

Short Communication

Information on elephant keepers in Sri Lanka

A. Dangolla and I. D. Silva

Abstract Approximately 200 domesticated and privately owned elephants play a significant role in cultural, religious and state functions, and in tourism in Sri Lanka. Information on elephant keepers is vital in order to educate them on better welfare, health care and management of elephants. This aspect has not been scientifically investigated in Sri Lanka in the past. Therefore, data on 53 elephant keepers were collected by a detailed pre-tested questionnaire administered during personal interviews with them during August 2001-June 2002. All keepers were Sinhala (race), Buddhist (religion), males; 49% were over 41 years of age. A majority had studied up to grade 8 (79%), and could write Sinhala language comprehensively (72%) and could read Sinhala news papers (83%). They provided satisfactory level of education to their children. A majority (70%) were receiving a monthly salary of more than that of an average laborer in Sri Lanka. Elephants in the tourist trade worked almost 30 days/month. Most logging elephants worked only 4-5 hours a day. Food was not provided for the elephants while working, by 58% of the keepers and most keepers provided water to their elephants during work (89%). Most of them did not provide sufficient food immediately after work (79%) though food was provided after allowing the elephant to bathe, immediately after work. Twenty two (41%) keepers had changed their assistants repeatedly. Most keepers (75%) carry the goad (5-6 feet long wooden pole with a steel hook at the end used for restraint), a stick and the knife all the time. Almost all keepers (91%) knew only about herbal medicaments for different ailments in elephants, probably because they had either no faith on, or had little or no exposure to western medicines both for their elephants as well as on themselves. Approximately half (47%) consumed alcohol daily. Thirty percent (30%) of the keepers smoked between 1-5 cigarettes daily and 98% chew beetle leaves. **Keywords:** Elephant, Elephant keeper

Introduction

At present, there are approximately 200 elephants (both domesticated and privately owned) in Sri Lanka, and the domesticated elephants are distributed in 12 out of 25 districts in the country. This number is similar to that of privately owned Asian elephants in USA (Roocroft & Atwellzol, 1994). The Sri Lankan elephants walk or at times travel in trucks, over long distances during annual festival seasons to participate in cultural, religious and state functions throughout the country. They also play a vital role in generating income from the developing tourist industry. A rapid decline in the future population is anticipated since more than half of the elephants are over 50 years old and therefore not in breedable ages. The net result of this reduction may adversely affect the economy and the people of Sri Lanka in many ways.

The Captive Elephant Owners Association of Sri Lanka (CEOASL) has taken several vital steps to improve the management of these elephants. The elephant owners hire keepers (all males) to manage their elephants. Elephants therefore, spend most of their time with the keepers. The CEOASL has decided to collect information on

elephant keepers to find the ways in which they work the elephants, in order to find ways and means of educating and training them on better management and health care practices with the objective of improving the welfare aspects in the hope of sustaining the existing elephant population. Such data on elephant keepers has not been documented in Sri Lanka. Each domesticated elephant has one keeper and one or two assistants to the keeper.

Materials and methods

Information of elephant keepers in 10 districts in which majority of the domesticated elephants live, were collected via a questionnaire which constituted of aspects on keeper's family, education of the keeper and his children, ability to read and write, his income, whether he smokes and consume alcohol, working schedule of the elephant and methods he use to restraint elephants. After pre-testing the questionnaire, necessary changes were made and the final version was administered via personnel interviews to 53 keepers during August 2001 to June 2002.

Results

Family, Income and level of education

The race and religion of all elephant keepers interviewed were Sinhala (race) and buddhists (religion) respectively, by birth. Nearly a half (26; 49%), were over 41 years old and they reported to have a maximum of two children. Only one keeper had studied up to grade 12 (General

A. Dangolla and I. D. Silva

Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences,
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science,
University of Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka.
Email: adangolla@yahoo.com

Certificate of Education, Advanced level), and 42 (79%) only up to grade 8. Thirty-eight (72%) were literate in the Sinhala language and 44 (83%) could read Sinhala newspapers. All of their school-going-age children were attending school. None of the children had left formal education at an early age. Eighteen (34%) keepers indicated their monthly income to be less than Rs. 4000.00 and 37 (70%) indicated a monthly income of above Rs. 5000.00.

Working the elephant

Twenty-two (40%) keepers worked the elephants under their care, up to an average of 10 days a month. However, those elephants in the tourist trade, especially the aged females, work almost 30 days a month. Their work, consist of walking approximately 5 kilometers per day while carrying 2-4 tourists.

Thirty four (64%) keepers assist the owners to decide on the work place. Most keepers had the habit of visiting the workplace before commencing the work. Those elephants that were hired for logging, which is strenuous, work only for 4-5 hours a day. However, 6 (11%) keepers worked their elephants up to 10 hours a day, at times. Twenty-two (41%) keepers changed their assistants repeatedly for some reason.

