

Elephant polo: conservation activity or animal abuse?

By Shubhobroto Ghosh

Are animals meant to entertain rich folks as they guzzle champagne and caviar? That appears to be the motive behind the organization of elephant polo games. Though a form of elephant polo was first played in India at the beginning of the 20th century, the modern form of the game originated in Meghauli, Nepal — reportedly after a drinking bout. Nepal’s “Tiger Tops” resort remains the headquarters of elephant polo’s merry men, and the site of the “World Elephant Polo Championships.”

Elephants are gregarious creatures that walk miles every day in search of food and opportunities to socialise with their own kind in their natural habitat. The (illegal) process of capturing these sensitive, gentle creatures is a brutal and cruel one, documented by several videos and films. Calves are separated from their families and beaten mercilessly till their spirits are broken and they accede to their captors’ demands. Many animals, adult and young, die in this process. Starvation and the use of red-hot iron rods to tame the unfortunate creatures are but a part of this induction.

Some sections of society deem it acceptable to use these giants for their entertainment

by reducing them to pathetic shadows of their former regal selves. Elephant polo is currently played principally in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal.

The game is sought out in Rajasthan because foreign tourists patronise it. This sport has been going on there for more than 30 years, climaxing on November 18 2006, when a high-profile elephant polo match was organised in Jaipur.

Rajasthan is not a natural elephant-range state. Some of its captive elephants are the descendants of those used by its royal families decades ago. Temperatures are usually too high in Rajasthan to be conducive to elephant welfare.

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The animals have been reported to suffer from tuberculosis, opacity of the eyes, gaping wounds on the body, massive foot problems and a host of other diseases that make their lives miserable. They are also used to transport tourists at Amber Fort in the scorching sun, and are treated badly by their handlers. Handlers use *ankushes*, or metal prods, to exert control and dominance over them.

There is a consensus among international elephant specialists and wildlife experts about the pointlessness of making these hapless creatures play a game intended for human benefit. Some organisers of elephant polo matches seek

to use attendance fees to bolster, and raise awareness of, conservation efforts — but there is no evidence that wild animals performing frivolous tricks sensitises the masses to conservation efforts. To make matters worse, several of the elephants used in Jaipur’s polo matches are without valid certificates, or with forged certificates. The animals have probably been illegally procured from Assam and traded in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, which lists elephants as a Schedule I species to be accorded the highest level of protection in the country.

Regardless of whether the elephants used in polo matches are treated humanely or not, elephant experts have argued that these animals are

being unnecessarily dragged into a spectacle that should not be organized at all. One of the world’s leading wildlife rehabilitators, who has hand-reared more than 75 baby African elephants, describes this game as insensitive and cruel. Another expert who has studied African Elephants several decades in Amboseli National Park, Kenya, has also expressed her opposition to the sport.

Criticism has poured in from luminaries in the animal rights, animal welfare and conservation fields. Virginia McKenna, a former president of Beauty Without Cruelty International and an eloquent elephant welfare campaigner for at least 25 years, has repeatedly appealed to the



organisers of this sport to stop it in India and neighbouring countries.

Many Indian groups and activists have expressed their opposition too. A website has been developed at www.stopelephantpolo.com to raise societal awareness of the futility of using wild animals in this game, no matter what the intention.


The elephant polo issue has been the centre of debate on the electronic list of the Hong Kong-based Asian Animal Protection Network. While the game's supporters claim this

activity is not of significant welfare or conservation concern, its opponents have stated that the game is inherently cruel and counterproductive, especially if conducted in the name of conservation; it fuels the illegal trade in this endangered species. The elephants of Rajasthan deserve better than to be treated as mere curios in a state that has much to offer in the form of cultural and historical heritage and pageantry.

The sensitive nature of elephants is not a figment of the imagination of so-called "bunny huggers" and animal rights

activists. Decades of research by leading elephant experts have established that elephants are capable of experiencing the same emotions as humans. In the light of all that has been written here, and in the website mentioned, it is suggested this activity be examined to prevent unnecessary abuse of the wonderful, amazing pachyderms whose real abode is the verdant greenery of the jungles.



 *Shubhobroto Ghosh is a BWC member. The views expressed in this article are his own, conveyed as an individual.*

Elephant Suffering

The Animal Welfare Board of India, Help In Suffering of Jaipur, and Elephant Family of the U.K. did not give a thought to the basic exploitation of elephants. Instead, they organised a Cartier-sponsored elephant polo event at Jaipur. Although the use of the *ankush* was forbidden, the event drew considerable flak from many international animal rights and wildlife groups.



Snehal Bhatt of the Gujarat SPCA says the pictures taken by them in Nepal (below), where baby elephants were beaten so badly were especially disturbing: "They show how the polo sticks whack the elephants' trunks when they miss the ball. The trunk is very sensitive, and supposed to be animal's nose. They screamed in pain. At Jaipur, I and other activists were detained and no one was allowed inside. My husband had to take pictures from outside the grounds, so some of the photos (above) were blurred." *Photos courtesy: Rajesh Bhavsar, GSPCA*

