

Summary ASEAN Captive Elephant Working Group Meeting

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Background

In Asia, about 16,000 elephants are currently maintained in captivity for a variety of purposes: logging, tourism, cultural and religious activities, and transportation. With the banning of logging in many Asian countries within the past few decades, elephants have found work mainly in tourism, where they interact with the public in the form of shows, trekking, bathing, feeding and other activities. A major challenge, however, is that most captive populations are not self-sustaining because deaths exceed births. High morbidity and mortality can be attributed to inadequate management, nutrition and medical care; thus, off-take of wild elephants to supplement captive populations becomes another major threat to species survival. An additional challenge is the decline in good mahoutship and the lack of skills in newer, more humane training methods. There is an urgent need for practical guidelines and clear recommendations on how to effectively manage captive elephants such that good health, reproduction and welfare are equally addressed and ensured at all times.

With all the above it is clear that the current situation of captive Asian elephants in South-east Asia is far from optimal, and while problems of captive elephants differ greatly from those of wild populations, we cannot ignore that these large numbers of elephants under human care have a major role to play in the overall conservation strategy planning for this species.

On the 11th and 12th of June 2015, a group of elephant experts and practitioners from countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) met for a first brainstorming session

in Chiang Mai, Thailand to strategize on how to address the above and ensure a sustainable and high quality of life for captive elephants in Southeast Asia.

Executive summary

On the first morning of the workshop, range country participants presented status reports on captive and wild elephant population numbers and uses of elephants in captivity. There were several common themes throughout these presentations that included declining numbers of wild elephants, lack of sustainability of captive populations, inability to breed captive elephants, need for better elephant health care, and a call for more mahout training to include positive reinforcement techniques.

Through facilitated discussions, participants then brainstormed ideas pertinent to these issues to: 1) identify a group vision, mission, objectives and goals; 2) determine areas of activity to promote good stewardship of elephants; 3) propose structure, roles and partners of the working group; and 4) determine next steps. Issues relevant to captive elephant management and welfare were identified, including 'gaps and



needs', and strategies were outlined related to the goals, with specific actions, associated timelines and the person(s) responsible for ensuring the action would be carried out.

Five key issues emerged, listed below but not in order of ranked priority:

- Create a functional working group that serves to advance elephant management and ensure a sustainable, high quality of life for all captive elephants in Southeast Asia.
- Develop a document describing best captive elephant management practices and protocols.
- Create methods of assessment for evaluating and possibly scoring existing camps (rating/ranking system).
- Provide educational/training materials and enhance capacity building.
- Conduct a thorough literature search on what is available and compile information on elephant management, mahout training, conservation messages and health care for distribution to invested parties, and to identify gaps in knowledge.

On the second day, participants visited the Maesa Elephant Camp near Chiang Mai. This is a large camp (76 elephants) and participants found most to be in good health, although there were

indications of foot problems in some individuals because of the hard ground elephants walk on during the day up and down the hills. There was also some concern about the lack of socialization time for individual elephants. Setting aside an area for larger groups of elephants to interact normally (e.g., the soccer field), with the public watching from afar, might be an option, and could be stimulating for elephant and tourists alike. In a separate area of Maesa Elephant Camp is the Elephant Care Center, which takes care of retired (those over 55 years old) or sick elephants; currently they have eight. Tourists pay to take part in daily management, without riding or a show, thus bringing in an income to care for these elephants.

In the afternoon, participants met in plenary and chose a name – ASEAN Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG), and created a 10-member steering committee that is tasked with setting priorities for group activities, coordinating with members and sub-groups, creating a master plan, setting future meetings, and serving as a liaison to group members for people seeking information. Tasks were assigned in the afternoon of the last day. Singapore Zoo agreed to host the next working group meeting, which will take place 9-10 November 2015 to further discussions and assess progress.

