



## Wild Welfare Position Statement on Elephant Riding

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**Wild Welfare considers all elephants under human care should have the opportunity to live rewarding and rich lives that enable them to carry out a robust representation of natural behaviours, reflective of a species-appropriate activity budget and repertoire. Elephants must be afforded the opportunity to make choices about their physical and social environments to promote natural behaviours including feeding and foraging, socialisation, self-maintenance, and locomotion; all of which facilitate the satisfaction of behavioural and biological needs. All circumstances that limit an elephant's opportunity to display natural behaviours, in particular the ability to form and maintain appropriate social groups and engage in an array of social interactions, should be actively prohibited.**

**Wild Welfare considers that situations in which elephants are ridden, for any purpose, severely compromise elephant welfare by limiting natural behaviours and socialisation, cause physical and psychological harm by requiring harsh, aversive training methodologies and equipment that causes physical wounding. Therefore, the riding of elephants should be stopped.**

Elephants are highly intelligent, sentient animals as indicated by their self-recognition<sup>1</sup>, high numbers of cortex neurons<sup>2</sup> (Roth and Dickie, 2005) and behavioural reactions when faced with deceased conspecifics<sup>3</sup>. Additional key characteristics of elephants deserving of consideration include: the extraordinary nature of their sociality, and critical freedom of movement requirements essential to their physical, mental and behavioural health. In recent decades, captive elephant management, housing, and care has undergone considerable change in an attempt to provide for the satisfaction of these key characteristics, with the resultant outcome in support of improved welfare and quality of life. However, the persistence of certain practices continues to compromise these efforts. Although riding elephants has been a popular activity for tourism, and historically used for elephant management purposes, particularly in parts of Asia, serious consideration must be given to the ethical implications and welfare compromise associated with this practice. Elephants subjected to riding are exposed to housing conditions and management practices that emphatically deny them the fundamental fulfilment of satisfying key behavioural, psychological, and physical characteristics, which is in direct conflict with modern animal care best practices.

Elephants are among the most socially complex of any mammal; they know, communicate, and maintain relationships with 100s of individuals for the duration of their long lives, which can be 65+ years<sup>4,5</sup>. Family bonds within a complex <sup>7</sup>matriarchal society serve as the foundation to elephant social behaviour and are essential to proper behavioural and central nervous system development<sup>6</sup>.

Individuals denied these opportunities may demonstrate a lifetime's worth of behavioural dysfunction and psychological trauma<sup>7</sup>. Captive elephant management practices must provide an appropriate social environment by keeping elephants in large, diverse social groups, preferably consisting of related individuals who are encouraged to engage in social behaviours representative of their wild counterparts. Elephants kept in intensively managed situations under outdated conditions have reduced opportunity for natural socialization and development of appropriate social behaviors, which can lead to abnormal behaviors and a lack of reproduction<sup>8</sup>. Elephant social groups are continuously disrupted when individuals are taken from their home enclosure to give rides, patrol, or fulfil other duties associated with being ridden, and therefore in direct conflict to the provision of optimal welfare through best practices.

Any examination of elephant welfare must include attention to training and handling methodologies. Unavoidable in the process of training elephants to be ridden for any purpose is the use of aversive training methodologies<sup>9</sup> requiring the use of a tool known as the ankus, hook or guide, which is used to establish and maintain dominance, serves as a stimulus for negative reinforcement training, and is also used to mete out physical punishment<sup>8</sup>. The process used to train elephants to respond to this tool requires that it be associated with fear and pain. This association becomes so intimately ingrained in the elephant's learning experience that even when a trainer doesn't carry the ankus, and instead replaces it with a facsimile such as a bamboo stick or cane, the elephant will remain compliant, affording the trainer stringent control over the elephant<sup>10</sup>. Tell-tale behavioural and physical signs of aversive training history are evident<sup>8</sup> as the scars of punishment are evident. Fear is a powerful emotion with a deep-rooted ability to influence behaviour. Individuals trained with aversive techniques may appear cooperative and compliant, but fear-based training can lead to a state of learned helplessness wherein the individual ceases attempting to affect change to a situation; essentially they 'give up'<sup>11</sup>. In this state, welfare is severely compromised and the individual stripped of all autonomy. In addition to the training methodologies and abnormal social settings that ridden elephants must endure, many will spend a considerable proportion of time restrained by leg chains/restraints or are confined in small areas, both of which severely restrict their ability to move naturally and prohibit the fulfilment of this key characteristic.

The practice of regular, prolonged confinement in small spaces or with restraints is detrimental to elephant welfare, and is directly related to behavioural pathologies such as swaying, rocking, head bobbing, and other repetitive movements. These behaviours not only indicate an inappropriate animal-environment interaction, but are detrimental to the physical health of the elephants. Repetitive movements like rocking and swaying result in abnormal pressure on the elephant's joints and feet, which can lead to physical disorders such as arthritis, degenerative joint disease, and increased incidence of foot maladies like abscesses and abnormal wear of the foot pads and nails.

Wild elephants travel many kilometres a day in search of food, water and social opportunities. While it is true that captive elephants are provided with food and water, the simple fact is that elephants have evolved over millennia to walk; the immediate availability of food does not change the need to satisfy this evolutionary adaptation essential to physical health and well-being. Elephants are highly driven to engage in foraging behaviours and may spend 18 hours per day feeding and foraging. Replicating these behavioural opportunities is challenging in many captive situations, but for an elephant used to give rides throughout the day, it is nearly impossible<sup>12</sup>. To thrive, an elephant's environment should be dynamic, provide novelty and problem-solving opportunities, enabling elephants to use their mental faculties. Research demonstrates that predictable schedules can elicit stereotypical responses within captive elephants further supporting that continuous use for riding can have a negative impact on elephant welfare<sup>13</sup>. In addition to the resultant behavioural and psychological damage caused by riding, the use of a howdah (elephant saddle) may cause physical harm to the elephant. Wounds to the skin along the back, spine, and chest occur where the straps and seat rub the skin causing abrasions and chafing injuries<sup>14</sup>.

As many thousands of elephants are currently owned by families, companies, or governmental agencies, and serve to generate income through tourism, patrols, or other means, we recognize that these practices cannot realistically be ended immediately. Therefore, alternatives to riding elephants must be developed and implemented over time. During the transition phase, programmes must prioritise elephant well-being while protecting the safety of mahouts and visitors. Successful alternatives to the traditional models of elephant management are being adopted for each above-mentioned scenario in which elephants are ridden. These projects could indicate the direction of future ethical elephant tourism and management. Furthermore, nationally and regionally applicable policies should be rigorously enforced in regard to the welfare and treatment of elephants whenever they are under human care. Effective policy enforcement needs to be in place and coupled with regular, independent assessments of the elephant's welfare.

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