



AMBOSELI TRUST
FOR ELEPHANTS



The Capture and Training of Elephants

Statement by Joyce Poole

I have come a long way to participate in this meeting. Likewise, South Africa has come a long way by encouraging this open process around such significant and contentious elephant management issues. The themes we are discussing are important for elephants, yes, but also for human beings who have the responsibility of acting in an ethical manner toward all living creatures.

I am here to comment specifically on the capture of wild elephants and the training and holding of these individuals for use in elephant-back safaris and in circuses – and possibly also for their consequent sale to circuses and zoos overseas. I am honored to be invited to participate in today's discussions, and to have the opportunity to comment, as an elephant ethologist, on the interests of elephants. I hope that next time I will be able to bring my family and stay longer in your beautiful country.

I have studied elephants for over 30 years and am Research Director of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants, the longest field study of individually known elephants in the world. I speak on behalf of elephants based on the collective findings of the Amboseli study and on studies carried out by our colleagues elsewhere.

The biology and the interests of elephants

Science provides ample knowledge to identify and protect the interests of elephants. The scientific evidence collected in recent decades uniformly supports the observation that elephants are physically vigorous, highly social and exhibit significant cognitive abilities. They are extremely perceptive, have impressive memories, and strong emotional capacity. They enjoy unusual social complexity and benefit from a rich and diverse social culture. These essential traits, honed through a process of 60 million years of evolution, are observed wherever wild elephants have been studied.

Elephants build social relationships that radiate out from the mother-offspring bond, through extended family, bond group, clan, population and beyond to strangers. Within this multi-tiered social network elephants exhibit strong and enduring attachments, many of which last a lifetime.

Elephants are exquisitely complex, and self-aware individuals. They possess distinct histories, personalities and interests, exhibit compassion for others and are capable of complex emotions and of suffering intensely, both physically and mentally.

They construct an intelligent understanding of their world through an intricate interaction of experience, social learning and memory. Elephants have an interest in their own lives and the lives of those to whom they are attached. As a particular consequence, of their remarkable memories, capacity for self-interest and for empathy, elephants demand our respect and special moral consideration in all of our interactions with them as individuals.

Capture and its consequences for elephants

For 4000 years elephants have been captured from the wild and trained. They have fought our battles, carried our royalty, built our dams and guarded our temples, paraded in our festivals, performed in our circuses and more recently carried us on safari.

The methods used to capture elephants remained unchanged for centuries until the advent of the helicopter, motor vehicle and immobilization dart. The capture of elephants, whether ancient or modern, traditionally, and as practiced in South Africa today, severs the bonds that connect an elephant with its companions, its mother, siblings, family and extended family. In doing so capture leaves an indelible mark on the psyche of an elephant.

Anyone with any experience with elephants knows that a matriarch will go to extraordinary lengths to defend her family, charging predators, attacking even demolishing vehicles. Families will attack *on masse*. Why might elephants go to such great lengths to defend one another? The complex biological and emotional responses between elephants, especially those between a mother and her offspring, have evolved for a reason.

Every elephant calf is biologically extremely important to its mother because, like a human mother, she must invest so much time, energy and effort in producing and rearing a calf to adulthood: 22 months of gestation, four years of lactation, at least 12 years of rearing and protection. As a consequence elephants have evolved extraordinarily developed behaviours of caring and bonding with their calves. If a calf is to survive to adulthood it, too, must form intense close bonds with its mother and other family members.

The capture of a calf and its removal from a family has an immensely psychological impact on the calf. The trauma it experiences through the breaking of close bonds leaves a permanent mark on its consciousness. You only have to look at the adult behavior of cull orphans in South Africa, or the number of deaths caused by captive elephants in India, to get a glimpse of the consequences.

Likewise, the capture of a calf and its removal from its relatives has an extremely disturbing effect on its family. If the revengeful behavior that we observe in Amboseli toward Maasai livestock is anything to go on, you can expect that the families experiencing abduction of their members will be increasingly hostile toward humans.

The support and companionship of family members, as well as the formation and maintenance of close and enduring relationships, are vital to an elephant's emotional and social development, its well-being and survival. These relationships involve tremendous emotional attachment. By capturing elephants, separating them from their family we break these close bonds and deny them access to their social network causing them psychological deprivation and harm. The lasting effects of trauma suffered by elephants may translate into a cycle of violence directed toward human beings.

