ELEPHANT-FRIENDLY TRAINING FOR WORKING ELEPHANTS

A practical manual for foundation training from first handling to riding and trunk control (2nd Edition)
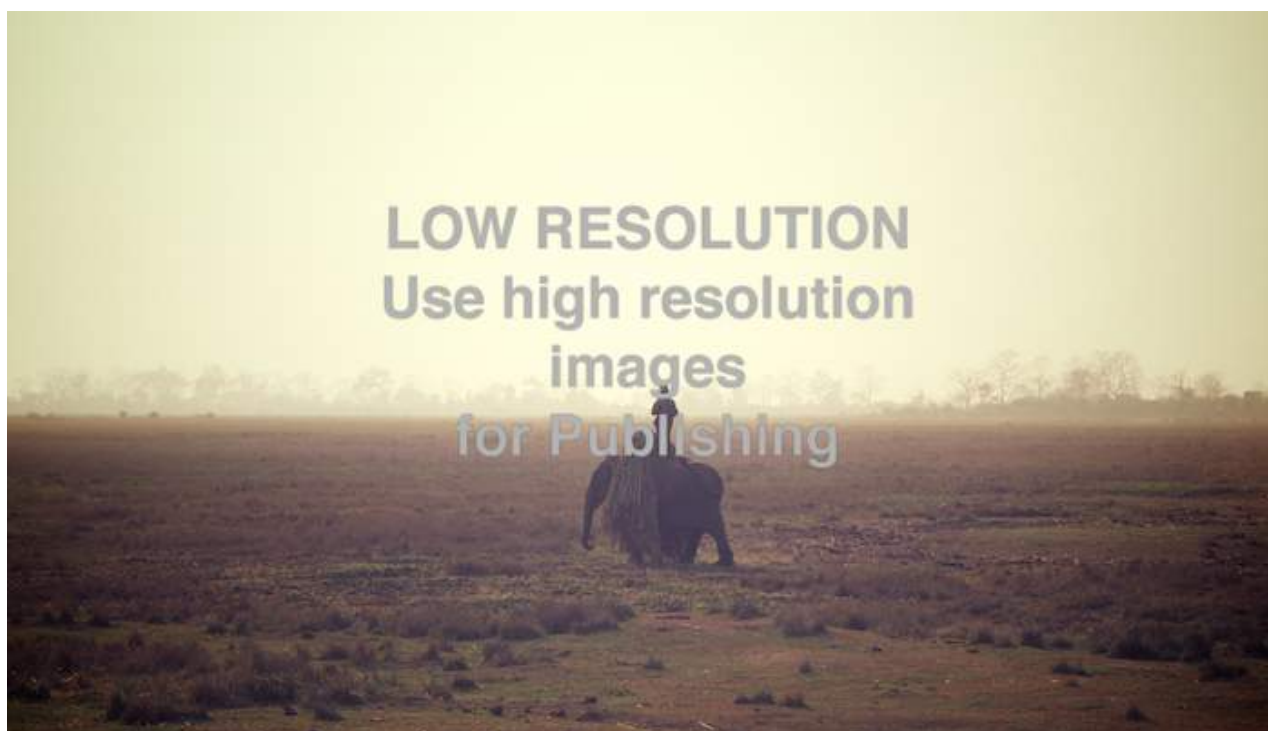

Human Elephant Learning Programs

Andrew McLean

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Foreword

Elephants have been in captivity for close to 3000 years. First as war machines, then as lumber operators and now in various other services, elephants have served humankind like no other wild animal. Of late, this age old relationship has been severely tested, by its irrelevance in modern society, by the increasing conflict between man and beast and even more fundamentally by an increasing consciousness of the ethical conundrums that it poses. In India as in South East Asia generally, The Elephant Task Force is clear in the recommendation that "In the long run, the Task Force favours the complete phasing out of elephants from commercial captivity. However, for the present, it aims to bring the upkeep to the highest standards through a synthesis of the finest traditions of elephant care including mahout practice and of modern scientific knowledge and practices accompanied by better regulation and monitoring".

However, this work of reference by Andrew McLean is not really about the question of captivity, but instead is a pragmatic manual to change one embarrassing aspect of the relationship that requires urgent attention; the cruelty meted out to the elephant by man during its training and sometimes due to the wrong foundations laid during training that has occurred intermittently throughout its long and sensitive life. Traditional ways have regrettably used the 'punish' rather than 'reward' method of training and also dwelt a lot on 'breaking the will' of the wild animal. This cannot be faulted when one thinks of how ancient this tradition is and how ancient man out of fear of this wild beast, the largest in his land, tamed it according to his best measure. He beat it, tied it and starved it. If it responded he untied it, rode it and then chained it. If it retaliated, he tied it again and beat it and starved it. Many centuries of this traditional shame continued hidden amidst the vast glories of the man-animal relationship. Andrew McLean comes from a more urbane animal training school, that of the horse. In training the equine, he realised that the

Pavlovian reaction to reward was for animals, especially intelligent animals, a far more humane method to training than these traditional methods. Having said that, it must have taken him much toil and time to adjust that set of thoughts to fit the elephant and also to incorporate into science, that which was sound and humane in the traditional methods.

Over the last few years Andrew McLean assisted by HELP has been visiting us at the WTI and we have jointly organised these alternate methods of training so that the elephants in captivity (and India has close to 4000 of these) are trained in a humane manner. His work has now extended to Thailand, Myanmar and Laos so many elephants and mahouts can benefit for a more humane approach. Those who feel that elephants should never be kept in captivity may well have a moral stand that is correct. But in reality the knowledge that there are still around 20,000 elephants in captivity and yet habitats are shrinking rapidly. Moreover, despite all the efforts of organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare, elephants still come into captivity out of conflict or temporary displacements. This makes this manual invaluable. If elephants must come into captivity then welfare to these 'near persons' is an uncompromisable value. And of the several major and minor indignities that we heap on this most noble of our creatures, the early torture of training is one that modern society can do without.

The beauty of this manual by Andrew McLean, HELP is that it is simple yet based on sound scientific principles of welfare based training: it is based itself on traditional practices and is yet 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.

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1. Introduction

Of all animals, elephants are among the most intelligent. They have been described as 'near persons' and there are certainly many similarities between our two species. Elephants, like people and a few other animals, can use tools. Problems of discomfort and survival can be solved with their dexterous trunks. Like people, if they are treated well and their training is clear, consistent and fair, they remain happy. Elephants are also like people, though, when subjected to pain that they cannot escape, predict or do not understand. When this happens, they can become aggressive and they can harbour this aggression for many years.

Elephants have been trained for thousands of years and this knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation. As with most old-fashioned animal training around the world the ideas of dominance and submission have been common among elephant handlers. This mindset

makes the learning process slow and inefficient for the elephant and sometimes dangerous for both mahout and elephant. What is now known about animal learning is very recent when measured against the time that man has worked with captive elephants. The good news is, this new knowledge is easy to understand for both people and elephants.
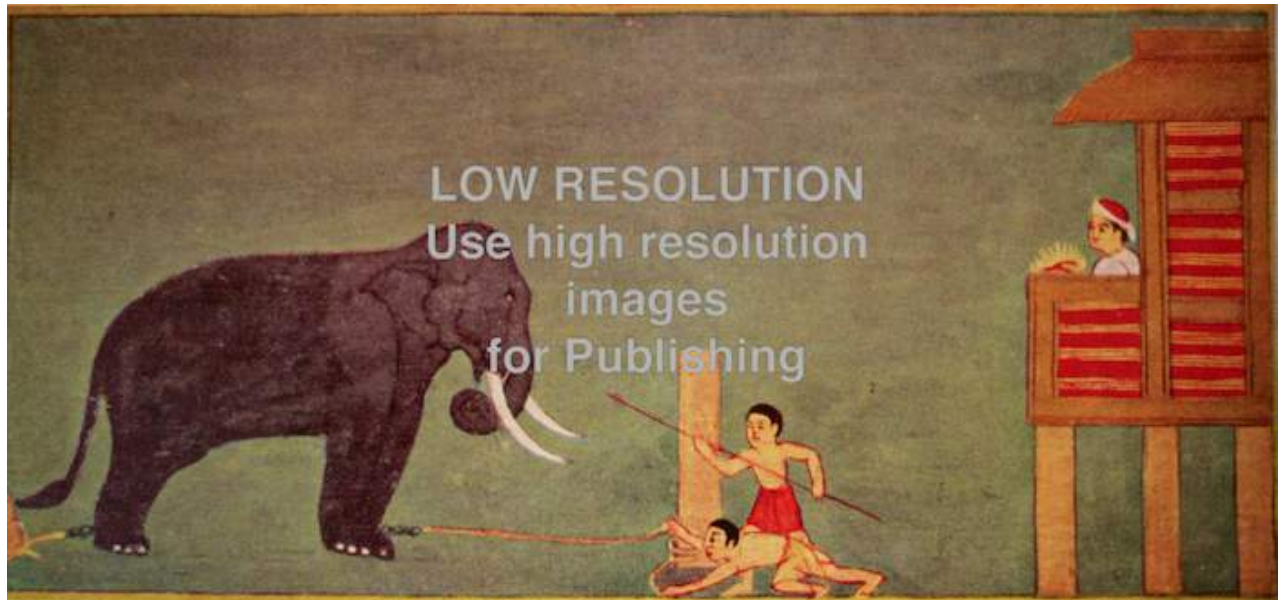

Fig. 1 Elephant training and management has been well-documented in ancient art and literature. From The Hastividyā̄rnava (Publication Board of Assam, 1974).

