

## Elephant madness - there IS a sane solution

### Another Op Ed Rant

In an earlier Op Ed Rant of December 2009, ZOOS' PRINT, I took a "benefit of doubt" position on the governmental action as described by Saroj Patnaik on the adjacent page. This was based on information from a ministerial meeting two years back that government had a long-range plan for all the country's suffering captive elephants. But, how government plans to do it is the question.

Would they do what they did in case of the zoos? One would hope not: the difficulties and anomalies of the zoo elephant "solution" are vexed with only +/-150 elephants. How could government deal with 3000+ elephants similarly ...take them to camps, rescue centres, or (God forbid!) the wild? A recent discussion with a couple of "insiders" suggests that a long range plan logistics is yet to be worked out.

Moving 150 zoo elephants to camps will start soon with the "worst case" elephants. It is going to be extremely difficult. Imagine then, 3000+ elephants - the privately owned and temple elephant. Move them? More madness. Owners would go to court and delay the initiative to death. Probably temples would join a joint action suit. Moreover religious extremists with political agendas are likely to see this as an opportunity to embarrass government. And, all said and done, IF government won the case, what would they do with 3000+ elephants ?

To summarise the situation, at one end of a spectrum of ironies, we have over ~150 zoo elephants, 2nd among the top two categories in quality of care; first being camp elephants being sent to forest camps even though many are uneven in quality. At the other end of the spectrum we have over 3000 privately-owned working elephants, temple and begging elephants which are far worse off but unattended as yet, perhaps because of the problems described above. It boggles the mind.

There IS a sane solution, however, which is:

- . designate **all** captive elephant groups as needful of improved conditions of care;
- . start with a presumption that all current owners get to keep their elephants but only if they improve all aspects of their maintenance to insure a humane quality of life;
- . create **national legislation including species specific standards of care** for elephants according to their group, along with a systematic plan for implementation;
- . such legislation can be added to the Wildlife Protection Act as an Amendment as this is a faster and less cumbersome method than getting a separate law passed from scratch.

This method worked for the 450+ zoos in the country. It was expensive and time-consuming but it is working. A similar initiative for elephants may

go more smoothly as there is now vast experience in how to set up and implement such a project. This is thanks to the Ministry's initiative to improve Indian zoos which amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act which resulted in the Central Zoo Authority and its system of inspection, evaluation, recommendations and reward and its opposite both based on compliance or lack of compliance. Many zoos were closed. As many again have improved as a result of the Zoo Act and Central Zoo Authority.

Although there are still many things to do (such as species specific standards of care for each individual taxon group) and improvements to make in India zoos, the die is cast...zoos will continue to improve provided the law & political will to enforce it exists.

Government can task a carefully chosen group of individuals to draw up legislation inclusive of specific standards of care, keeping in mind the differences between the groups of owners, but not compromising on the relief from pain, fear, discomfort, frustration, and all the other unconsciousable conditions which are part of the lives of the greater number of captive elephants in India currently.

Legislation doesn't automatically make people shape up. An aggressive process of implementation has to be initiated and it takes time to get it right. but there is no dearth of experienced institutions to advise and forward this solution under MOEF... the Elephant Task Force, Project Elephant, Central Zoo Authority, Animal Welfare Board of India, and myriad individuals such as retired and working foresters, military, zoo managers, CZA MS's or members, welfare officers, academics, field biologists, selected animal welfare advocates, all preferably with elephant and enforcement experience. Many would gladly volunteer to inspect and monitor captive elephant holdings state by state.

Don't think for a minute that I think this is simple or easy. It is not. I witnessed first and the difficulties of establishing the CZA and the persistence and strength of officials who, as CZA Member Secretaries, stood firm, working agonising hours, endured terrible hardships made it happen. Now India has the strongest zoo legislation in the world and because of this legislation India is slowly but surely improving their zoos.

