

Ethical Issues Pertaining to Tamed Elephants in Sri Lanka: A Philosophical Study

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Introduction

This research paper is an attempt to study ethical issues pertaining to tamed elephants in Sri Lanka. The affinity between people and elephants has been an integral part of Asian civilizations. The elephant has been a prominent part of their cultural, economic and religious traditions. When we look at the history it shows that the ancient kings of Sri Lanka captured and tamed wild elephants and used in a number of ways for official occasions and temple ceremonies, to clear jungle, to plough field for agriculture in the construction of the large reservoirs. The first record of elephant capture in Sri Lanka is by Robert Knox in his book. He says that;

“Tame elephants were used to lure elephants from the wild.”

Presently, there are about 15000 elephants in captivity in the world (Sukumar, 1986). Mostly captive elephants are kept for more of alternative purposes. At present four types of captive elephant conservation methods are formed; individual people keep in their home gardens, temples and devals keep in their gardens, hotels keep captive elephants for tourisms and keep captive elephant in the orphanage.

The Sri Lankan elephant population is now largely restricted to the dry zone in the north, east and southeast of Sri Lanka. Elephants are present in Udawalawe National Park, Yala National Park, Lunugamvehera National Park, Wilpattu National Park and Minneriya National Park but also live outside protected areas. The capture of elephants from the wild and taming them involves severe disruption of the wild herds with much cruelty and a high death rate, since large numbers of captured babies die in the capture and taming process. In Sri Lanka, this was precipitated by the public outcry against wild captures consequent to the disastrous results of the last such major capture operation the Panamure kraal in 1950. In Sri Lanka and most other Asian countries, captures have been banned, leading to the reduction of the wild herds. However, illegal captures have persisted.

Problem Statement

People have used elephants as beasts of burden and war machines, slaughtered them for their ivory, exterminated them as threats to people and ecosystems, turned them into objects of entertainment at

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circuses, employed them as both curiosities and conservation ambassadors in zoos and deified and honored them in religious rites. This is the major problem that Sri Lankan elephants have to affect to their life.

Research Objectives

Key Objective

- To identify the ethical issues pertaining to tamed elephants in Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

- Find out how humans use elephants as tools and entertainment.
- Examine the ethics of training and legal protection actions needed.

Significance of the Research

Every single year, tens of thousands of elephants are brutally killed for their ivory. Working illegally, ivory dealers employ poachers to shoot entire herds of elephants before hacking off their tusks with axes or chainsaws. Despite being shocked by the mass murder of elephants under those circumstances, no one seems to have given much thought to the desperate lives of the elephants forced to entertain a torrent of tourists each year, until now. So that is why this research is more important area to study.

Methodology

Research methodology used in the study was largely based on qualitative approach which analyses the relevant documentary sources from books, journals and web sites relating to this area. A descriptive research design with survey method was applied in this study.

Literature Review

In 1997, one survey was carried out and that revealed there were about 214 domesticated elephants in Sri Lanka. Of these, 107 were males and 107 were females. There were domesticated elephants in 15 of the 24 administrative districts in the country. Another survey was conducted in 2002, showed a further reduction in the tame elephant population. The figures were 101 males and 88 females, totaling to 189.

Going by old ola leaf manuscripts which have set out in detail everything we need to know about elephants, including the methods of taming and training of these wild creatures, many people have become highly skilled elephant trainers and mahouts today.

Talking about ownership of tame elephants, Jayantha Jayewardene's has found that during the time of the British the first owners were the chieftains of the Wannu district. They were either given or allowed to keep some wild elephants. The chieftains had to give a specific number of elephants each year as tribute to the British government. Many elephants were captured by the kraal ('athgaala') method when a herd of elephants are driven into a large enclosure ('gaala') and then captured. As for the capture of elephants, Jayewardene outlines several methods: Using a female decoy, noosing – head noose, tree noose & ground nooses – drugged food (opium introduced to pumpkins & melon and placed on their trail), pitfalls and kraal.

The Uses of tamed Elephants in Sri Lanka

Elephants are one of the country's main tourist attractions and tourist promotional material by the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, as well as the country's national carrier, Sri Lankan Airlines uses elephant parading cultural events such as the Kandy Esala Perahera and the Navam Perahera in Colombo, as well as elephant rides and the Dehiwela Zoo, which chains elephants, to woo in more tourists to the country.

Identify the ethical issues pertaining to tamed elephants

Some of the issues and facts related to this problem can be identified as follows.

1. Logging Elephants: will often have broken backs or malformed legs from the dangers of the job. They are now forced to earn their feed by spending hours upon hours hauling tourists. Numbers are dwindling because owners often cannot afford to allow the mothers the time and light load needed to gestate for 22 months and when they are born, the baby elephants are destined for the tourism industry as well.



fig.1 Logging Elephant

2. Temple Elephants: Esala Perahere pageant of the temple of the sacred tooth relic Kandy would be joined by around 75 tamed elephants and tuskers out of the remaining 123 tamed elephants in Sri Lanka. The other major perehera is the Navam perehera conducted by the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo. The Bellanwila, Kelaniya and Dondra temples also, amongst numerous other temples conduct perehera where elephants participate. They play a major role during festival processions in

Sri Lanka. Although temples have had their own tame elephants in the past as tradition decrees, maybe now things have to change. Each and every temple cannot aspire to have elephants and in the case of those which have had elephants, they cannot aspire to have as many animals as they used to have.

