

IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

Draft Position Statement on Captive Asian Elephants

The IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) recommends that captive Asian elephants be considered in conservation strategies, due to noteworthy factors such as the large number of captive elephants, the impact of illegal captures on wild Asian elephant populations, and the potential for illegal trade in ivory from captive elephants.

The AsESG defines captive elephants as those in direct human care and control. Captive elephants have also been referred to as “domestic” or “domesticated” elephants. While Asian elephants have had a close association with humans for thousands of years, as a species they have not been selectively bred for domesticity, as is the case with other animals defined as “domestic” such as dogs, cattle, horses, etc. Most captive Asian elephants in the world today have been wild-caught, and wild males have sired many of the captive Asian elephants born in captivity in some range country facilities.

The AsESG recognizes that some Asian elephants are likely to remain in captivity in the foreseeable future and as such supports work to protect their well being, regardless of whether they are in or out of direct human control and identifying uses for captive Asian elephants that can provide for their long-term support and care.

The AsESG recognizes the contributions that captive Asian elephants can make to conservation via science, education and awareness, and fundraising. A detailed knowledge and understanding of physiological facts and behavior is needed to develop clear and practical management policies regarding captive Asian elephant management.

According to the 2006 report from the IUCN/SSC sponsored Asian Elephant Range States Meeting (AsERSM) there are approximately 13,000 captive elephants in Asia. In addition there are approximately 700 captive Asian elephants outside of Asia (in Australasia, Europe, and the Americas) as identified in regional studbooks. The AsERSM outlined the main concerns regarding captive Asian elephants as: need for standardized registration, identifying rational and sustainable uses of captive elephants, and developing standards of captive elephant care and management.

1. Registration

The AsESG considers the registration of all captive Asian elephants necessary to facilitate monitoring and management of captive elephant populations, and to help curtail the illegal trade in elephants and their body parts (including ivory) and the capture of wild elephants. (see Annex I)

2. Long term management of captive Asian elephant populations

The AsESG recognizes that Asian elephants have been integrated into human activity for thousands of years. Some existing captive elephant populations will remain in captivity well into the future with an increasing trend in some countries and a decreasing trend in others.

2a. Management strategies

The AsESG recommends that countries develop clear national policies and strategies for managing their captive elephant populations taking into consideration the long-term requirements. Resources and well-planned management policies will be required for captive Asian elephant populations that are intended to be sustainable in the long run, so that these populations do not have adverse effects on wild populations through unnecessary capture from the wild. Establishing long-term goals will facilitate the development of proper management strategies needed to achieve those goals with sufficient long-term support and care. The AsESG recommends that requirements of captive elephants and their population trends be evaluated on an ongoing basis. The AsESG can help assess captive elephant management strategies.

The AsESG notes that long-term management strategies would involve sustaining, increasing, or reducing captive elephants depending on the requirements of individual countries. In countries that wish to sustain or increase their captive elephant populations, the strategy will involve implementing captive breeding programs if removal of elephants from the wild is to be avoided. Captive breeding programs involve setting genetic and demographic goals for a defined population, establishing the level of genetic diversity that needs to be maintained over a time span, and establishing how the age structure of the population will be managed. When captive breeding programs are considered, all factors (e.g. costs, resources, genetic stock, animal welfare) need to be fully assessed and provided/planned for. The AsESG notes that an array of diverse factors may guide elephant breeding programs in different regions, as the need for, and access to elephants, technologies, and resources will vary

Countries with the goal of reducing their captive elephant populations will have to ensure that numbers do not increase through unplanned breeding or captures, and also develop clear exit plans that ensure that the existing populations are well managed till their death or transfer. Release of captive elephants into wild elephant habitat (for restocking or to reduce captive populations) should be carefully evaluated: the impact on the habitat and resident wild population, as well as the potential for disease transmission need to be addressed. Human-elephant conflict issues should also be taken into consideration when such releases are considered.

The AsESG advises that the capture and removal of Asian elephants from the wild is not ideal for supplementing captive stocks and should be avoided. However the AsESG also recognizes that there will be some situations where capture from the wild and transfer to captive facilities may be justified because of human-elephant conflict situations where the only solution lies in removal of wild elephants (and where translocation is not a possibility). Prior to implementing any capture operation, all aspects of capture and removal from the wild need to be carefully evaluated and justified, in particular long-term post-capture support for the elephant(s). When

capture and removal from the wild is considered, the AsESG is a valuable resource to help evaluate situations, suggest best practices, and offer alternatives where possible.

2b. Use of captive Asian elephants

The AsESG has identified current uses of captive Asian elephants and can help guide the improvement of unsuitable environments where needed. Furthermore, the AsESG encourages information and resource sharing to benefit elephants.

Within Asian range countries, elephants are owned by government agencies, commercial organizations (circuses/tourist resorts), religious institutes, and private individuals. Their uses range from logging work, transport, patrolling (forests), HEC mitigation, tourism, ceremonial, display, performance, and education.

In non-range countries, elephants are owned by zoological institutes, commercial organizations (circuses), and private individuals. Their uses are largely restricted to display, performance, and education.

The use of captive Asian elephants has undergone major changes in recent times, and traditional uses as working animals have largely been replaced by mechanization. Their use as display and performing animals has also undergone change with increasing interest in ethical considerations. When planning for the future, the AsESG feels that due consideration needs to be given to the humane use of elephants, while taking into account the need to manage them properly.

3. Guidelines for captive Asian elephant management

The AsESG suggests that the care and management of captive Asian elephants be continually assessed and improved whenever necessary. The AsESG is available as a resource to advise on the development of captive Asian elephant management programs, and to facilitate building the capacity of staff. The AsESG proposes that if best practices of elephant care, husbandry, and welfare cannot be met on a regular basis; the management of captive elephant populations in these environments should not be regarded as acceptable unless the environments are significantly improved.