India is in a very similar situation now with captive elephants and it may be even more complicated to convince 3000 captive work-elephant owners and temples, zoos, even camps to improve their methods of keeping these intelligent and sensitive animals. It will require government's best efforts ... and NGO's best behaviour to establish a process which would result in quality of life improvements for all captive elephants in the country. **Sally Walker.**

## Banning of elephants in zoos

**Letter No.: SKP-298-2009, December 07, 2009**

Dr. Rajesh Gopal, IFS  
Member Secretary,  
Central Zoo Authority, New Delhi.

**Copy forwarded to the Minister of State Environment & Forests, Secretary, Environment & Forests, Additional Director General, Wildlife & Director Project Elephant for favour of their information and early necessary action.**

Dear Dr. Rajesh Gopal,

I saw in the newspaper reports and also learnt from some Zoo Directors that the CZA has instructed the zoos to stop keeping elephants and transfer them to elephant camps forthwith. I do not know the background which has compelled you to take such a step. You are aware that many large zoos and medium zoos in the country have already constructed very large enclosures for housing their elephants and are not tethering them as far as possible. Many other zoos though they do not have large moated enclosures also maintain their elephants quite well though there are cases of poor upkeep in certain cases. I am uncertain whether all these elephants will be better treated in the elephant camps where they will be kept tied and even may not get right facility conducive to their upkeep.

There are more elephants in captivity outside the zoos in temples, *maths* and completely private ownership particularly in states like Kerala, Bihar, Eastern U.P. and Assam. Even there are large numbers of begging elephants in the country who are made to travel hundreds of kilometers in most adverse condition to beg for their masters. Is there any planning to get these animals to the elephant camps? Having done that can it be ensured that such a large number can be properly cared for or they have even space for them. Though elephant camps in south Indian states like Tamilnadu and Karnataka and few in North Bengal have better facilities, there is hardly any in states like, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. Besides there are none or negligible number of trained or traditional Mahouts in these states to take care of the camp elephants there. This transfer and change of Mahouts may put these animals to avoidable trauma. Instead of banning altogether can you not ensure better up-keep of those in badly kept zoos or only remove this population (badly kept ones) to the camps or better zoos?

You might have seen the report of a MoEF committee set up under the chairmanship of Sri S.C. Dey on the captive elephants of the country. That gives a fairly good picture of the entire country and problems faced to keep them.

With the increasing onslaught on the elephant habitats in most parts of the country particularly due to mining, industrial development, expansion of habitation, road, rail, and irrigation projects, their habitats have been fragmented and disturbed and the elephants have migrated to places where they were never seen in the past 100 years or so like Chhatisgarh, Dumka in Jharkhand, Northern and southern Andhra Pradesh, Sundargarh Division of Orissa and elsewhere. Even they have gone to Maharastra and Goa. This is due to fragmentation of elephant habitat, disturbance caused due to industries, mines and lighting. This is causing severe human elephant conflict resulting in death of elephants often. We need to address them. While we have not been able to address this, I fail to understand the logic behind such a drastic step. The zoos do not have only elephants they have a large number of other endangered species in good numbers. Is it planned to take them to rescue centers and why? Have all the states got the proper infrastructure, finance, and trained man power to keep them in perceptibly better condition than in the zoos which have created infrastructure for them over the years, mahouts with experience and can provide veterinary care. Many zoos have even saved and are caring for orphaned calves and even blind or maimed ones for decades, thanks to their veterinary care. If we continue to have zoos is there any plausible reason for not exhibiting elephants there. Has this decision been taken in the last meeting in the Central Zoo Authority? If so may I have a copy of the resolution? I have a strong feeling that it is a hasty step taken without analyzing pros and cons of the issue and need to further examination by all those who are familiar with the subject. This may also be deliberated in the National Board for Wildlife, Steering Committee of Project Elephant and views of the Wildlife Institute of India and other institution may be taken. I am writing this in my personal capacity and endorsing copies of this letter to the Minister of Environment & Forests, Secretary, Environment & Forests, Additional D.G. Wildlife and Director, Project Elephant for any action required to be taken at their level.

Yours faithfully,



(Saroj Kumar Patnaik)  
Former Chairman, Indian Zoo Directors Association  
& Former Member, Steering Committee of Project  
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