3. **Tourism Industry:** Around 75% of elephants in the tourism industry have been illegally captured from their natural habitat in order to satisfy the increased demand for riding and entertainment. This is also a big problem. The elephant then has to be forced to understand and obey human commands. To ‘train’ an elephant, babies are quickly taken from their mothers before having their spirit broken through physical and psychological pain, including isolation, starvation and beating. Although, they are used to take tourists and even local visitors on safaris into the jungle. Tourists are taken for an hour or two, on elephant back, into the jungle where they see wildlife, including elephants. *The ethical issue is people forget that these animals are there for the rest of their lives. Tourists can go home (once entertained), but those animals will be there until the day they die in captivity.*



fig. 2 Trained and tamed baby elephant in Zoo

4. **Capturing baby elephants:** A new trend has surfaced in Sri Lanka, in the last few years, where gangs of poachers go into elephant habitats and possibly kill the mothers of selected baby elephants. In another method the poachers make a lot of noise, use firecrackers and bright lights to chase and disperse the herd. The babies are separated from their mothers in this confusion and are caught. The babies are then taken away to be tamed and used for the tourist trade, ceremonial occasions or kept as a symbol of prestige that accrues from owning an elephant.
5. **Capturing wild elephants:** While the human elephant conflict (HEC) is certainly prevailing, in spite of laws governing the shooting of elephants, the ban on capturing elephants from the wild is certainly being implemented well. So we can conclude that elephants are hardly ever captured from the wild now. So there is no possibility of replenishing the tame elephant stocks as in the days gone by.
6. **Ensure an Elephant’s Rights:** Animals’ also have their rights. There are accepted codes of practice for the keeping of tame elephants which include the ‘Five Freedoms’ a captive elephant must enjoy. They are the freedom from malnutrition, terminal physical discomfort, injury and disease, fear and stress and the freedom to express normal patterns and behavior.



fig. 3 An adult male tusker found dead in the south-east of Sri Lanka with gunshot injuries

Legal Protectio

Up to now only 128 elephants have been registered. At the time registration commenced in 1992 there would have been approximately 260 tame elephants. In 1997 the survey of tame elephants conducted by the author revealed that there were around 214. In 1999 the Department of Wildlife Conservation initiated a survey of the domesticated elephant population in the country. This was carried out through the District Secretaries, who were requested to fill in a form with the required information, consisting of: name and address of all elephant owners in the district; number of elephants owned; male/female; and tusker/without tusks. These details are still coming in. Based on the information received so far, the Department has written to 91 owners who have not as yet registered their elephants, asking them to do so. They have been informed of the legal consequences in the event that they do not register their elephants. Errant elephant owners could be fined between Rs.100 000 and Rs.200 000 or imprisoned for a period between 10 and 20 years, or both.

Findings

Sri Lankans too have in recent times taken to protesting against this form of cruelty with various organizations taking to social media to highlight the cruelty to elephants in the country. The ‘Say NO to Cruelty to Our Elephants of Sri Lanka’ in a post published on March 18, 2016, called on the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society and Department of Wildlife Conservation of Sri Lanka to immediately stop elephant cruelty at the popular Dehiwela zoo, which chains elephants and keep them in concrete cages to entertain humans. “Stop this madness! Stop, please stop. Let us as a nation say ENOUGH,” the post said.

The Conservation organizations have noted the global trend towards ethical tourism and expressed confidence that Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural and natural heritage, attracts visitors who value ethics and eco-tourism alike.

Suggestions

- There is definitely some serious need to maintain a stock of captive elephants for religious purposes.

- The use of elephants in religious festivals also must be carefully regulated under a set of strict guidelines and controlled.
- Transportation of elephants in very stressful and dangerous manner should also be banned forthwith.
- All captive elephants must be properly registered with details of their owners.
- Periodic follow up and training workshops must be organized for all captive elephant owners and strict penalties imposed on those who violate the code of practice.
- There should be a body set up to monitor the management of captive elephants, training of mahouts and all such activities related to a captive elephant's welfare. Therefore, if we are to successfully continue keeping tamed elephants, we need to ensure that there are enough well trained and devoted mahouts.

Conclusion

According to the survey it shows that some of the necessary actions should have taken to pretend the ethical issues affected to the tamed elephants and protect their lives. Security, protection and safety measures are very important. We all have different moral codes and standards. However, it is important that these animals are well looked after and a code of practice should be mandated and regulated. It is imperative that, in recognizing their value and potential, we take the utmost care to protect this most precious resource.

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