Human Elephant
Learning Programs
Advancing Elephant Welfare

Abuse ends where knowledge begins.
Help us to advance elephant welfare.

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The elephant is our largest land animal but not all elephants are the same. As most people are aware, there are two types – the African and Asian elephant. African elephants, as the name suggests are from the African continent and outnumber the population of their Asian "cousins" by around 10:1. Asian elephants roam India, Nepal and South East Asia countries, including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. There are only maybe 30,000 to 50,000 Asian elephants left in existence, with their population having halved over the last 75 years due to poaching and loss of habitat. This has made the Asian elephant an endangered species.

One third of Asian elephants are domesticated. They are often relied upon for wildlife surveillance, census and anti-poaching activities. Unlike any other 'vehicle', the ridden elephant provides many advantages: wildlife is not disturbed, they move silently, they provide a tall vantage point and they traverse all terrains and water. Some elephants are in sanctuaries and contribute to eco tourism. Many animal organisations and people call for the immediate release of domesticated elephants back into the wild. Sanctuaries respond that that course of action would be irresponsible and at least in the short term, reckless. They believe there would not be enough food for these domesticated elephants to compete with wild elephants, as a result of depleted habitats. This would result in many dying from starvation and many killed to be sold to China for their skin, tusks, etc.

H-ELP does not have a position on domesticated elephants, because it is not an advocacy organisation but an animal welfare one. Just as many people object to fishing, or eating eggs, this does not invalidate efforts in animal welfare to undertake more humane catching practices to ensure by-product is not caught in nets or implementing free range on farms. Our mission is just to improve the lives of domesticated Asian elephants using scientific methods in animal welfare.

The prevailing methodologies for human-animal interactions arise from mankind's historical belief that an animal is born knowing how to be of service to humanity and merely needs to acquire respect in order to become compliant and 'willing to please'. So training ideologies have been based on dominance and submission, often involving punishment. Apart from punishment being unnecessarily cruel – food and drink deprivation, being chained, instruments used to cause pain – it can lead to psychological damage which can manifest itself much later through post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD may show up as sudden hyper-aggression and violence triggered perhaps by a mild fearful experience or a relatively benign situational trigger, such as the noise of a balloon bursting at a children's birthday party or a conflicting emotional situation. It has also led to the deaths of many mahouts during early training.

H-ELP has contributed to developing learning theory where elephants are motivated to obtain certain goals and, on achieving them, their actions rewarded; and the beginning of a positive stimulus-response connection is born. With repetitions, actions form into habits and trained behaviours that arise from discreet signals become reliable. This results in a mentally secure and confident elephant, raised in kindness.

Founded in 2010 by Eureka prize for science awardee and world-renowned animal behaviourist Dr Andrew McLean, H-ELP has educated mahouts in Asia, improving the welfare of many domesticated elephants. It has enshrined its learning theory in an elephant training manual, a syllabus that has been described by the CEO of the Wildlife Trust of India as, "futuristic in its ambit: and most importantly it has been tried and tested now in Nepal, India, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. I see this as one of the major contributions to animal welfare in South East Asia and if mahouts across the land can adopt it, the region will be a kinder place for elephants."