The new training system you are about to learn improves everyone's safety and is many times faster than traditional methods. This is because it is based more precisely on the elephant's learning systems and avoids punishment which slows down learning. All it requires is 20 minutes every day or every second day and you will be riding the elephant freely in a very short time. However, you will see that it is also very similar to traditional training and has been largely informed by many of the methods, signals, riding techniques and goals of traditional systems. So it really isn't all that different to the ways you already know. However, the big difference is in the subtle use of pressure, optimal timing and the way behaviours are built, motivated and rewarded.

I strongly encourage you to follow this manual as closely as possible and you can be assured that not only will you have trained a bold and willing elephant for life, but a happier and safer one in all circumstances.

2. Training Procedures

Before we begin talking about training, it is vital that you always keep safety in mind. Working with elephants can be dangerous and aside from the life-threatening dangers of angry elephants, even calm elephants can kick in almost every direction. Using these humane methods, your safety

will be vastly increased but still you should be mindful of the dangers of being close to the elephant – it is essentially a tamed wild animal. So when working beside, in front of or behind elephants, always be aware of the dangers.

Things to remember

There are a few important things to understand before we begin training. Firstly, the elephant doesn't do things to please us, or to make us angry, he does things to please himself. Mostly this is either about remembering something he did that instantly caused a pressure on his body to diminish (in other words what made him comfortable) or remembering a reaction that instantly resulted in something nice, like food.

Secondly, he makes associations between the regular things we do (voice commands and signals) and his own reactions. If he gets rewarded by removal of pressure or food, he repeats these and soon he forms the habit of reacting to our signals in the same way. This gives him a feeling of security because everything is predictable, and this security makes him brave in challenging situations. Punished animals are much less brave.

Learning pathways

There are just five elements of animal learning that you should become familiar with that make training easier to understand. These apply to all animals that are trained:

1. *Habituation*: Is when an animal becomes accustomed to things in its environment. For example, an elephant has to get used to certain things such as the noises of birds and other elephants. He also needs to get used to the weight of the mahout on his back.

Fig. 2 The elephant must get used to the weight of the mahout on his back.

2. **Pressure-release**: Is when the elephant is rewarded by the stopping of something uncomfortable or irritating. If the elephant is pressured with a stick vibrating or tapping him and he finds that if he steps backward the pressure goes away, he will soon think that the walking backward will remove the pressure and make him comfortable each time. So, as his trainer, this means it is vital to always *begin with the very lightest of pressures and stop the pressure* the instant the elephant attempts the correct response. In a few short repetitions, the elephant will learn to respond form the lightest of pressures, whether it is the mahout's fingers or a stick. Pressure has to be used at the same place too. The process of pressure-release training works in all situations, and the elephant has to guess at first, he doesn't know the correct answer yet and can learn the wrong one if we release for the wrong response! It is important, especially in early training, to ensure that the elephant doesn't learn the wrong response through the removal of pressure.

3. **Reward**: Is when you give the elephant something he wants straight after he has done a particular behaviour. If food is given each time the elephant lifts his leg, he will soon think that if he lifts his leg food will come. We can also promise the elephant that food will come if we pair it with a specific and unique word of praise (such as *Good Boy!* or *Well done!* or any other clear word in your language) So, as soon as the elephant does something we want, we say the voice praise word then reward him with food. The word tells the elephant that reward is coming. There is another reward that is important in social animals such as elephants and that is pleasant stroking.

Stroking the elephant on the top of his head on one of the two prominences can also be an important and effective tactile reward and can later replace food when behaviours are consolidated. Stroking should come in after the voice praise but before the food so that it also predicts the food. Stroking followed by food is then a double reward. Patting should not be used as it is not rewarding as I will describe later.

Fig. 3 Pleasant stroking is very rewarding for the elephant.

4. *Learning signals*: When we see that the elephant is beginning to respond correctly, new signals can be added. If we have taken care to always begin with very light pressure, the elephant soon learns that if he responds to the light pressure then he can avoid the stronger pressure. Now, if we want to teach a voice command, it works best if the word comes *before* the light pressure. So the trainer has to remember to not only use pressure in the same places but also to use the same voice command each time *before* the pressure. But you should work on establishing simple, consistent signals first. When training any animal including elephants, you must remember that they don't learn words so much as *sounds*. The sounds they learn are the vowels. Try to develop your trainer's voice and emphasise the vowel sounds of the voice commands. By doing this you make the voice commands stand out as different from the background noise of human chatter.

5. *The sequence of signals:* Every signal has to be in a sequence, that is, one immediately follows another. If you give 2 signals together (i.e. voice and pressure) you will either block the learning of one signal, or else the signals will only work as a pair, but not on their own. Therefore, training reactions from your signals in the young elephant should be understood as a chain of events as in the diagram below. This forms an effective combination of pressure-release and reward.

Voice Command	⇨	Light Pressure	⇨	Increase Pressure	⇨	Release Pressure	⇨	Praise & Stroking	⇨	Food

6. *Building habits*: This is about deciding which behaviours you want and developing them into solid habits. It means that you have to recognise the smallest beginning of the reaction that you want then reward every *good* and each *better* try. Then set it up again and reward and repeat. For example, training an elephant to sit involves progressively rewarding him for lowering his hindquarters. Better still, if you see him doing something on his own that you would like him to learn from a voice command like sitting, say the voice command as he does it then reward him for doing it. When you repeat the same thing over and over again, the elephant soon learns to do things by habit. The best trained elephant has the best trained habits. Your job is to build good habits.

Starting early

An elephant begins learning from the moment he is born. As he learns, habits begin to form. In the training and breeding camps therefore, it is not only possible but also very useful to consistently familiarise the young elephant to some very basic commands. These will form a solid foundation for life. This manual recommends that some simple training of the elephant begins at a very early age.

In particular, teach him to *step-back and go forward from voice commands* early in his life so that you can make him retreat if he is somewhere that he shouldn't be. When you see him stepping-backwards or about to do so at any time, say the command. This will save him from the risk of punishment which is bad for his welfare.
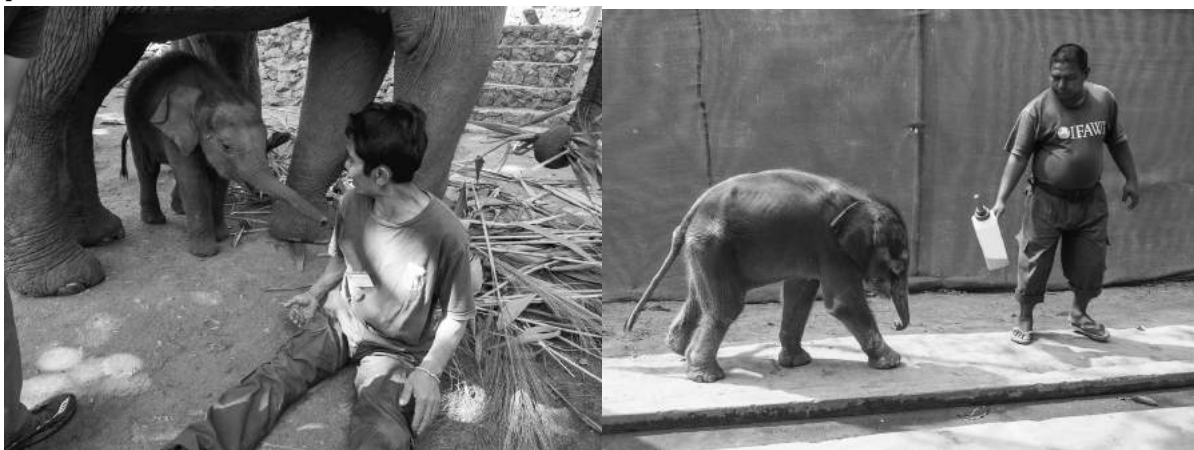
Fig. 4 & 5 It is very useful to introduce the young elephant to some basic commands.

The Training Environment

The most important aspect of the place you train the young elephant is that it should be free of distractions as much as possible. It doesn't matter if the area is in the jungle or in the camp itself, so long as there are no other things going on that take the elephant's attention. This also includes the young elephant's own needs – he should not be too hungry or thirsty or suffer other deprivations. The very young elephant should not be trained while he is separated from his mother if he has never been accustomed to her absence.

Another important aspect of the training environment is that there should not be too many people involved. Only one person should give a voice command or a pressure signal and only one response should be asked for at any moment in time until that response is completed. If there are too many people helping to train the elephant he may become confused and possibly overwhelmed.

Take your time and be patient. Don't allow your frustrations to affect your training or the elephant will become anxious. Elephants read people very well.

Bonding

Young elephants are like young children. They need guidance and direction but they also need affection, touch and clear training. Spend time being with the young elephant and teach the lessons often but don't overdo it. Try to set up the right reaction. If you know it's a bad time to get the elephant's attention, perhaps because his mother has just departed, then choose another time. However, feed time can be a good time to train as you can ask the elephant to give a certain response before you give him food. The more you train the elephant to do different responses, the deeper the bond you make between yourself and the elephant. Communication makes bonds! Aggressive elephants (apart from bulls in musth) are the result of inconsistent training and thus, unreliable communication.

Affection also deepens the bond between you and the elephant. Do spend time just being with the elephant and focus on *stroking* his body and especially the 2 prominent bulbs on his head. As you will see, we will be incorporating this into our reward system. Avoid patting. Patting doesn't help the elephant learn things and it doesn't make the elephant feel comfortable. It's a bit too much like hitting. Stroking the elephant is far more comforting and it is also a valuable reward.

Fig. 6 Spend time bonding with the young elephant, stroking his body and accustoming him to a soothing voice.