Training and its consequences for elephants

With a tradition of some 4000 years, the starting point for training elephants is, all too frequently, simply what has gone before; the breaking and training of elephants has largely remained unchanged since their capture began. Training methods are passed by word of mouth, handed down from father to son, or from mahout to apprentice. And because the history of the human-elephant interaction in almost all cultures measures its success in terms of what works for people in social and

economic terms, tradition is surely a most unreliable guide to elephant needs and interests.

In 1998 Malays were brought to South Africa to both train the Tuli calves and to pass on training techniques. These young elephants, first traumatised by removal from their families and by the experience of capture, were then deprived of physical and psychological nourishment, beaten, prodded, and chained. I personally witnessed these calves being beaten and being chained, and I observed, first hand, their very poor physical and psychological state.

More recently, these same methods were applied to the Selati calves: traumatizing capture and separation followed by solitary, and for an elephant, terrifying confinement, chains winched tight such that the calf is "stretched out" in a totally vulnerable position, punishment by poking with an ankus for any normal exploratory elephant behavior, small rewards of goodies for docile behavior or for the performance of tricks. Through this system of harsh punishment and tiny rewards the elephant is trained.

These methods are used wherever elephants are trained for circuses or wherever elephants must perform on demand for humans. This is standard industry practice, but *that* does not make it humane or ethically acceptable. To the contrary, based on our current scientific knowledge, I speak with absolute confidence when I state that the capture and training of elephants for human use is a practice based on totally unacceptable methods and techniques.

Using positive reinforcement you can *tame* an elephant and even train it to do all sorts of clever things, so long as you accept that these performances are done on the *elephant's* own terms – in other words that it performs *what it chooses, when it chooses*. This form of training to a target is being used in a growing number of progressive zoos.

By their very nature, circuses and elephant back safaris demand a far more rigid regime. An elephant must, instead, perform *exactly what the mahout or trainer wants, when he wants it*. You cannot allow an elephant to go and browse in a thick Acacia patch, pull down the branch of a tree, go mud bathing or dust bathing with a group of American tourists on its back. Can you? Surely, an elephant behaving as it wishes would result in dead or injured people and lawsuits galore – even if the elephant meant no particular harm.

Elephants in elephant-back safaris and all elephants found in circuses are managed in a system commonly known as *free contact*. In other words, the trainer occupies the same physical space as the elephant. In *free contact* the trainer, or mahout, holds the dominant social position over the captive elephant and directs the position, activities and movement of the elephant at all times.

Free contact management depends upon a combination of negative reinforcement, physical punishment, and threat of physical punishment, deprivation and, to a lesser extent, positive reinforcement to train and control the elephant.

This kind of intensive, direct management of elephants through human dominance is only achieved through the routine use of chains and cables to gain physical control over the animal. Such physical control is necessary for the delivery of routine husbandry and physical punishment and to restrain an animal to the space assigned for its use. Physical punishment is characteristically delivered through beatings by the use of ankuses, also commonly called bullhooks or guides, or sometimes bats and clubs.

Circus and elephant ride trainers carry ankuses with them at all times. This is the central tool of *free contact*; it is used to hit, poke, jab, prod and coerce the elephant. It is the most common tool used to deliver corporal punishment to elephants, especially those beatings when a young animal is new to its life in captivity. In this way, the elephant learns and never forgets that the ankus is capable of inflicting great suffering. It is in this way that an 80 kg man displaying an ankus can gain control over a 500 to 5000 kg animal.

Once the trainer has introduced and firmly established his dominance over the animal through beatings and other forms of punishment, he need only show the ankus to the elephant to elicit a desired response or behavior. When an elephant exhibits such learning, the ankus has become a *stimulus cue* whose power can be refreshed through less severe and intermittent beatings in the future.

To put the power of the instrumental application of pain as a training method into context, let's imagine a man approaching a group of naïve but tame elephants – such as at Daphne Shelbrick's orphanage. The man waves a bullhook. Would any member of the group exhibit fear of a small metal stick in his hand? They would not. Why? Because they had not yet *learned* what the bullhook could do. That is why trainers carry bullhooks. Throughout the captive elephant's life the bullhook serves as a potent symbol of the dominant humans' capacity for violence and inflicting pain.

