



## Back to school & health inspections

*October 15*

The great thing about the husbandry of these Government Forestry elephants is that they live in the National Park. They are set free during the night and in the morning they return. They breed this way, the females finding a wild bull in musth when necessary. So this morning Dada was nowhere to be found. He was somewhere within 10 kilometers of forest so a party was sent out to retrieve him. (He arrived of his own accord in the afternoon). So we only had Rabi Prasad to train today. Rabi Prasad was very keen on the food rewards and by the look of his condition and size, food was a priority. Unlike the energetic Dada, I doubt he would wander far from camp while training was on the agenda.

After a small reminder about the order of events and timing, our morning session began with instant success. Rabi Prasad had learned a lot the day before and was now moving forward back and even turning more and more frequently from voice commands alone. In this region of India it is customary to put a rope girth around the elephant (whereas in the south it is only a neck rope) so as to give the mahout something to hold on to when we mount the elephant, the girth takes a bit of habituating to as it is not tight but reasonably firm. Rabi Prasad wasn't too happy about the rope girth and tried to yank it off with his trunk and made a vocal protests. I showed the mahouts how to overshadow this and soon Rabi Prasad had forgotten all about the girth. We decided he needed more time to habituate to the girth so we kept it on while we began the training of picking up the stick. The verandah came in handy here as we could sit there and he would supposedly pick up the stick from it and we could also reward him from there. These Forestry camp elephants are sometimes hit with a stick when they get into mischief so teaching them to pick up the stick can be a longer process than it would normally. So we decided to use a much bigger stick so it didn't resemble the normal camp control stick. After a dozen or so trials, he managed to actually hold the stick briefly so we rewarded that profusely (we jackpotted it with extra treats). We had a few more successes and then we felt he had had enough so we retreated to the guesthouse for lunch. In the late afternoon, Dada had still not turned up so we repeated the groundwork and the girth. One particular mahout who was showing great promise as a trainer single handedly manoeuvred Rabi Prasad backward, forward and with turns all from voice commands and food rewards. The pressure of the stick had so far done its job of placing the locomotion of the elephant under our control so now it was becoming easy for the elephant. We ended the day on a high and just before we were about to leave, out of the forest came Dada, all too late but looking very enthusiastic!

*October 16*

This morning the elephant camp is buzzing with activity. Mahouts and their elephants are arriving from many kilometres away across the National Park. Aside from our training workshop, the gathering today is for an elephant health project. All of the Government elephants are thoroughly checked for parasites, skin disorders, foot health and many other health issues. Faecal samples are taken and an old pathological microscope is used (one with a mirror instead of a lamp due to there being no electricity here) and Dr Bhaskar shows me that Rabi Prasad is loaded with trematode worms for which he is treated.





*Bhaskar examining elephant dung samples for worm infestations.*



*A healthy elephant foot should have moisture around the nails so as to avoid cracking.*



*You can estimate the age of an elephant by the increasing folds at the top of its ear toward the base. This one is around 45.*



*Dada excelling at picking up the stick despite not attending school yesterday!*

Nevertheless our training workshop continues amongst this mayhem of 30 odd elephants of all ages. Rabi Prasad is supreme today and his mahout again shows us his work singlehandedly maneuvering Rabi Prasad in reverse, forward, turn, stop and picking up his foot ready for mounting (the foot is used as a step). We also pursued his picking up the stick which he showed big improvement, however he needs more time to perfect it. His mahout, Alum Alum is very enthusiastic to continue with this guy, over the coming months. We decided not to do the evening training workshop because the gathering of mahouts would undoubtedly in the evening turn into a party and expecting the mahouts to work with us might go down like a lead balloon. Instead, Jonna and I will go on a tour of the park this afternoon.

Of course with so many elephants here, Dada also showed up. When we were working with Rabi Prasad you could have sworn the Dada was jealous of the attention (in truth he was motivated by the prospect of bananas and sugar cane) and he constantly barged in and broke up our training with Rabi Prasad, locking trunks and pushing each other around.

So Jonna took Dada aside and reminded him of the things we had taught him on the first day – he remembered very well. For him this is only day 2 and session number 3, yet he quickly got the hang of the manoeuvres and relished in the food rewards. We began his training of picking up the stick for the first time and he surpassed Rabi Prasad picking it up easily and for longer. It's always interesting to see that, like horses and other animals, elephants are all different and some shine at some things and others are quicker to grasp other skills.

Today also we were paid a visit by the Deputy Director of Manas National Park, Dr Sonali Ghos, an engaging and intelligent woman who came to see for herself how our training was working. We put Rabi Prasad through his paces and I described the systematic approach that is tailored directly to the elephant learning processes. At the outset, Dr Ghos asked me how things were going and I explained that the elephant training was the easy part, but the mahouts had an unsatisfactory life: extremely low wages (less than \$AUD9.00 per week) and they hardly get to see their families. Furthermore half the time these wages from the government can be up to 6 months late. There is no insurance, and the mahouts are mostly all on contract. It's an abysmal situation and for me it's all very well bringing

them a new way to train the elephants but if they can't send their children to school. They badly need a mahout school to raise their status and self esteem and to qualify for the kind of salary that such a dangerous and onerous job not only training and managing elephants but safeguarding Parks from poaching. You can't expect improved animal welfare if the people in charge have poor welfare, there's



just no point. I asked that if I set up a new foundation in Australia for mahouts could we supplement the wages if the government refused to budge? It's an endemic issue because the mahouts in Kerala are paid the same low wages and have the same conditions. Dr Ghos was genuinely concerned to find a solution and suggested that we could turn the local centre in the Park into a training centre where the mahouts would demonstrate the worlds most advanced and ethical training system to tourists who would pay to see this process. This seemed like an exciting idea, and so I will drop in to see her on my way to the airport tomorrow.