Captive Asian elephants are used for a range of tasks and are managed in a variety of environments so there is a need to recognize that a diversity of approaches to elephant management exist, yet common best practices of care and husbandry should be promoted and adhered to.

The AsESG encourages the use of professional standards about elephant management - particularly management in a specific environment (i.e. forest camp, zoo, etc.). This information can be referred to in professional standards and publications available regionally, nationally and internationally. The AsESG is available as a resource to identify information about captive Asian elephant management.

The AsESG recommends that, at a minimum, standards developed for captive elephant management address the following guidelines for the care and management of captive Asian

elephants, regardless of elephant use or environment. These guidelines address the general needs of elephants in any situation – housing, care, and health, social and behavioral requirements – as well as common administrative responsibilities for elephant managers. A standardized method to monitor and evaluate elephant management in any environment can be developed using indicators such as birth/mortality rates, degree of medical and/or behavioral issues, and body condition. (see Annex II)

Annex I

AsESG guidelines for registration of captive Asian elephants

The AsESG considers the registration of all captive Asian elephants necessary to facilitate monitoring and management of captive elephant populations, and to help curtail the illegal trade in elephants and their body parts (including ivory) and the capture of wild elephants.

- Registration of captive Asian elephants should primarily involve the use of a simple standardized database that includes basic biological information on each individual elephant (e.g. gender, approximate age, place of origin, estimated height, estimated weight, distinguishing characteristics, any reproductive information, etc). If the elephant is captive born, parentage information must be recorded at the time of registration. The database should also include basic information about the use of the elephant, elephant owner(s) information, and location (current and previous) of the elephant;
- This registration database should be able to be readily accessed and analyzed – both within and across range countries – and personnel training should be provided in database management and analysis;
- Registration should also include the use of photographs and/or microchips and/or other tamper-proof marks (e.g. brand, tattoo) to help positively identify each individual elephant;
- It is recommended that an elephant be registered, and tagged if a form of identification such as a microchip is used, no later than 6 months after birth or after capture;
- Where photographs are used, it is important to have several different views of the individual elephant, and it is suggested that ear confirmation, shape of the dorsal portion, and shape of the head in old animals be considered. Young animals should be photographed at regular yearly intervals to maintain an accurate record;
- Where microchips or other forms of tamper-proof identification marks are used, there is a need to standardize systems of use and provide training across range countries.
- The AsESG is available as a resource to advise on the development of captive Asian elephant registration and identification programs.

Annex II

AsESG guidelines for captive Asian elephant management

These AsESG guidelines can assist in the development of captive elephant management standards, and are intended to be re-evaluated and updated as elephant management practices progress. A guiding principle in captive elephant management should be the avoidance of physical or psychological harm to the individual elephant.

Proper Elephant Housing and Husbandry:

- Provides adequate shelter; exercise areas with adequate monitoring or fencing to prevent animals from straying and to prevent unwanted access by public; and access to natural substrate such as dirt;
- Elephant housing location kept clean at all times; fresh drinking water provided daily; good quality and appropriate fodder and any needed supplements provided daily; program of pest control and prevention;
- Elephants should not be housed alone and should have access to other elephants and opportunities for natural social interaction;
- Managing social groupings include: being aware of social compatibility, dominance hierarchies, and being able to deal with new animal introductions and separation;
- Daily bathing (skin care) provided; regular exam of all body parts; weight and height of the elephant measured regularly;
- Ability to treat and medicate elephants anytime necessary, and take samples from elephants (blood, urine, feces, trunk wash); ability to manage elephants in an emergency medical situation (separation) and if there is aggression to another elephant or to a human;
- Where chaining, or other types of tethering, is used it should allow adequate movement and, where possible, social interaction. Types of restraints designed to cause physical harm if the elephant exerts any force against them should not be used. Continuous tethering should be limited, every effort should be made to provide elephants with time off tethers;
- Elephants performing work should be allowed periods of rest in a sheltered area where they can comfortably move around and lie down at will.

Elephant Management Protocol:

- Outlines the elephant management program goals, management policies and emergency response;
- Defines responsibilities for all staff involved in the elephant management program; guidelines for all elephant management and handling activities.

Responsibility of Elephant Care Staff:

- Should continually build the capacity to improve elephant care and humane handling practices and skills; should be knowledgeable about proper and humane use of all training and management tools; share information and experiences with other elephant care staff.

Responsibility of Elephant Facility Administrators:

- Understand the ethical and financial commitment necessary to maintain elephants, from animal welfare to conservation issues;
- Provide a proper number of qualified elephant care staff and understand the level of staff expertise necessary for an effective program; support ongoing education of elephant care staff;
- Provide and support responsible program of veterinary care;
- Understand and communicate how the goals of the facility and of the elephant program dictate implementation of elephant management strategies.

Considerations for Public Education:

- Make available up-to-date educational signs and display information about elephants; where possible offer educational presentations, talks or demonstrations by elephant managers and staff, and an elephant conservation message.

Elephant Studies and Conservation Goals:

- When possible take advantage of new study opportunities;
- Involvement in elephant studies in the following areas to benefit conservation and/or animal welfare strategies is suggested:
 - Physiological
 - Behavioral
 - Communication
- Support efforts to benefit Asian elephant populations by raising awareness of, helping support, and, where possible, funding conservation activities.

<Addendum:

Existing guidelines/standards/rules concerning captive elephant management are available from the following resources:

State of Kerala, India

Elephant Managers Association (EMA)

American Zoo Association (AZA)

European Zoo Association (EAZA)

Australasian Zoo Association (ARZPA)

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