Elephants, like most mammals who see no way to escape, may appear "happy" even in harsh living conditions. Such behaviour is not evidence that their living conditions are acceptable, but is similar to the Stockholm Syndrome in which kidnap victims, over time, become sympathetic to their captors. Captives begin to identify with their captors initially as a defensive mechanism, out of fear of violence. Small acts of kindness by the captor are exaggerated, since finding perspective in a hostage situation is, by definition, impossible. These symptoms occur under tremendous emotional and often physical duress and represent a common survival strategy for victims of interpersonal abuse, including battered spouses, abused children, prisoners of war, and concentration camp survivors. I put to you that the elephant response is no different.

I understand that industry spokespersons claim that their elephants are treated kindly. If this is true, I challenge every circus and every operator of elephant rides to open their capture and training methods to the media so that the public and other third-parties may gain access to a full and complete understanding of actual industry practices. It is only in this way that the sincerity and veracity of claims to industry kindness can be fairly reviewed and judged.

Chaining and rigid control and its consequences for elephants

Finally, I would like to comment on the chaining and rigid control of elephants.

Elephants are extremely large and active animals adapted to continuous movement over long distances. In the wild elephants are on the move 20 out of every 24 hours. Their enormous bodies and great physical vigor demand the opportunity for sustained physical movement and the consequent necessity of large space.

The activities experienced by a free-ranging elephant motivate an active mind and keep fit a vigorous body. No matter what the arena, foraging, defending family or mate, socializing, or reproducing, an elephant's daily life is distinguished by need, purpose, will, choice, and autonomy. Chaining and rigid control prevent these elements, so fundamental to the life of an elephant.

In the United States and Europe elephants in circuses are chained for up to 20 hours of the day, sometimes longer. They are moved about from venue to venue, chained on trucks and in boxcars. Chained, they stand all day and all night – except for the few minutes devoted to performing and possibly giving rides.

Such chaining severely restricts an elephant's ability to obtain adequate exercise, it prevents an elephant searching for, selecting from, learning about and manipulating a wide variety of food items and, it takes away the opportunity for a supremely social animal to interact. Chaining eliminates activities that form an enormous source of mental stimulation required for the basic well being of a highly social and intelligent animal. Chaining is inhumane.

Conclusion

For thousands of years humans have praised and punished, revered and feared, elevated and degraded elephants. Throughout history their welfare has been compromised through human ignorance, consumption and self-indulgence.

Elephants are such extraordinary beings, with such complex emotional and cognitive abilities, that we owe them special attention, care and protection from human conduct and institutions that cause their needless suffering.

South Africa currently has 112 elephants in captivity - 92 of these are used in elephant-back safaris, 14 animals are used in a circus, and six are in zoos.

Four handlers have been killed in the last 6 years, with three of these occurring in the last two years. Several people have also been injured.

In Kerala, India, there are 630 captive elephants; 47 mahouts were gored, thrown about or crushed to death by their wards in 15 months. I quote from Frontline, an Indian magazine, "As elephants become symbols of exploitation and commercial success, the irony now seems to be in the gory details of the increasingly frequent and violent encounters between man and beast in the streets at festival venues."

At this stage, the closing down of captive elephant operations represents a small economic loss relative to the loss of closing down a larger industry later, relative to the enormous management and other problems that captive elephants will undoubtedly engender down the road, and relative to the moral dilemma of allowing these practices to continue.

Specifically I argue that:

1. Based on the scientific evidence the capture and removal of wild calves from their families is inhumane and should be outlawed.
2. South Africa should, therefore, neither import nor export captured elephants destined for captivity.
3. In my opinion, the argument that capture is less abhorrent than culling is not true.
4. All chains, ankuses, hydraulic winches and cables and other instruments used to control elephants represent abuse and should be outlawed.
5. Businesses or organisations that exploit animals for commercial gain cannot be allowed to set their own standards. Laws and regulations related to animal welfare reflect a nation's moral stand, and must as a principle be enforced by an independent body.

6. Elephants should be removed from all free contact situations where they are expected to perform on demand; the use of elephants in circuses and for elephant back safaris should be outlawed.
7. There should be no breeding of elephants in captivity, as this will only compound the current problem.
8. The 112 elephants in captivity now should either be released to the wild or semi wild; there are many ways in which these elephants can still benefit the country and her people.

In respect to capture and training of elephants South Africa is poised between the past and the future, a 4000 year tradition versus progressive, enlightened policy. What does the new South Africa wish to be remembered for? Continuing a tradition that a growing number of people find abhorrent and that goes against key scientific truths? Or leading the way forward? This decision is about acknowledging the truth and having the courage to act on it.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joyce Poole', written in a cursive style.

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