

Collaborating with Myanmar Mahouts on Elephant Health Care

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With approximately 5000 individuals, Myanmar manages the highest number of captive elephants amongst all Asian elephant range countries. Nearly 3000 of these captive elephants belong to the government run Myanma Timber Enterprise (MTE). The MTE has one of the best structured and closely monitored captive elephant management systems in Asia. In this system, adult trained elephants have been used for different kinds of work in logging operations since 1948. As MTE is a government agency, and due to its elephant management expertise, it is increasingly put in charge of wild elephant conflict management in Myanmar by means of wild elephant drives, habitat patrols, and wild elephant rescues and translocations.

During the past years the annual timber extraction quota in Myanmar has been drastically reduced, and progressively more heavy machinery is used for logging operations. This has led to a situation where increasing numbers of MTE elephants

no longer need to be employed in the timber industry, but MTE still has a responsibility to provide care for these elephants and is working to identify alternatives for the sustainable use of these captive elephants. Recently MTE has explored the possibilities to employ some of their elephants in eco-tourism projects, for protected habitat monitoring and patrols, and for HEC management. With support from international conservation NGOs, during the past few years MTE started to develop some of their timber elephant camps as conservation and eco-tourism camps. This includes training MTE staff (mahouts, camp managers, timber rangers) in the camps to be able to fulfil their new or changed roles. Topics addressed by additional training include field navigation with GPS and maps, recording and record-keeping of data, English language skills, HEC conflict mitigation strategies, and exchanges with field staff from similar programs in other Asian elephant range countries.





As part of this ongoing training program, and in order to improve the management and health care of their captive elephants, MTE conducted a training workshop for mahouts and veterinary assistants on September 14-20, 2015, with assistance from the NGO Asian Elephant Support (AES). Invited presenters were Dr. Christopher Stremme, elephant veterinarian, and Heidi Riddle, elephant manager, in addition to MTE staff led by Dr. Zaw Min Oo, Assistant Manager, MTE Department of Extraction.

The workshop started on September 14 in the MTE Nanchun training school in Taungoo, Bago (East) Region. During the first day lectures were given on basic elephant biology, differences between Asian and African elephants, captive elephant management in western facilities, training elephants for foot care, elephant foot anatomy and physiology, elephant foot problems and diseases, as well as treatment and prevention. Participants in the session included 18 veterinary assistants and 12 mahouts from different parts of the country. From September 15-20 the session was continued in the Phokyar elephant camp close to the town of Taungoo. During this time practical demonstrations using the camp elephants were given about training elephants for foot care and conducting proper foot care. From the second day on the participants were divided into 4 groups; two elephants with their mahouts were assigned to each group. The groups were supervised to start training their elephants and to conduct basic foot care procedures. All of the participants were extremely interested, enthusiastic, and participated very well in the practical activities. By the end of the workshop all the elephants used during the practical session

were able to be handled for basic foot care, and the participants had a good understanding of the principles of proper elephant foot care. Foot care tools donated earlier by the Elephant Managers Association, a U.S. based organization of elephant keepers and enthusiasts, as well as by AES were given to all participants in the session and to mahouts from the Phokyar camp to enable them to continue this elephant care after the session ended.

In addition to the Phokyar elephant camp, two other camps (Myaing Hay Wun and Green Hill Valley) managing MTE elephants were visited. In both these camps captive elephant management and foot care topics were discussed via presentations and practical demonstrations. Foot care tools were also distributed to mahouts in these camps.

Further collaborations including field training and knowledge exchange between elephant management programs and staff from Myanmar and other Asian elephant range countries (i.e. Sumatra-Indonesia) are planned for the future.