Food rewards

As soon as the baby elephant can take food (around nine months) then food that he likes can be used as a reward. Generally, it is best to use food that the elephant has a strong appetite for such as palm sugar, sugar cane, salted coconut palm stalks or banana. Food should be given in small amounts otherwise the elephant is still eating when you are ready for the next repetition or he may soon lose his eagerness for food. For example, a piece of sugar cane or palm stalk the length of your thumb are sufficient sized rewards to make the elephant want to repeat the behaviour that produced the food.

People often think that giving food is a bad idea as it can make the elephant pushy and aggressive. However, if you initially only give the elephant food directly into his mouth he won't learn to use his trunk to harass you for food as he has to raise his trunk to obtain food. Later, when his is being ridden he can take food from the rider with his trunk. Food rewards, when used properly, greatly help the elephant to learn faster They make him want to stay at 'school' and they deepen the bond between human and elephant. Elephants have big appetites so they don't tire of food as fast as other animals and you can get many repetitions.

Fig. 7 To avoid being molested by the elephant's trunk in search for food, reward the young elephant with food directly to his mouth during on-the-ground training. This ensures that the trunk stays out of the way. However, when ridden work begins food is then delivered via the trunk.

Don't let the elephant displace you

It is important to remember that elephants are quick to learn that they can control you, and it all begins if he learns he can push you around. When the elephant moves his head, body or trunk toward you, in a way that may make you lean away or step away from him, you should avoid leaning or stepping away. Instead you should tap-tap his head or trunk away with your hand so that he learns not to displace you. If he manages to move you, he may repeat it with more force next time. When training the young elephant, be careful not to allow this situation to arise so that he never learns to remove people. This is an advantage of training the elephant at a very young age; you can teach rules for good behaviour. Each time he puts his trunk at you, push his trunk back firmly and continue with what you are doing. It's important to be consistent with your corrections. If you're not you may cause confusion and frustration. This can lead to aggression.

Use good opportunities

There are many occasions in the elephant's life that may present ideal opportunities. For example, washing the young elephant in the river. The river might also be an ideal time to establish sitting and laying-down as the elephant is naturally prone to do these behaviours when in the water.

When you see the young elephant doing something you eventually want to train, say the chosen voice command, if possible just *before* he does it. Remember to emphasise the vowels in all you voice commands so that they are different to ordinary human language. For example, if the elephant is about to lay down in a river or a place where he is accustomed to laying down, say the word as early as you can and even reward him with food (so it's a good idea to have some food always handy. This may seem inconvenient, but it will pay off enormously in the future). Say the command for stepping backwards or going forwards whenever you see it, from birth onwards. The earlier he learns commands the better.

Fig. 8 & 9 The river is an ideal place to establish sitting and laying down as the elephant is naturally prone to do these behaviours when in water.

You can also encourage him to touch objects and eventually pick them up (especially with a bit of palm sugar on the object). You should teach him the appropriate word command (e.g. "pick up") by saying the word just before you throw the object on the ground. You would then reward him for gradually picking it up higher or for longer, as well as begin teaching him to give it to you using the voice appropriate voice command. Remember good timing is essential – try to use your voice at the earliest part of the response – in other words as soon as you get a hint of the reaction, say the word and reward the response.

Fig. 10 If you see the elephant doing a random movement that you might want him to do at some point later from a voice command, say the appropriate word as early as possible just before he begins the behaviour.

Repetition, reward and recency

For elephants to learn good habits, you have to repeat a few times and reward each time, especially in the early stages of learning something new, so the elephant knows that what he has just done is right. For each repetition, reward with the voice praise word the exact moment he gives the right answer. Remember to make the praise word clear by emphasising the vowel sounds. The praise word is followed by head stroking (on one of the two prominences of the elephant's head) and then a food reward. This sequence of three makes a powerful reward system and makes the elephant want to repeat the behaviour. It is important to remember that you must 'pay' the voice praise every time you say it. Think of the praise word as the *promise* of a reward. If you say the praise word and do not pay with food or stroking, praise it will begin to mean nothing to the elephant and he won't try any more.

Making the repetitions as close together as practical will help him to remember the most recent behaviour. Aim to achieve a sequence of at least three good repetitions. You can do more, but three correct or near-correct repetitions in a row can be hard to achieve so it's a minimum number for effective learning. If a child gives three correct answers in a row, you can be reasonably sure that the child is beginning to learn. The same is true for elephants. The

repetitions don't have to be perfect, they just have to be as good as or better than the last ones. Finally, the most efficient way to teach elephants for any behaviour (e.g. sit, lay-down, forward, back) is to do *three sets of three repetitions in a row.* This means:

1. A set of three good repetitions in a row, followed by
    - a short rest of about a minute
2. then three more good repetitions then
    - another short rest then
3. three final good repetitions.

This makes learning very fast and you will find that the beginning of the second set the elephant is already better than the first set and by the third set he may even begin with the correct response.

Ensure that your training sessions are not too long on any single day. Sessions should not be more than 20 minutes each time with elephants up to five years of age. They can gradually can become longer as the elephant forms habits. Ensure also that there is at least a 20 minute break between sessions. As a maximum you should do only three training sessions per day.

By doing these repetitions close together and by doing three sets, you are teaching him by rote learning – in other words the answer to the problem is still in his conscious mind. Whereas if you allowed big time-gaps between repetitions, the learning will be slower because some of the answer will be forgotten.

On this topic of repetitions, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of repeating the voice commands for every command with distinct vowel sounds. If you are consistent and distinct with your voice you will be amazed how efficiently the elephant learns to react to the human voice commands.   This is one of the secrets to become a very good trainer.

Consistency

It's important that the young elephant sees all humans as equal, in that they always ask him to do the same things, the same way. This means that everyone who works with an elephant needs to use the same words, signals and rewards. Otherwise the elephant will become confused and might form undesirable habits.

Overshadowing

Overshadowing refers to the elephant's *inability to do two things at once.* It means that you should be careful not to ask for more than one thing at a time. However, this learning principle also gives us a useful technique whereby the elephant's attention can be directed away from an undesirable behaviour and toward an alternative response. If the elephant tries to shake a mahout off his back, stepping the elephant one or two steps back cancels his intention to shake. For any aggressive behaviour stepping the elephant backward, either when ridden or in-hand, quells these behaviours far more effectively than punishment. This approach diminishes anxiousness and the potential for future revenge. For it to be effective, it is essential that step-backs are routinely tested and trained. In early ridden training, it's a good idea to step the elephant back one step before you ride him forward, just to prevent any intention to shake. When things go wrong, such as during the early mounting of the elephant, his desire to shake may be so strong that he doesn't

notice the command for step-back, so you have to escalate the pressure to ensure that the elephant responds to the step-back command rather than the motivation to shake. If you are effective in this, the shaking will not occur in the future.

Overshadowing with step-back responses is effective for quelling most motivations. For example, if the elephant is afraid of the veterinarian or an injection, step-backs can be used while keeping the syringe at the same distance from the elephant until the step-backs occur from very light pressures. When step-backs occur from very light pressures, the syringe or veterinarian can come a little closer and these step-backs are repeated until the elephant again steps back easily from a light signal. In a short space of time you will have desensitised the elephant to that fearful stimulus. Rewarding with the sequence of praise/head-stroking/food at each stage of calmness enhances this learning.

The nervous young elephant

If the young elephant has a nervous disposition and is shy of human contact he will benefit from learning about praise and food rewards. Each time he makes contact with you, even if it is with his trunk, say the praise word as soon as he makes contact and then immediately reward with food. Repeat this until you can actually touch the elephant, upon which you should praise followed by head-stroking and food. As soon as the young elephant becomes confident enough for you to touch him and reward him, cease rewarding him for touching you with this trunk so that it does into develop into an unwanted habit. Instead, now each time *you* touch the young elephant you should reward him with food and stroking his body so that he comes to value the contact. At this time also, begin giving the food treat directly into his mouth so that he learns to keep his trunk away.

Take home message

• *Only one person to give a signal at any time. Everybody else should be away from the elephant unless they have a job to do such as giving food rewards.*   • *Start with light pressures, then increase pressure, releasing at the correct response.*   • *Ensure* praise *is said at the moment of the correct response.*   • Praise *must be followed by food in the early training; later it is paired with head-stroking.*   • *Be consistent with the use of signals (i.e. same voice, same place, same way).*   • *Add new signals before the 'known' ones.*   • *Train three sets of three improved consecutive repetitions in a session to develop habits.*   • *Break training goals down to smallest parts, then train them one by one.*   • *Make sure everyone who handles the elephant does things the same way.*   • *Do not allow elephant to move you.*

3. Training the young elephant

It is important to know that from birth onwards, elephants are able to learn and it is the trainer's job to ensure they learn the right things. They are not born knowing what we want: no animal is ever born this way. Like children, we have to teach them what we want them to do. So the big

challenge is how we can get the elephant to learn these things. All behaviours involve reward in some way. Reward can be giving the elephant what he wants after doing something or by removing a mildly irritating pressure that is aimed at motivating him to try a desired behaviour.

In the past it was believed that punishment would help the elephant to learn. Punishment is common in animal training because it is one of the first things that comes to some people's minds, to teach the animal a lesson. But often we are actually punishing the elephant for our own incorrect training. The worst thing, however, is that punishment makes animals anxious and anxiety makes learning slow. If you're scared of your teacher, you will be paralysed with fear and not confident to give the right answer. Fear ruins the relationship between the teacher and the pupil or, in this case, between the mahout and the elephant. When people or animals have had such negative experiences, especially if they involve extreme fear or pain that they had no control over, then bad things can happen later on in life. It is well known that elephants have killed their mahouts and the reasons for this are connected to early use of punishment. The important point is, if we want to make a safe, brave elephant that has a strong bond with his mahout, then we should use the techniques of modern training that are well established.

