulting work, and numerous seminars and workshops, I feel uniquely qualified and obliged to examine the topic of elephant rides more closely. The issue of public safety and the damage that elephants incur both physically and psychologically demands that this topic be given further thought and consideration.

The topic of riding elephants has been misunderstood for many hundreds of years. This is relevant since elephant rides are often justified by referencing historical events of this practice for over 3,500 hundred years. Although true, it is also of little relevance from the standpoint of true animal welfare since this viewpoint is anthropocentric in nature.

The argument against elephant rides can be addressed in several general topics and are as follows: Ethology, statistics, ethics/training methodology and human/elephant safety.

Elephants are not a domesticated species. Elephants have not undergone any genetic changes through selective breeding, therefore the argument of riding because of domestication is inaccurate. The idea of elephants being gentle giants is also misleading and fraught with inaccuracy in relation to humans. Elephants are rarely if ever alone, always being in the company of other elephants and are highly protective of their family units. This strong bond and natural instinct to protect family members is still a leading cause of many fatal elephant/human interactions. Because of this strong protection instinct, wild and captive elephants kill far more humans than sharks, tigers and lions combined.\* This statistic shows that humans in close contact with elephants is potentially lethal. The statistical probability of a human/elephant conflict is very high when both species are in close proximity and with elephants that have been trained using harsh methods without having elephant proof barriers.

Riding elephants is more about what we do *not* see versus what we are allowed to see. On the surface, the untrained eye observes elephant and human in close proximity of each other, working together in harmony. These surface interactions are often misconstrued, identified and

\*According to the India Environmental Ministry – between 2016 and 2017 – 259 people were killed by wild elephants versus 27 people killed by tigers during the same timeframe in India alone. Smithsonian Magazine reports that lions have killed some 593 people in Tanzania between 1990-2004, that is 42 per year on average. Elephants kill nearly 500 people per year according to National Geographic.

labeled as 'trust' and 'strong bonds and relationships' since it is argued that the elephants would not allow themselves to be ridden if they did not have strong, healthy relationships based on trust with their trainers. The truth is far different. The idea that 'trust' is an element of what is seen when we observe elephants being ridden by humans (or sometimes by other species for the purpose of entertainment) is in reality *learned preparedness* and/or *learned helplessness* as defined by Dr. Martin Seligman\*\*.

*Learned preparedness*, in association with elephants allowing themselves to be ridden, comes from the ability to learn what consequences to avoid in order to survive. The ankus or bullhook\*\*\*, is a traditional tool used to manipulate what an elephant does by directing force to a small point and applying it to the thinnest dermal areas on the elephant. The elephant moves away from these pressure points, avoiding the discomfort and pain that can be directed onto the thinnest areas of their skin. Once a history of this pain is well established, the elephant, when presented the hook, will move away from it (the bullhook) into the posture 'trained' by using the hook, thus trying to avoid the pain the hook induces. The elephant will do whatever results in the least amount of pain or discomfort, *prepared* to do what it takes to avoid torment. This is *learned preparedness*. This is not cooperation, not trust and not based on an ethical relationship. The elephant is *prepared* to avoid the hook or other negative stimuli.

*Learned helplessness* is the condition whereby an animal that has been exposed to negative stimuli, without the ability to escape it, will endure the negative treatment based on the idea that they cannot escape it. They simply give up in hope to minimize exposure to the negative stimuli. The theory is 'don't fight it' and it will stop. The term stems from experiments done to dogs that endured long standing, significant amounts of physical punishments for their actions instead of being offered reinforcers. Even when offered an avenue to escape these terrible conditions, many of these animals failed to take the opportunity, hence being called 'helpless' or 'helplessness'.

To see an elephant walk with people on their back is not telling the entire story of how these animals were put in these positions in the first place. For elephants to be trained to allow human riders, they have been separated from their family units at young ages, sometimes permanently; exposed to trainers that have limited their (the elephants) ability to escape negative stimuli; been roped or chained for many hours to restrict free movement; often withheld food; often beaten with bullhooks; pick handles or worse; electroshocked; and/or physically manipulated to be compliant. It is this history of abuses that is not seen by law makers or the public that tells the truth and the story of why these elephants allow themselves to be ridden.

\*\* For more detailed information on *Learned Preparedness* and *Learned Helplessness*, reference Dr. Seligman in any search engine.

