

Elephant care tools for Mahouts

April Yoder¹ Heidi S. Riddle²

Whether or not you work with animals directly, you can appreciate having the correct tools to get the job done effectively. As elephant professionals we strive to provide these animals with the best care possible, but in western facilities we are typically supplied with basic tools needed for our daily work, i.e. shovels, hoses, wheelbarrows. Our counterparts in range countries often work in environments without all the necessary tools, yet they are expected to also provide good care to their elephants.

The Elephant Managers Association (EMA) has been extending support to fellow elephant handlers (mahouts) in Asia by donating elephant care tools to help in their daily tasks.

The EMA is an international nonprofit organization of professional elephant handlers, managers, and elephant enthusiasts dedicated to promoting proper care and management of captive elephant populations. The Association actively supports the work of captive elephant handlers/keepers/trainers through communication and networking.

In Asia there are a number of captive elephants in communities with few resources to provide needed supplies for mahouts to properly care for their elephants on a daily basis. In western facilities it is often stated that "the elephants in our country are ambassadors for their wild counterparts".

If the elephants in these facilities are indeed ambassadors for elephants in range countries, then EMA members should be the ambassadors for their fellow elephant handlers in these countries. Therefore the EMA Conservation Committee developed a program to help support the mahouts in Asian elephant range countries.

In 2009, the EMA Conservation Committee initiated a fundraiser to purchase a much needed elephant care tool, a hoof knife, for the mahouts working in the government forest camps of Sumatra, Indonesia. A hoof knife is a tool designed specifically for use in animal foot care, and this type of care is an integral part of captive elephant husbandry.



Mahout in Assam doing foot care using a khukri



Elephant foot care tools donated to Mahouts in Sumatra

¹Asian Elephant Support, USA

²Elephant Managers Association, USA

The EMA membership generously donated enough funds to the initial "Hoof knives for Mahouts" project to purchase over 200 hoof knives. These knives were delivered in 2010 to the group FOKMAS (Sumatran Mahout Communication Forum), the EMA counterpart organization in Indonesia, and distributed to the mahouts working in Sumatran forest camps. The Sumatran mahouts greatly appreciated this gift from their elephant care colleagues working in western facilities. Due to the success of the initial "Hoof knives for Mahouts" project, the EMA Conservation Committee discussed extending their efforts to mahouts in other regions of Asia. In discussion with a small nonprofit organization, Asian Elephant Support (AES), that supports captive elephant care projects in Asia, it was brought to EMA's attention that there were many mahouts in Assam, India, in need of proper tools and equipment. AES's veterinary partners in that region regularly conduct small clinics and workshops in elephant health and husbandry for mahouts and their working elephants. Therefore, this was a good opportunity for EMA members to raise funds to purchase proper tools for the mahouts, and for the tools to be distributed during these workshops. One of AES' top priorities is supporting people in Asia that care for captive elephants, so the partnership of AES and EMA is well-suited for this project. In late 2012, during the annual EMA Conference, the EMA Conservation Committee and AES joined forces to raise support and help supply the mahouts in Assam with an essential tool: a khukri. In this region, these traditional knives are used by the mahouts on a daily basis for a variety of tasks - from cutting fodder to feed the elephants to trimming elephants' feet. However most mahouts have only handmade tools, so providing them with a proper khukri will greatly assist their daily work.

Since the introduction of this program, seven field training sessions for the mahouts on foot care with the khukri have been conducted in Assam and more than 50 knives have been distributed. With generous support from its membership, EMA and AES will continue to provide tools to additional mahouts in Asia. Due to the success of the program it may also be expanded to include the donation of other items requested for the mahouts such as rubber boots and raincoats.



Mahout in Sumatra trimming an elephant foot pad