When you teach animals or people, you try to keep the rules the same for all of the animal's life. So we should start establishing the right behaviours as soon as we can. Of course, like a small child, there is a limit to how much a young elephant can learn. So we begin with simple things like moving a couple of steps forward and back. Importantly, what we teach should last the elephant's whole life. When animals repeat things, over and over again, they form habits: they can soon respond without thinking. We humans also develop thousands of habits that we take for granted. Anything you do that you don't have to think about anymore is a habit.

These early years are where correct use of the training processes is critical and our job is to set up the right habits in the elephant from the start. We do this by doing the same thing the same way each time, and rewarding with a word (praise) followed by head-stroking/food. If the elephant is too young to take food, reward with just stroking). When the young elephant is ready to take food from humans, he soon associates the voice praise with the head-stroking and food. The food should be delivered directly into the elephant's mouth by a person on the ground, not into his trunk or he will use his trunk when he sees you to not only body-search you for food, but later to displace you. However later on, when we begin riding the elephant, the food rewards will be delivered directly to the elephant's trunk by the mahout astride.

Fig. 11 Stroke the bulb of the head as a special reward site in conjunction with praise *and the delivery of food.*

One of the most important things we train the young elephant to do is to move his legs in the direction that we want. Most of what we think of as "naughtiness" is simply a lack of control over the elephant's movement (his legs).

It is useful to begin an elephant's training soon after he is born. As it is important not to disturb the mother-calf relationship, training sessions should be brief but, even so, these early lessons can establish correct habits. For example, if the young elephant is in the wrong place, we can begin teaching him to move either backward or forward - whichever is needed at the time. This is better than punishing him for being in the wrong place because he doesn't know what is right or wrong and it is too complicated. Even if the elephant never gets in the way, we should still take every opportunity that we see him moving forward or backward to say the command for these actions and he will soon learn them for the future. In this way we will teach the elephant the voice commands for moving his legs forward or backward just a step or two. This will help make the elephant a much safer and happier elephant for his entire life.

At this age the training sessions will be very short and simple and perhaps only occasional or momentary. By the time the elephant is ready to begin his ridden training, he should know the commands for stepping forward and back, to sit and lay-down and even to pick up and give things with his trunk. The more trained responses that are established during the elephant's early days, the less there is to do later and the less resistance that occurs in later training when he is ridden.

If he knows no other way of life other than a positive way of interacting with humans, he will expect no problems. Again, you will have a safer, more confident elephant.

Phase 1 – Basic training in hand

Whatever behaviour you are training, always begin with the appropriate voice command and make sure it's said clearly and the same way each time. Training the elephant to step back is of great importance because it not only teaches him to go in reverse, but it also trains stop at the same time (it's the same muscles as for stop). Probably the most important thing about training step-back in a young elephant is that it can be used to *overshadow* aggressive or incorrect behaviours.

Training forward and backward steps is an important part of the overall scheme of training the elephant to be ridden, even though the ridden work does not occur until the elephant is older. In all there are six phases of training to the point of being independently ridden and teaching a single step of forward and back is the beginning of what we call phase 1.

Here is a reminder of the training sequence:

| Voice Command | | Light Pressure | | Increase Pressure | | Release Pressure | | Praise & Stroking | | Food |

It is best to teach the elephant to take a single backward step first before forward is trained. Of course when the elephant gives a single step-back of the forelegs, he is likely to give a second step simply to rebalance himself and this is normal and no problem. The important thing to remember is that you should not try to train too many steps back or forward at any one time. This is because forward can result in a running-away reaction. Teaching reverse helps the elephant learn to stop because the step-back muscles are also used for stopping.

Reverse: To train backwards steps:

1. Use the chosen voice cue for backwards and then
2. Press directly with your fingers into the elephant where his shoulder joins his chest at the front, OR
    - vibrate your fingers where his shoulder joins his chest at the front, OR
    - tap his chest with a stick OR
    - tap his foreleg with a stick OR tap just above his toenail with a stick. You can experiment to find the best place on his body that makes him move his leg back.
3. In every case, remove the touch of the hand or stick as soon he steps back just one or two steps of his forelegs
4. As you remove the pressure, praise then stroke the elephant's forehead and then
5. 'Pay' with food
6. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

When one or two steps of backwards are achieved from a voice command and a light touch, repeat this until the behaviour is well established. When the behaviour is established, also ensure that the elephant steps back from the light tapping of a stick on his chest, as this will pre-train the elephant to stop on command, once you have taught him to go forward.
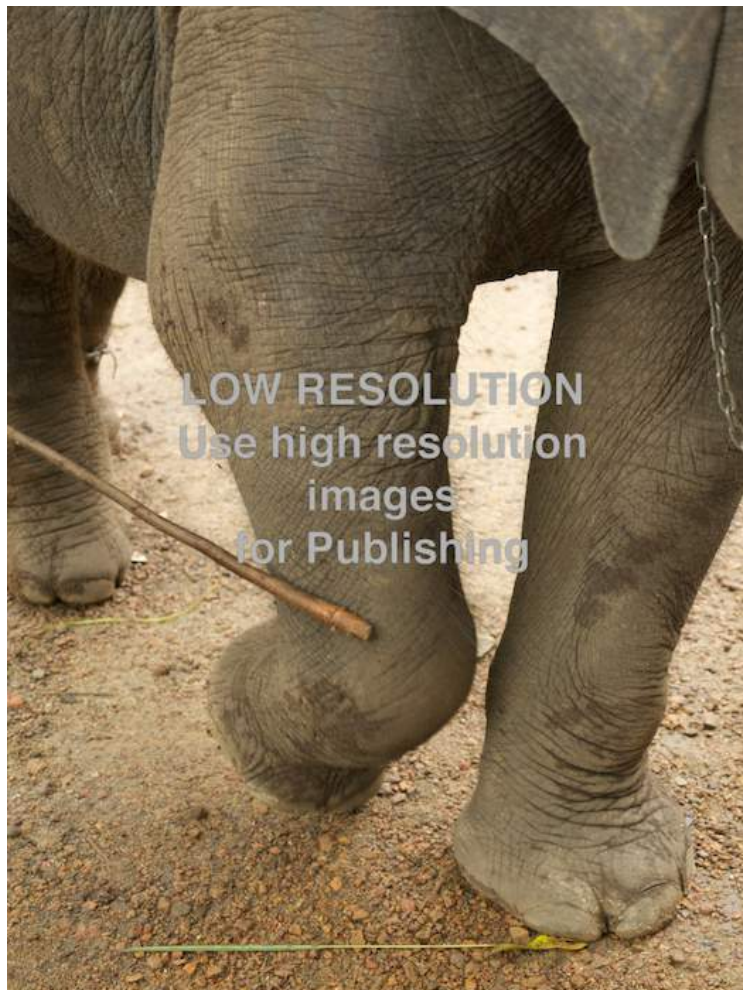

Fig. 12 Tapping the leg motivates him to move it in the direction away from the tapping and ceasing tapping trains the response. Tapping then becomes an increasingly light signal. This signal can fortify voice or touch commands providing these precede the tapping signal.

Forward: Also teach the young elephant to go forward a step or two. Use two people for this. One person should be at the front of the elephant to lure him forward a single step and the other person is behind the elephant. The person with the food treat should not allow the elephant to see the food. To begin training the elephant to go forward:

1. Use the chosen voice cue for 'forward' and then
2. The person behind gently taps half-way down the elephant's hindlegs with his fingers OR taps with a stick in this place (and then
3. The person in front of the elephant now exposes and offers a food treat to lure the elephant one or two steps forward
4. The touch of the hand or stick is removed as soon as the elephant steps forward just one or two steps
5. As you remove the pressure, praise then stroke the elephant's forehead and then

6. 'Pay' with food
7. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Stop:

To train stop:

1. Use the voice command for stop, then
2. Gently tap on the elephant's chest for stop, then
3. Reward the uptake of the voice and pressure using praise/head-stroking/food
4. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

For the elephant less than two years of age, it isn't usually necessary to train him to do more than a step or two forwards and backwards and then later he can also be taught to stop. Teaching him to go backward and forward on command while he is very young, however makes later training easier and becomes part of the elephant's life: his habits and his welfare will be safeguarded.

At two years of age, training can become a bit more regular and teaching sessions can be a bit longer. All we have to do is to repeat the behaviours we want and reward him for it. We have to focus on his legs. This means if he is doing something we don't want, then we have to move him using the commands for that directions (e.g. 'go forward' or 'go back' or 'stop'). If we use other words or we get angry, we confuse him and he can become a 'naughty' elephant.

These responses will be of increasing importance as the elephant progresses in his training and learns to accept a mahout riding him. Do not attempt any further training until these responses are reliable (see page XX).

Take home message

> - *Train the baby elephant from the start to move forward and backward from signals. This way, if you need to move him, he will not be punished.*
> - *Always be careful not to remove the pressures until you get the result you are seeking. Removing the pressure teaches the behaviour that came before it.*
> - *Do not allow anyone to punish the elephant for wrong movement or the elephant will remember this and this could result in problems during later training.*
> - *Remember good timing of signals, pressures and reward makes a happy elephant and bad timing makes a rogue.*
> - *When things go wrong, blame your training and think about how to repair it.*

Phase 2 – Further training in-hand

In this phase, we train <u>multiple</u> steps of forward and reverse (as well as stop) from the assistant's signals. This requires two people, one at the front and one at the back of the elephant.

Danger! Unless the elephant is completely trustworthy, be very careful behind the elephant as it can kick very swiftly and strongly. For this reason, a stick of at least one metre in length is required so that you can touch the elephant initially from a distance.

Fig. 13 Initial training of the elephant requires two trainers, one at the front and one at the back.

Forward: To train the elephant to do multiple steps of forward:

1. Give the voice command to 'go forward' (he should be capable of this by now for at least two steps) then
2. As soon as the elephant slows (usually on the 3rd or 4th step), repeat the voice command and if necessary assist with the fingers or gentle tapping of the stick on his hindlegs (by the assistant) then
3. As soon he resumes his speed, stop urging him with fingers/stick then
5. When he has walked a couple of more steps than before, reward him with the usual sequence of praise/head-stroking/food
6. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Gradually ask for more steps and consolidate this until the elephant continues walking forward and stops on command. Consolidate each stage through rewards so that he goes forward in many steps from voice/light pressure. Soon you will begin to train the elephant to stop while he is moving forward. This means you have to try to set him up to move through your training of go forward and then after some steps, stop, ensuring you use the chosen voice cue followed by the rewards for praise/head-stroking/food. It is important to state at this point that although the elephant may go very well from voice, it is imperative that he also goes from light pressure of the fingers or stick so that the learning of this pressure translates to his later work when ridden. This ensures that in all circumstances the elephant has a well-practiced and safe stop response.

Reverse: Now that one or two steps of step-back are consolidated, ask progressively for a second or third step with slightly increased fingers/stick signal if initially there is no response. Take your time and do not ask for more than two improvements in any one session. When these steps are consolidated and easily achieved by the young elephant ask for more steps, rewarding with praise/head-stroking/food each time. Repeat these exercises so that the elephant is not only reliable but can respond in different circumstances i.e. in different places.

Turn

When the elephant is capable of walking forward any number of steps that you ask and stops on command and can go backwards any number of steps that you ask, it is now time to each him to turn. This requires just one trainer.

To train turn:

1. Walk forward with the elephant on straight lines,
2. Now give the voice command for 'turn left' then
3. Immediately change direction to the left very slightly (just one step to the left).
4. When he has altered direction, reward him with the usual sequence of praise/head-stroking/food.
5. Go straight ahead and then give the voice command for 'turn right' and again reward him with the usual sequence of praise/head-stroking/food.
6. Repeat this in both directions
7. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Elephants are intelligent animals, so it is not necessary to consolidate turning to one direction only and then train the other. You can mix it up – the important thing is to give the precise voice command for the turn and reward every time in the beginning.

> When the elephant is consolidated in forward, stop, reverse and turning you can begin to pay with food on an increasingly occasional basis. However, it is a good practice to always, or almost always, pay with head stroking, because it is part of the bonding relationship that you rely on to keep both mahout and elephant safe and confident.

Training to stay still

Training the young elephant to stay in one place is important and it creates a deeper level of communication because it clarifies stop and go signals. For example, training the elephant to stay basically means that in the absence of commands to move, the elephant should *not move*.

Training the elephant to stay immobile can only be done after the elephant has learned to step forward and backwards from voice and light pressure signals.

To train stay:

1. Stand on the elephant's left side beside his head while *facing his hindquarters*, then say the voice command for 'stay' and then
2. Step one step backward *away from the elephant.* If he follows you, say the word 'back' and then step him back one step by pressing or tapping his chest (as you have trained for reverse)
3. If he moves sideways with his forelegs or hindlegs, step him back also. If he steps backwards, ignore it. This is the basic advice for training stay. Repeat this until he does not attempt to move any more.
4. Now repeat this while you stand on the right side of the elephant's head *facing his hindquarters*, using the same procedure as with the left side and giving the voice command for 'stay' first.
5. Now *face forward*, repeat the same again and do it also on both sides, correcting the elephant with a step-back if he moves forward or sideways.
6. When this is trained, try walking in a curved line away from the elephant's shoulders around his head and to the other shoulder so see if walking a curved line induces him to move and if it does, then correct him with a step-back.
7. Now try running away a few steps to see if your faster movements induce him to move.
8. Gradually move further and further away and of course reward him with the sequence of praise/head-stroking/food.
9. Practice this frequently so that he stays still for longer and longer periods
10. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Fig. 14 Stand beside the elephant's head, facing his hindquarters to begin the training of stay.

Being able to 'stay' on command is vital because:

- *An elephant that is always moving when he is asked to stand still <u>is never calm</u>*
- *Later on, you can use step-backs to quell any shaking or moving that the elephant does when you mount him. Stepping the elephant back* **overshadows** *fear and anxiety as well as shaking (to get rid of a mahout off his back) and stops them getting worse*
- *However, if the elephant steps back of his own accord, or even a few steps that you didn't ask for, just ignore it: nothing detrimental will be learned*
- *It is useful to train him to stay immobile for a few seconds before giving him his meals*
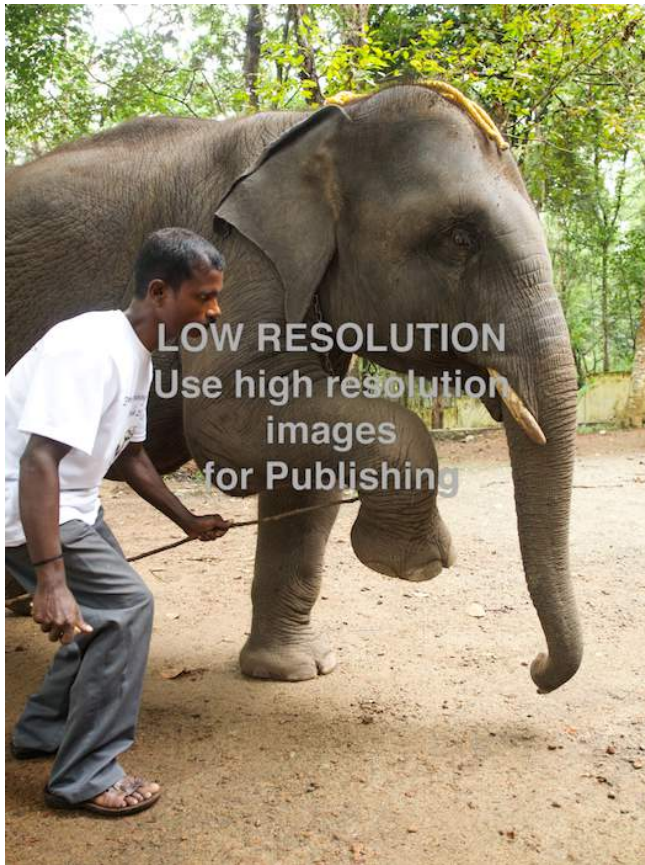
Training to lift legs

Training the elephant to lift each of his legs is needed for veterinary inspection and treatment. Furthermore, in some countries, the foot is used as 'step' for mounting the elephant.

The lowest portion behind the elephant's forefoot is sensitive and so when touched or tapped by a stick, the elephant is generally inclined to move his foot and perhaps lift his foot off the ground.

1. Use the chosen voice command for 'lift the foot'
2. Using a stick, touch or tap the back or side of the elephant's foot above the toe nail area

3. As soon as the elephant moves his foot even a very small amount off the ground, the stick should be removed and
4. Praise/head-stroking/food is used to add to the reward.
5. Over a period of days, reward progressively higher leg lifts
6. When the desired height has been achieved, now reward progressively longer durations of holding the leg up.
7. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Remember that it is the *stopping* of the stick pressure that initially rewards the foot raising, so you must remove the stick pressure as soon as the desired result occurs. It is also important to remember to make gradual height improvements in foot-raising and that you do not expect too much at one time. Remember to always use the voice on its own first then the stick if there is no response and reward continuously until the elephant has learned to hold his foot from a voice command only. If the elephant begins to fail, go back to the reward system.

Figs. 15 & 16 Training the elephant to lift his legs is useful

Desensitising to light weight on shoulders

For the ridden elephant, we first need to accustom him to the feeling of weight on his shoulders so that he becomes comfortable and learns not to react to this pressure. Of course if the elephants are regularly bathed in a river or lake then they already become familiar with people clambering all over them. In that case, pressing weight on the elephant's shoulders as a separate lesson may not be necessary.

You first begin by

1. Pressing down on his shoulders with your hands for just a short period and
2. Gradually make the pressing time longer and with more weight.
3. Reward with the usual sequence of praise/head-stroking/food
4. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Do not subject the elephant to periods of more than 20 seconds of pressing your weight on him. Remember that if he moves and it causes you *stop leaning on him*, you will be teaching him that when he moves, he can dislodge you and that is not a good start. Try to set up the situation so that when you lean on him, even if he does move, try to stop him, (or get an assistant to control his stop and go reactions which are now learned) or wait until he stops his feet and then remove the leaning pressure. As time goes on you can extend the time you spend leaning on him and begin laying across him and eventually sitting up for short periods. During any of these times, if the elephant moves try not to get off until he is still. If this is difficult, then ask an assistant to make the elephant step back (one or two steps only).

Fig. 17 Lean down on the elephant's shoulders to begin training him to eventually be mounted.

The age of two years is a very good time to begin teaching the elephant to sit and also to lay down. There are a number of ways to train this:

- The easiest way to train this is to begin when the elephant is young and say the voice command just when you think the elephant may lay down (such as in the water). For this to work you must be consistent and say the word every time. The usual reward of praise/stroking/food as soon as he lays down hastens this training.
- Another effective method involves constructing a raiseable bar on two strong posts at least two metres apart. The lowest setting of the bar should be just above the height of the elephant when he is in sternal recumbence (on his sternum with his knees folded underneath him). The highest setting is where he cannot quite walk under when standing. Offer food from the opposite side of the bar so that he has to progressively lower his head and soon his entire body lower and lower to get the food. The training begins:
  1. Set the bar at the highest point and offer the elephant a food treat from the opposite side, so he has to stoop down a little to get the food
  2. Progressively lower the bar so that the elephant has to stoop lower and lower to get the food.
  3. Midway through the training, add a tactile cue: try tugging the loose skin behind the elephant's elbow behind his foreleg just before he is lured with the food reward.
  4. When the elephant is now stooping as low as he can get in sternal recumbency i.e. his chest is touching the ground, you now introduce the voice command for 'lay down' just before the tugging of the skin, both of which are followed by luring with the food.
  5. At all stages, use praise/stroking/food to reward the progressive stages.
  6. Soon the bar can be removed and when the response is reliable
  7. The elephant can be asked to lay down in other places gradually further away from the training site.
  8. When 'lay down' is consolidated, you can now teach the elephant to roll over on his side (lateral recumbency) which is useful for various treatments.
  9. So when the elephant is in sternal recumbency, you lure him to take the food from a point where he has to roll a little bit sideways to reach the food.
  10. Pushing his body in the desired direction can assist in motivating the elephant to give the correct response
  11. Progressively he rolls further to his side to obtain the food.
  12. You now always begin the response with the voice command for 'lay over'.
  13. At all stages, praise/stroking/food is used to reward the progressive improvements.
- You should also train him to get up standing on his feet again:
  14. To do this you begin with the voice command for 'get up' and then an assistant gently but relentlessly taps the elephant on the hindquarters to motivate the elephant to get up, at which point the tapping stops and the praise/stroking/food rewards are given.
  15. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

- Some elephant's find squeezing and tugging the loose skin behind the elbow or in front of the shoulder ticklish. This are can also induce the lay down response without using the training bar:

    1. Squeeze and vibrate the young elephant's loose skin behind the elbow of his foreleg or at the point of his shoulder to motivate a 'cringing' effect, so that the elephant lowers his body a very small amount.
    2. You may find also that pressure on the top of his shoulders or vibrating the skin at the back of his hindleg can also induce the lowering and eventually the sitting reaction.
    3. As soon as he lowers, you should release: the timing of your release is absolutely critical to the success of this. You have to release at the moment the elephant lowers his shoulders and not a second later.
    4. At this moment you should also reward with praise/stroking/food. When you have done the first repetition, now add the voice cue before you squeeze and/or vibrate his skin.
    5. Progressively lower the elephant until he is in sternal recumbency.
    6. Praise/stroking/food rewards are given for all improvements.
    7. Aim for three sets of three improved repetitions in a row and either rest the elephant or move on to a different lesson.

Fig. 18 For some elephants, squeezing and tugging the loose skin behind or in front of his elbow induces a ticklish sensation. This can motivate the elephant to gradually lower his body by tugging the skin on his foreleg and then rewarding each improved stage of lowering.

Remember if you see the elephant about to sit or laydown at *any* time, then use the appropriate voice command and reward him. This makes it quicker for him to learn the appropriate voice commands.

Fig. 19 & 20 Train the elephant to lay down on his side as well as on his chest.

Take home message

- *Remember the importance of this early training so that it makes later training easier.*
- *Use every opportunity to use a voice command when the elephant is doing something that you might want him to do from a voice command in the future.*
- *Ensure that your timing of removal is perfect – i.e. as soon as the elephant gives the first sign of the correct response.*
- *Ensure that each part of your reward is separated by a short space of time: first the voice command, then after the correct response* praise *followed by head-stroking and food.*
- *Blame yourself, not the elephant, if things are not working out.*

- *Never punish the animal if it gives the wrong response or no response. You have to re-examine what you did and then set the reaction up carefully and try again.*
- *Do not over work the elephant – 20 minutes is long enough to teach him.*
- *Work in sets of repetitions to make training fast and efficient.*

4. Training the 3-5 year old elephant

In some parts of Asia, it is considered that three years of age is an ideal age to begin training the elephant to be ridden. In other parts, it is traditional to wait until the elephant has attained a certain height, which may not be until he is four or five years of age. Remember that the younger the elephant, the less time his shoulders can sustain a mahout on his back. Yet it is also true that the younger the elephant, the easier it is to teach them to be ridden. Older elephants can resist much more strongly and violently and are less mentally pliable than younger elephants: they have had more years of freedom. The early foundation training is the time of the elephant's life where good riding habits are made. So before the ridden training begins, if the elephant stands still on command, can show forward and backward steps, if he sits and maybe lays down on either his chest or his side and he can pick some things up with this trunk, you will find that the rest of the training is much, much easier.

This is the time when you deepen the young elephant's training of all the things he has previously learned plus you get him used to having a mahout on his back. Training the elephant to be ridden is not a difficult procedure. You need at least one assistant and preferably two extra people. As mentioned earlier, you only need to train him for 20 minutes per day and you will be riding the elephant freely within 10 days.

Let us assume that the young elephant has learned to go forward and to stop and reverse and stand still at this stage. So to now train the ridden work, we will assume that Phases 1 and 2 are complete. (If not then thoroughly train Phase 1) So we begin at Phase 3.

Phase 3 - Habituation of elephant to mahout

If you have been following this manual, the young elephant may have already experienced a mahout pressing down on his shoulders, laying over his back or even being sat on astride in the river or some other place. Unless the elephant is well consolidated in having a human on his back it is important to go through this stage thoroughly. The neck rope should also be introduced at this stage. This should not present a problem – the rope is just worn snugly around the elephant's neck.

Training the elephant to make positive associations with a human on his back is essential and, as mentioned earlier, it can also be achieved in various convenient settings such as while the elephant is bathing in the river for example. It is important to recall the overshadowing (page xx) technique because the biggest challenge to the mahout is aggression that causes the elephant to shake the mahout from his back. This can be eliminated by overshadowing the shaking with step-

backs at the very instant the elephant shows the first signs of shaking. The important thing is to increase the pressure for step-back to ensure it occurs when the elephant is about to shake. This becomes easier to do as time goes on but the motivation to shake may be stronger than the motivation to step-back, so you have to be ready to step-back with increased pressure to ensure it is effective.

There are eight stages in this process and each should finish with the mahout dismounting when the elephant is still. Remember that in the early stages of mounting, dismounting is rewarding for the elephant. It is best to get off only when the elephant is still, so that you reward stillness. If the elephant moves forward or sideways without being signalled to do so, he should immediately be overshadowed with a step-back. However, if the elephant steps backward it can be ignored as it usually doesn't lead to any problems and soon disappears. If, however the elephant does continue to go back too many steps (more than five or six), then the assistant should step him forward.

When the mahout achieves each stage, and is pressing-down/laying-over or sitting up, the mahout should praise and the assistant at the front of the elephant should deliver the head-stroking/food. There should be at least three sets of three consecutive repetitions in a row for each of these stages and try not to do more than three stages per session so as not to overload the elephant:

1. The mahout presses down on the top of the elephant's shoulders.
2. The mahout makes small jumps up and down beside the elephant while pressing.
3. The mahout jumps up, lays over and is held there by the assistant who holds the mahout's leg.
4. The mahout jumps up and lays his body over the elephant's body.
5. The mahout jumps up, lays over and brings his knee over the elephant's back .
6. The mahout jumps up and brings his entire leg over the elephant's back.
7. The mahout jumps up and crouches over.
8. The mahout jumps up and sits up.

Consolidate and reward (****praise*********/head-stroking/food) each stage until elephant is calm being mounted.***
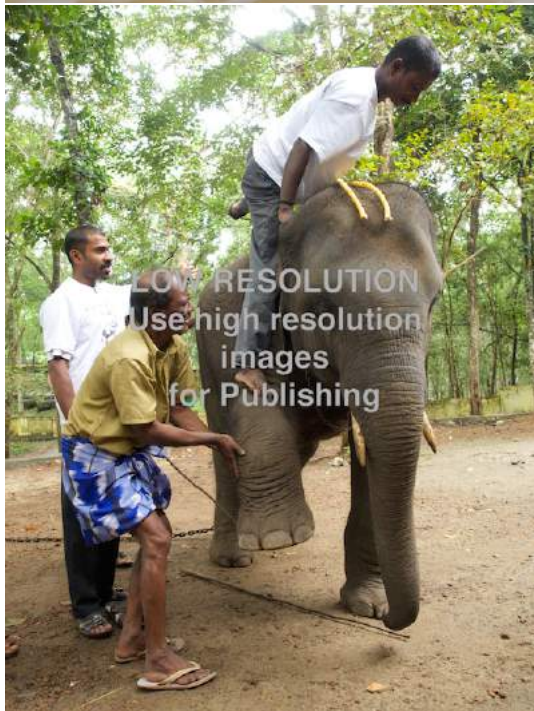
Figs. 21 and 22 The easiest way to train the elephant to being mounted is to gradually move all over him during bathing. If this is not possible, then it is important to gradually mount the elephant in stages, rewarding and consolidating each stage.

Reward transfer from assistant to mahout: When the elephant is mounted, you can transfer food delivery from the mouth to the trunk, via the mahout on board. The mahout astride should now be the one to say the voice praise (praise) to stroke and to deliver the food directly to the elephant's trunk rather than to his mouth, as before. To do this, the mahout should stretch his hand with the food very far forward so that the elephant can see that the food is coming from above rather than from below. It may take some practice for the elephant to manage his trunk above his head in a stable way, so patience is needed to teach him to do this. If the elephant does not take food from the mahout above, then the mahout should reach to the side where the elephant can see the food for a few repetitions and gradually raise the place where the food is delivered to the top of the elephant's head.

When food is readily received by the elephant's trunk from the mahout astride, then mahout now takes over all of the reward process.

Later on in the elephant's training we begin to diminish the food reward (give food occasionally) so that when the mahout issues the praise word, the only reward that comes is head-stroking, which will have a powerful meaning in itself for two reasons:

1. Head-stroking is rewarding because it strengthens the attachment bond between mahout and elephant.
2. The head-stroking has been consistently paired with the powerful reward of food and so its value is increased.

The young elephant is now ready to be trained to move with a mahout astride. The next phases are about slowly introducing the mahout's control. First however, the elephant needs to learn to be calm moving with the mahout on his back who should stay passive and give no signals.

Fig. 23 Once the mahout has mounted the elephant, food can now be given via the trunk.

Picking up and giving objects:

This is an ideal time to train the elephant to pick up objects with the trunk and give them to the mahout above. To do this the assistant is required to drop an object (such as a stick) on the ground in front of the elephant and then use the voice cue for 'pick-up' just before the elephant *touches* the stick (The elephant is not expected to pick up the stick at this stage, but just simply touch it). He is then rewarded with praise/head-stroking/food. In order to encourage the elephant to touch the stick, it should be smothered in the juice of banana or sugar cane. This training begins as follows:

1. The stick is smeared with banana or sugar can juice
2. The stick is dropped just below the elephant's trunk
3. The mahout gives the voice command for 'pick-up'
4. The elephant touches the stick
5. The reward sequence of praise/head stroking/food is immediately given
6. This is repeated.
7. The elephant is gradually rewarded for improvements in *duration* of holding the stick.
8. When holding the stick for few seconds is reliable from the voice command:
9. The reward of picking up the stick is discontinued and
10. The mahout on the ground gives the voice command for 'give it to me' (whatever the usual command for this is in this language)
11. The mahout then takes the stick from the elephant's trunk and
12. The reward sequence of praise/head stroking/food is immediately given
13. This is repeated and
14. The training can extend to the point where the elephant is commanded to walk forward a few steps, holding the stick and give it to the mahout.

Phase 4 - Exclusive control by the assistant (with mahout aboard):

Now, with the mahout sitting passively astride, it is time for the assistant to give forward and stop commands to the elephant. It is important that at this stage the mahout *does nothing* (except deliver rewards) and sits quietly. The elephant has to become accustomed to moving while the mahout sits astride.

To train this:

1. The mahout mounts the elephant and
2. The assistant checks that the elephant remembers to step back and forward (if necessary, and as in Phases 1 – 2) from light pressures and voice commands
3. The assistant then checks that more steps of reverse, forward and stop from light pressures and voice commands are of the same quality as in Phase 2. It is essential that the elephant responds as well with the mahout on his back as he did without the mahout on his back.
4. The reward sequence of praise/head-stroking/food should be employed by the mahout astride for each correct response.

Consolidate and reward (praise/head-stroking/food) each stage until elephant is calm being mounted.

Fig. 24 Exclusive control by the assistant where the mahout does nothing (sits passively) and the elephant is completely under the control of the assistant.

Phase 5 - Partial control by mahout

This is the phase where the mahout now begins to take over control of the elephant's mobility from the assistant.

This phase of training is very simple. The training of the 'go forward' and 'stop' responses requires that:

1. The mahout mounts the elephant and now shifts forward in his riding position from the middle of the elephant's back to sitting over the elephant's shoulders (normal riding position) with his foot through the neck rope.
2. In this forward position the mahout is able to give the typical ridden commands to the elephant using his feet (heels and toes).
3. These signals are given before the voice commands so that the elephant learns the new tactile signals (presuming that the elephant now knows the voice commands from the earlier phases)
4. The mahout's foot signals are as follows:
    a. The mahout's toes of both feet on the base of the elephant's ears are used for variations of 'go forward', 'faster'
    b. The mahout's heels are used lightly pressuring shoulders of the elephant for 'stop', 'slower' and 'step-back'
5. As soon as these foot and voice commands are given, the assistant immediately gives the (now already learned) signals for the relevant commands on the ground. The assistant's job is to ensure the elephant responds to the mahout and to back up the mahout's signals when the elephant fails to respond.

6. The reward sequence of praise/head stroking/food is immediately given when the elephant responds to the mahouts signals without the help of the assistant.
7.

If the elephant does not respond, the assistant increases the pressure as he would have done if the mahout were passive (Phase 4) or non-existent (Phase 2). This is repeated until the elephant steps back from the mahout's voice and heel pressure. When the elephant responds, the mahout must be quick to soften the pressure of his heels and to reward with sequence of praise/head-stroking/food.

It is essential that the mahout's signals come before the signals of the assistant. And that the mahout does not remove the pressure of his heels on the elephant's shoulders until he feels a step back. If he stops pressing and the elephant has not stepped back then the wrong response will be trained.

Now it is time to train the elephant to go forward from the equal pressure of the toes of both the mahout's feet. The mahout first gives the voice command for going forward which is immediately followed by the vibrating pressing of the mahout's toes on the elephant's earlobes. Because this is the first time the elephant experiences the mahout's toes on his earlobes, it is unlikely that the elephant will move forward so the assistant must be very quick to assist in helping the elephant to move forward by using the signal the elephant already knows. As soon as the elephant moves forward, the pressure of the mahout's toes is softened; the elephant is rewarded by praise followed by head-stroking and food. As before, the mahout must increase the pressure until the response occurs upon which the usual rewards are used.

Fig. 25 The mahout now begins to train the elephant to respond to signals from his toes for forward and his heels for stop and reverse. The teacher ensures that the signals are consistently given in a precise location.

Consolidate and reward (praise/head-stroking/food) each stage until elephant is calm being mounted.

Turn: This is also a good time to train the elephant to turn his forelegs whilst being ridden so that he can learn changes of direction. Up until now the ridden elephant has only walked in straight lines, so now turns are trained. It is an easy thing to train if he has learned to turn in-hand earlier. In some parts of Asia, the elephant is trained to hold a stick in his trunk at an early age and can be led with this stick by a person (the assistant). So this helps in training turns when ridden. Otherwise, if the elephant has learned to turn in-hand then all you need is an assistant walking in front of the elephant, as he learned earlier during his in-hand training (so you can skip step 1.).

To train the elephant to turn left and right with a mahout astride:

1. The elephant takes the stick in his trunk which is also held by the assistant.
2. The mahout gives the voice command for the elephant to walk forward.
3. As the elephant and assistant are walking forward, the mahout gives the voice command for 'turn right' and then

4. Presses his toes at the base of the elephant's *left* ear. (In some countries a neck strap is used in which the mahout places his toes). Then immediately after
5. The assistant also leads the elephant in a turn of just one step to the right, which of course causes the elephant to do so too.
6. The same thing is done on the left turn, with the mahout's voice command for 'turn left 'and his toes on the base of the right ear and the assistant also walks one step to the left.
7. This is repeated and after a few steps of tur the praise/head-stroking/food rewards are delivered).
8. Soon the elephant will begin turning from both the voice command and from the pressure of the mahout's toes on the base of the ear for each turn.

It is vital that the mahout and the assistant remember that the pressure must be released as soon as the first sign of the correct answer (turn) is given as this is the reward of pressure-release.

It is very important in the beginning of training turns that the mahout does not ask for more than one or two steps (of the forelegs) of turn and only gradually increases the number of turning steps.

Figs. 26 & 27 Training the elephant to turn can be shaped by gradually fading away the leading commands of the assistant.

Training the elephant to pick up and give objects to the mahout astride:

In Phase 2 the elephant learned to pick up a stick and give it to the mahout on the ground. Now it is time to train him to give the stick to the mahout *astride the elephant*. To do this, the elephant should first be proficient in picking up the stick from the ground and giving it to the mahout on

his back. The training of this is simple once the elephant has learned to pick up and give the stick on the ground:

1. The stick is dropped on the ground in front of the elephant with a mahout astride
2. The mahout gives the command for 'give it to me' and
3. To make it easy for the elephant, the mahout reaches past the elephant's field of vision with his hand
4. When the elephant gives the mahout the stick
5. The reward sequence of praise/head stroking/food is immediately given
6. This is repeated and rewarded in each training session with a variety of objects once the stick is mastered.
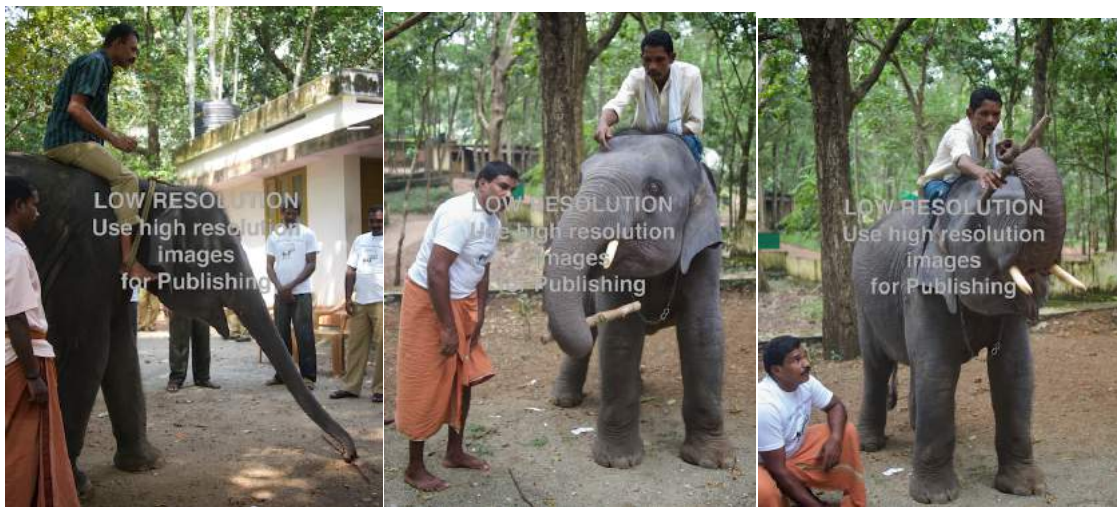
Figs. 28, 29, 30 The gradual training of trunk use in the elephant: first touching, then picking up, then picking up and giving object to the assistant, and finally picking up and giving object to the mahout.

Phase 6 - Complete control by mahout

This phase develops smoothly from phase five as the assistant slowly becomes unnecessary and the elephant is completely controlled by the mahout. During this phase:

1. The sequences in phase 5 are repeated, then
2. As the elephant responds to the mahout alone without any help from the assistant, the assistant gradually moves further away from the elephant
3. For some time however, the assistant remains nearby, ready to give assistance if the elephant fails to respond to the mahout's signals. This assistance will be required frequently in the beginning of this phase and then only occasionally as the elephant comes to learn the new signals. The assistant on the ground must be very quick to assist if the elephant does not respond to the mahout's signals on board.
4. The mahout now has complete and reliable control of all of the elephant's movements (stop, step-back, go forward and turn left & right) and gives all the commands and signals.

Again it is important not to overload the elephant, so restrict training sessions to only 20 minutes, unless you are going on a safari ride to graze etc. If you wish to do more repetitions in one day,

then ensure there is at least a 20 minute break between sessions. As a maximum you should do only three sessions per day.

Fig. 31 The mahout is now riding the elephant independently.

Turning the hindlegs sideways: The turn of the hindlegs is useful but not as essential as the other movements and can be left until the elephant is ridden confidently. It is much easier to train this movement if the elephant is previously trained to move his hindlegs sideways by a person on the ground before training it astride. This can be done by tapping side of the hindleg leg until it steps away. With the mahout aboard:
1. The voice command for stepping the hindlegs must first be given followed by the pressing of just one of the mahout's heels on the elephant's shoulder which is immediately followed by an assistant signalling the elephant to move his hindlegs sideways.
2. If there is no response, then the assistant uses increased pressure to obtain the response.
3. If the elephant repeatedly moves forward instead of moving sideways, facing him in front of a fence or barrier can make this training easier.
4. As soon as the correct response is given, the elephant is rewarded with praise/head-stroking/food.
5. This is repeated until the elephant learns to move his hindlegs sideways from the heel of the mahout without any assistance. If the elephant moves forward instead, the mahout stops him and the sideways of the hindlegs is requested again.

Faster and slower: As the elephant's responses improve and he goes from voice commands and light pressure of toes and heels, it is now an important step to train speed alterations so that his legs can be made faster or slower.

1. The voice commands for faster and slower and slightly extra heel/toe pressure are used and the elephant soon learns to associate these with the correct responses.
2. As soon as the correct quickening or slowing response is offered, the elephant should be immediately rewarded by the release of pressure with praise/head-stroking/food. The mahout's pelvis is used to follow and maintain the speed of the elephant so that it acts as a maintenance signal.

Environmental challenges: It is also important now to increase the environmental challenges very gradually. Do not make big alterations in environmental challenges but always make them gradual. Riding out with other elephants is a very good solution and letting experienced elephants take the lead in difficult terrain is also very important. However, it is also important that the young elephant doesn't learn to expect to be led by older elephants, so when he has sufficient experience, ensure that the young elephant spends some time leading the others where possible.

Training and refining step-back should also be continued and rewarded as time goes on. This can be done in a precise way such as drawing a specific track on the ground that is lined with small rails or stones with a left and right turn that the elephant has to negotiate backwards. If elephants develop phobias of events or objects in their normal environment (such as local noises or chickens etc.), then retraining step-back can help greatly (this is because both the noise and the chicken are triggers for a deeper problem of the loss of responses, especially the stop and step-back responses).

Fig. 32 Practising more precise step-back responses on a specific track deepens both stop and step-back signals.

It is important throughout the elephant's life that his good habits are checked and maintained. So it is necessary to check how obediently the elephant performs all of his responses. If there are any losses of responding then the particular responses should be retrained as described in this manual, focusing on rewarding the correct responses.

Phase out food: As the elephant learns and becomes more consistent in his responses to voice and the light signals of the mahout's toes and heels, the use of food rewards begins to fade out randomly, and is eventually replaced by head-stroking which is never faded away. Head-stroking creates and maintains bonds of confidence and trust between mahout and elephant and thus should always be maintained.

The elephant will learn new things at his individual rate and he may find some tasks easier than others. Be patient. But above all, be consistent. Consistency is now the most important thing in the elephant's life so that the rules never change and he learns to become confident in the world. This way he is able to meet serious challenges such as those posed by poaching surveillance, conservation missions and noisy festivals with confidence rather than fear.
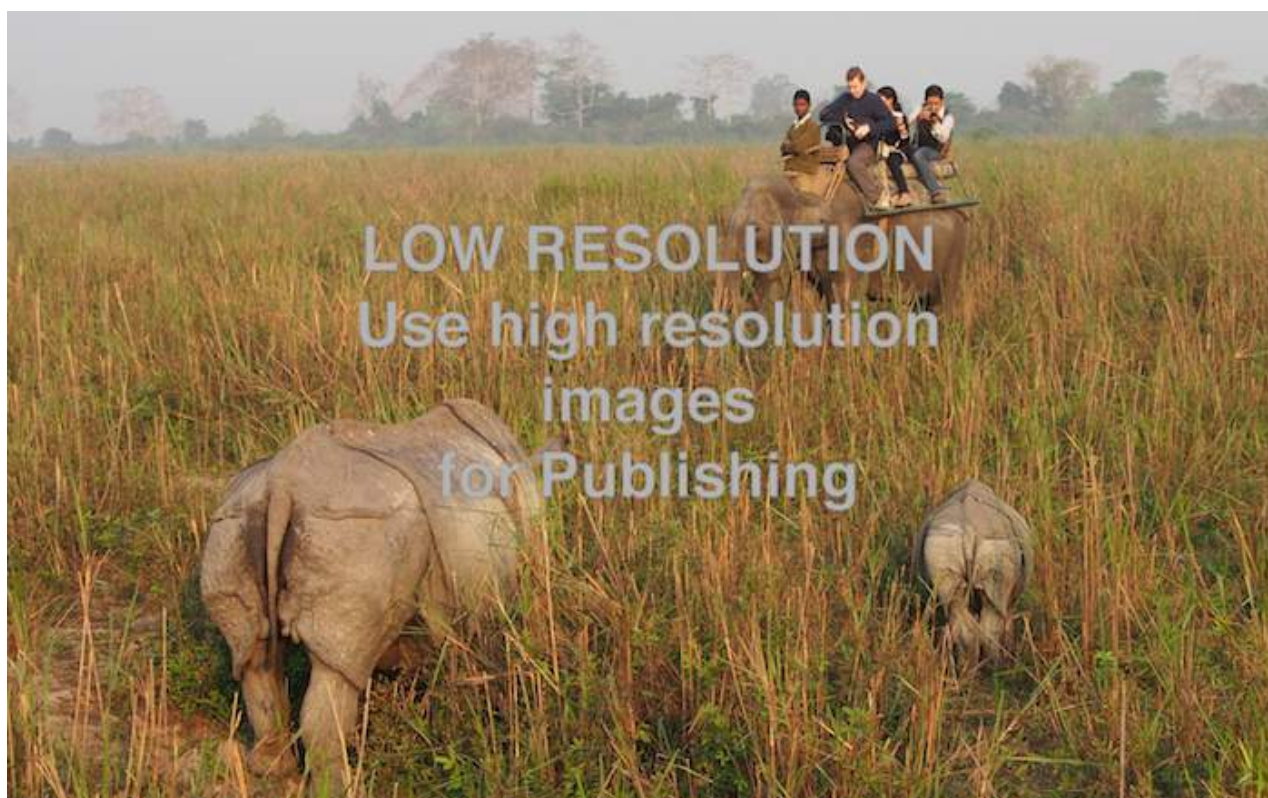
Fig. 33 Training the young elephant using humane methods is the surest way of making him brave in challenging environments. Here the elephant is used in a safe, non-invasive way to monitor wild populations of rhinos.

Take home message

- *Training can sometimes be frustrating. Remember it is a weakness to resort to violence. The more you train with kindness and using clear signals and plenty of rewards, the braver your elephant will be in the face of danger, and when you most need him to trust you.*
- *Do not assume that once the elephant has learned these things that he now knows them for life. You should constantly check his responses and retrain them again using food rewards (even if you have phased food out) in order to keep them perfect.*
- *Always keep in mind that elephants can learn human vocal sounds but they do not understand language as we do. So use your voice commands clearly and in the same way each time.*
- *Be patient, training has its ups and downs and sometimes things go fast, other times slowly. If the elephant is highly aroused or in an intense emotional state, abandon training for that day.*
- *Finally remember that you only have to do a few repetitions so training doesn't have to take long. Keep your sessions to around 20 minutes.*
- *Elephants are highly intelligent and sensitive animals. Treat your elephant well.*
- *Remember the power of touch. Elephants are social contact animals like humans and that provides the basis that enables us to work with him.*
- *When elephants have endured violence that they cannot predict, control or understand they harbour it causing them later on in their lives to turn violent against those who have hurt them. Always treat your elephant with respect.*

Acknowledgements

Editor's note.

The methods of training described in this manual are suitable for all elephants. Although I have referred to the elephant throughout as "he" this was done for simplicity only.