Providing food and water to the elephant

Food was not provided for the elephants during work by 31 (58%) keepers, and 47 (89%) provided water to their elephants during work, 42 (79%) provided adequate drinking water immediately after work and the food was given subsequently. In general, they were bathed immediately after work for about 4 hours a day, and most of the food was given thereafter.

General

Majority of keepers (40; 75%) carry the goad (5-6 feet long wooden pole with a steel hook at the end), a stick and a knife at all times, but they mainly use the stick to control the elephant. Almost all keepers (48; 91%) knew a variety of minor herbal medicaments used for different ailments of elephants. Only 4 keepers were aware of western anthelmintic preparations used on elephants, while all of them were confident and had used ayurvedic medicaments for various ailments in elephants under their care.

Approximately half (25; 47%) of the keepers interviewed consumed alcoholic liquor, 30% smoked cigarettes and 98% chewed beetles. Beetle leaves are traditionally chewed with areca nut, tobacco and lime. One third of keepers (17; 32%) chew beetles at least 17 times daily.

Discussion

It was not surprising that all keepers interviewed are Sinhala buddhist males, as most functions in which

elephants participate are associated with Buddhist viharas or Hindu temples. The present culture in Sri Lanka does not appear to attract and favor female keepers, probably because of the physical hardships of this occupation. Though most keepers had not completed their primary education, they could read and write reasonably well and they appeared to be very concerned over the education of their children. Most keepers had left school education early and had learnt the trade of elephant keeping as a profession from their fathers, grand fathers or uncles, as they were fascinated about elephants. It is likely that the number of professional elephant keepers who would learn the profession from their fathers would be reduced and therefore, a formal training of keepers may become inevitable in future. Such training would also provide an opportunity to educate them on welfare aspects, newly reported diseases of Sri Lankan elephants (Dangolla *et al.*, 2002) and also other health risks due to excessive work load (Silva & Dangolla, 2002).

Most elephant keepers dress shabbily though their income is more than that of an average laborer. It is also known that these keepers earn incomes in addition to their regular pay unless the elephant falls sick for long periods of time. The keepers of male elephants face financial difficulties when their elephants come in to "musth" as they are traditionally not worked during this period.

Examination of the place of work by most keepers prior to commencement of work is commendable since a joint decision could then be made with the owner. This is important since several elephants have died due to falls when working in bad terrains. The practice of not offering even small amounts of food while at work may not be advisable considering the relative inefficiency of the digestive tract of elephants.

The goad and the stick carried by the keepers were for restraint while the knife was for cutting the branches and leaves for food and to trim the nails of elephants while bathing, when necessary. However, there had been many instances of long term wound dressing and antibiotic therapy on injuries caused by keepers using sharp goads indiscriminately.

Many elephant keepers had not used western medicines on the elephants under their care possibly because they (both elephant and themselves) have had little or no exposure to western medicine or because of lack of faith. We were able to convince many keepers that regular administration of a haematinics to old elephants, especially those in tourist trade, could sustain good health status (Dangolla & Silva, 2000).

The respondents appeared to be quite addicted to chewing beetle leaves and consuming alcoholic liquor. Interestingly, elephant keepers are known to tell "untruths" (Evans, 1961). However, the fact that most of them had indicated a reasonably higher income may suggest that the extent of lying was possibly less.

It is apparent from the work load, the diet and the diseases emerging in elephants, that the keepers need to be educated promptly on those facts, if the older domesticated elephants are to be preserved longer.

Acknowledgements

D Weerasiri and ULD Jayantha are thanked for their assistance during the study.

References

Dangolla, A. & Silva, I.D (2000). A case of mal-absorption syndrome due to fractured molars in an Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*). *Sri Lanka Vet. Journal*, 47(1A):11-12.

Dangolla, A., Silva, I., Thevenasan, V., Siribaddana, A.,

Ratnathunga, N., Perera, J. & Fernandopulle, S. (2002). Preliminary information on Tuberculosis in an Elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*). *Proceedings of 54th Annual Convention of the Sri Lanka Veterinary Association*, 3-4th May 2002, Gannoruwa, Sri Lanka

Evans, G.H. (1961). *Elephants and their diseases: A treatise on elephants*. Supdt. Govt. printing and staty., Union of Burma, Rangoon. 323 pp.

Roocroft, A. & Atwellzoll, D. (1994). *Managing elephants; an introduction to their training and management*. Fever Tree Press, PO Box 205, Ramona, Ca 92065. USA. 198 pp.

Silva, I. & Dangolla, A. (2002). Blood levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in wild and domesticated Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus*) in Sri Lanka.



Photo: Heidi Riddle for International Elephant Foundation (IEF)