\*\*\* The bullhook has been argued to be a guide, which is not correct. It is a pain inducing instrument designed to have an elephant move away from it. If it were merely a guide, there would be no use for it, a trainer could simply use their hand, or any other object that could cause no pain and did not have sharpened ends.

To use a visual timeline of how to get an elephant into a position of allowing people to ride them, we need to look at the entire picture:

Step 1



Newborn elephants are separated from their family units.

Step 2



Neonates are then subjected to hardline training techniques. High reliance on hook use.

Step 3



Elephants used for rides spend little to no time in natural family units and are often chained.

Step 4



*Learned preparedness or helplessness.* An elephant doing what it needs to survive.

Steps 1 through 3 are covertly done and hidden from the view of the general population to minimize criticism. Photos like these are often obtained by concerned citizens after they themselves have been exposed to the brutality of clandestine training methodology, releasing them via citizen journalism initiatives. These pictures show that with enough force, a behaviour like riding an elephant, no matter how unnatural, can be accomplished through the use of unethical physical practices. These practices often have a secondary consequence of producing abnormal repetitive behaviours (ARB's) or stereotypies and are not seen in wild conspecifics as well as producing a long list of other observed behavioural fallout such as self mutilation, for one example.

To 'train' elephants to allow any species to ride them comes from intensive training techniques based on a 'breaking' or 'casting' strategy. This is what the general public does not see, but it is this information and data that is most relevant to the discussion of elephant rides.

Elephants in the care of humans have been misused and abused for selfish human/business interests typically stemming from economics, ego and labour. At very best, elephant rides may bring some distant awareness to the species as a whole, but not in a light that is relevant to help conserve the species. Elephant rides provide nothing that helps long term survival of the species, whether it is in captivity or to wild conspecifics.

As it pertains to safety, captive elephants working without barriers with people, have been attacking humans in zoos and circuses for as many years as people have been riding them. One of the best documented was the attack of Alan Campbell in August 1994, in Hawaii where an elephant named Tyke attacked and killed Alan Campbell before escaping the tented circus area, running wildly into the streets of Honolulu. Tyke was eventually shot some 86 times within city

limits before dying on the streets of the city, with several other people sustaining significant injuries.

Elephants, if not respected and treated humanely and safely, can cause catastrophic property damages, injuries to themselves and people in close proximity, and often cause deaths. Offering elephant rides significantly and statistically jeopardizes human and elephant safety. When, where, and which elephant will react in response to abusive training tactics or will pose a danger cannot be predicted. Many incidents relating to elephants causing bodily harm to humans are seldom reported to authorities to protect economic interests and the reputation of the owners and/or managing facilities.

Local governments should consider several questions: How much risk do local law makers want to expose their constituents to for the purpose of riding elephants? What are the acceptable numbers of injuries to both human and elephants and to what severity will law makers allow? What costs are these animals burdened with due to human commercialism? Does this attraction provide value to the elephants in question or just the people that ride them? Would people still want to ride elephants after being shown how it is accomplished?

When and where an incident will happen cannot be predicted by any elephant expert. As long as riding elephants is allowed, the possibility of another Honolulu/Tyke incident is probable. There is no guarantee of safety to the people or the elephants. Elephants kill many people worldwide. In Sri Lanka alone, captive elephants kill 42 mahouts (keepers) per year on average. There is a long history of elephants killing trainers and occasionally spectators abroad as well as in first world countries. This includes injuries during elephant treks and against tourists.

Using hardline training techniques such as beatings, isolation, restraint from free movement, exposure to injuries from hooks, chains and ropes does not meet the basic 5 freedoms\*\*\*\* test. These techniques, and the many more that accompany them, does not meet good ethical practices of keeping elephants in the care of humans.

There is no benefit in allowing elephant rides other than for the purposes of financial profit for human entertainment. It serves no conservation initiatives, does not meet ethical training methodology, does not follow the ethological patterns observed in wild elephants herds, and has considerable risks to human life, property, to the elephants themselves, and potentially to the reputations of politicians that allow it within their constituencies.

Solutions: Terminate elephant rides state/continent wide. Public safety will never be guaranteed no matter what any trainer says. Work with reputable experts that understand ethics, have field research experience, and behavioural science experts for public education programs to generate awareness. Stewardship can be obtained without resorting to riding elephants.

\*\*\*\* As defined by the ASPCA: FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST. by ready access to fresh water and diet to maintain health and vigour. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT. by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS.