



Human Elephant
Learning Programs

2020
Annual Report



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An update from our Chair, Alex Lilley

As COVID-19 became a global pandemic, it was clear that the 2020/21 financial year would be a year unlike anything most of us had ever encountered.

This has been an extraordinary year in nearly every respect for H-ELP – each year, H-ELP’s team would ordinarily travel to Thailand, India and Laos as part of our strategy to improve the welfare of working elephants. As the international borders closed, H-ELP was faced with a new challenge – how do we continue to assist the welfare of working elephants without travelling abroad?

In addition, H-ELP’s primary source of donations revolved around our annual fundraising charity ball held in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. As Victoria headed into a long and hard lockdown, hosting such an event was out of the question.

Without the ability to travel abroad, as well as our major fundraising event cancelled – the H-ELP board faced a challenging situation. The H-ELP board along with many Australian charities, responded to these global challenges by exploring ways in which we could still generate donations as well as continuing to assist the welfare of working elephants abroad without being “on the ground”.

Some of these changes were already underway as part of our long strategy, others were enforced or accelerated due to the global pandemic. Recently, words and phrases like “unprecedented” and “once in a generation” have been used liberally to reflect the enormous impact of the pandemic.

Alarmingly, H-ELP received numerous requests for immediate support from our international contacts as their income streams evaporated due to dwindling tourism and other impacts from the global pandemic. The elephants were simply running out of food.

The H-ELP board resolved to donate some of our funds to the following carefully considered and vetted international partners. These funds were directly distributed to these partner organisations to purchase food for the elephants.

- Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation (GTAEF)
- Lao Elephant Initiative (LEI)
- ElephantStay
- Animal Doctors International

The H-ELP board is grateful for the donations we received and it was heartening to see our donated funds having an immediate impact on the welfare of working elephants from Australia.

In addition, we expanded into elephant zoom calls by partnering with GTAEF to launch a global service that stars elephants in Zoom video calls live from their natural habitat in Northern Thailand's ancient jungle. During the Zoom video call, participants can virtually participate in unique and once-in-a-lifetime elephant experiences. Championing the natural joy of daily free-roaming time, accompanied by the mahouts and either an elephant veterinarian or biologist, the activity offers insights from scientific experts about how these intelligent creatures think and behave as well as their social interaction in their native habitat.

By developing these international partnerships, we can offer wider ranging donation options for our supporters. This change in direction directly contributed to how we successfully coped with the pandemic's impact on our work and will continue to hold us in good stead through the turbulent times that lie ahead.

The years ahead will present exceptional challenges to H-ELP. Nevertheless, we are looking to expand our online presence and ability to generate donations through greater online exposure. With the continued dedication of our incredible board members and volunteers, along with the support of our wonderful supporters, we will continue to strive to improve the welfare of working elephants.





— Alex Lilley
Chair



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Highlights

With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting H-ELP's ability to travel to our partnered sanctuaries for on-site training of our model, the team at H-ELP shifted their focus on promoting positive Elephant Welfare. One of H-ELP's main focuses over the past twelve months was increasing donations and feeding this through to partnered sanctuaries. This money went directly to providing essential food, water and medical care that was becoming difficult for sanctuaries to afford because their main source of funding (tourism) had ceased.

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
|  H-ELP Elephant Training Technique in use in Laos and Thailand | 12 H-ELP and GTAEF's Elephant Zoom Calls Conducted |  | \$2,200 Raised from H-ELP and GTAEF's Elephant Zoom Calls | |
| |  | \$6,300 Donated from loyal patrons and the general public | | |
| | 4 Elephant welfare presentations facilitated |  | | |

New Donations Structure

Alongside the growth of H-ELP, key priorities have changed. H-ELP is evolving to become more than a charity with a sole focus on training a safe way for Mahouts and Elephants to interact, that is why in recent years H-ELP's mission has evolved from 'Abuse Ends Where Knowledge Begins' to 'Advancing Elephant Welfare'. With this in mind, H-ELP has decided to let donors choose what direction they would like their funding to go in. As part of our general donations pillar we have enabled the option for monthly options.

Elephant Welfare

Help provide basic needs such as fresh food and water as well as medical care/ supplies to elephants to sustain their welfare.

All donations to this pillar are evenly distributed amongst H-ELP and our four partners .

Elephant and Mahout Training

Contributing to projects relating to the safe training of elephants and mahouts with the H-ELP training technique.

Elephant Scientific Development

Donations will contribute to scientific advancement in understand and caring for elephants.

Elephant Survival

Funding will be directed towards ensuring the long-term survival of Asian Elephants.

General Donations

All donations for this section will be split between H-ELP initiatives. Donation amount and monthly donation options are available as part of this pillar.

This new structure was instilled in late March. All donations prior to the new structure have been considered 'General Donations'.



Elephant Zoom Calls

In the first quarter of the 2020-2021 financial year, H-ELP, in partnership with the GTAEF, commenced an Elephant Zoom Calls initiative. With many being confined to their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, H-ELP saw an opportunity to brighten up a work meeting or person's day by having a Zoom Call with an Asian Elephant under GTAEF's care.

With an option for 10 or 20 minutes, the zoom call includes an Asian elephant appearance and an opportunity to talk to a GTAEF expert.

The elephants under GTAEF's care are looked after using the H-ELP training technique. This technique draws from all areas of cognitive research and based on the most proven principles to date, the following sections explain how we employ methods that have been successful across a broad range of animal training situations.

By purchasing an Elephant Appearance sessions, donations are split between H-ELP and GTAEF to go towards the upkeep and welfare of Asian elephants.

In a twelve month period H-ELP and GTAEF have facilitated 14 elephant zoom calls, raising a total of \$2,300. \$1,150 has been distributed to GTAEF in the 2020-2021 financial year to contribute to the welfare of each elephant in their care. This funding was crucial in a time where COVID-19 and a drought has been impacting funding and supplies.

[Purchase yours today.](#)

H-ELP In The Media

H-ELP is extremely proud of the international media attention that they have had in the past financial year. This exposure has helped to drive attention to H-ELP initiatives and drive donations.





H-ELP's Elephant-Friendly Training For Working Elephants Explained

The H-ELP training team is often asked about the structure of our training sessions when we are in the field. Our sessions are always driven by our mission and that is twofold: to improve the welfare of captive elephants and the safety of their handlers (mahouts). This means that our ultimate goal is to produce an elephant that is able to complete her job calmly and contentedly because this not only ensures her welfare it also ensures the safety of her mahout.

To achieve this we employ a range of evidence-based training techniques. We use subtraction, addition and combined reinforcement, classical conditioning, and shaping, as well as a number of gradual desensitisation techniques when required. So what do these terms mean and how do we use them in training?

1. Subtraction reinforcement is the removal of a mildly annoying pressure at the onset of a desired behaviour. It increases the likelihood that the behaviour will be repeated. So, for example a trainer might apply pressure to the elephant's chest with their palm until she takes a step backwards at which point the trainer's hand is removed. Elephants (and horses, dogs, camels etc.) soon learn that stepping backwards removes the pressure. When subtraction reinforcement is used the pressure always starts very lightly and increases over a predictable timeframe. This gives the elephant a sense of control over the process because she is able to avoid any annoying pressure by performing the behaviour.

2. Addition reinforcement is giving the elephant something that she wants (like a banana or gentle stroking) when she performs a desired behaviour. For example, if the elephant stands quietly to have her feet checked we will often reward her with either stroking or something delicious. This increases the likelihood that she will do the same thing again.

3. Combined reinforcement is when subtraction and addition reinforcement are used together. It also increases the likelihood that the reinforced behaviour will occur again. For example, if the elephant is being trained to step forwards the trainer will often apply gentle pressure at the base of her ear and as soon as she takes a step they will both release the pressure and either stroke her or give her a treat (like a sugar cane).

4. Classical conditioning occurs when two seemingly unrelated things become associated. So, for example, once the elephant has been taught to step backwards from light pressure, the mahout will then start using a voice cue. He will say the word for back and then apply the pressure cue that has already been trained by subtraction reinforcement. After several repetitions, the elephant learns that the word predicts the onset of pressure and she starts to step backwards from the word alone.

5. Shaping is the gradual change of behaviour. Desirable behaviours often take weeks and even months to achieve. Captive elephants need to accept the handling of their feet and legs because they can suffer from small wounds caused by sharp sticks in the jungle and these need to be treated to avoid infection. Elephants are surprisingly sensitive and often don't enjoy their feet being touched. Desensitization must always occur very gradually because rushing can cause the elephant to become stressed. A shaping program for foot care will often include walking the elephant slowly over a small log and rewarding her when the chosen foot touches the log. Pretty soon she will place her foot on the log when she is near it because she has learned that this behaviour leads to delicious treats. She will then be rewarded for allowing a mahout to touch her foot while it is on the log. This process will continue until she is happy to allow her foot to be touched and stroked while it is resting on the log.

When we give animals (and humans) a sense of control and an ability to predict certain things in their environment they become calmer and more content. Using evidence-based training techniques provides this. Subtraction reinforcement gives the elephant a sense of control because she can remove the mildly annoying pressure of the trainer's palm at any time by producing the trained behaviour. Classical conditioning gives the elephant the ability to predict events because the mahout's voice command precedes and therefore predicts the onset of pressure. A very gradual shaping process ensures that there are few incorrect answers in any training session which means lots of rewards, happy elephants and safe mahouts.



“This means that our ultimate goal is to produce an elephant that is able to complete her job calmly and contentedly because this not only ensures her welfare it also ensures the safety of her mahout.”



H-ELP Partners With Animal Doctors International

H-ELP is very excited to announce our newest partnership with Animal Doctors International (ADI).

Our reach has broadened from a purely humane training focused organisation to addressing the deeper elements of elephant welfare. With projects already aimed at assisting food supply in South East Asia amid the COVID-19 pandemic and drought, we are extremely proud to be partnering with ADI to also focus on providing funds for veterinary care.

“It is truly wonderful to partner with H-ELP to safeguard Asian Elephants in Vietnam,” said Dr Will Thomas, Veterinarian and ADI Founder.

“The uniquely holistic approach of H-ELP addresses all facets of captive elephant welfare and we’re incredibly excited to bring desperately needed veterinary care to elephants. The elephants we are able to support are often in chronic pain, distress or experiencing malnutrition and don’t have any access to veterinarians other than our visits.

“Together with H-ELP we are able to make a real difference to the lives and futures of these elephants.”

Watch this space as it is the beginning of a developing story and exciting partnership.



A Special Thank You To Our Partners

H-ELP is very grateful to be working with a number of elephant sanctuaries to advance the welfare of Asian elephants.



[Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation \(GTAEF\)](#)

GTAEF is a Thai-registered not-for-profit that focuses on helping elephants through three core pillars, Captive Elephant Welfare, Wild Elephant Conservation and Research & Education. As well as looking after elephants in their forested grounds in Far North Thailand, they have programmes to support vets, positive reinforcement training programmes, and directly help elephants across Thailand.



[Laos Elephant Initiative \(LEI\)](#)

LEI was founded in 2018 as a not for profit organisation focused on promoting the wellbeing of both captive and wild Asian elephants through education, community partnerships and innovative conservation strategies. LEI have established the Feed The Elephants project to help feed starving elephants in Lao, provide veterinary checks and treatment to elephants, and hire full-time mahouts for high at-risk elephants.



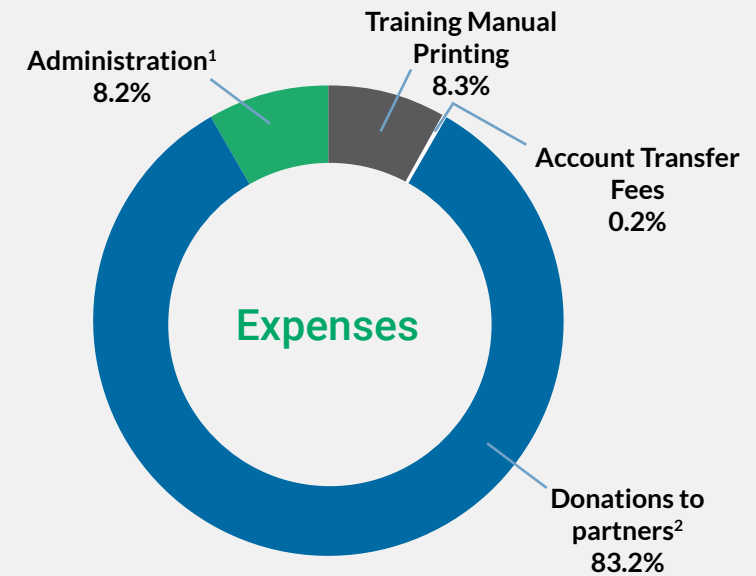
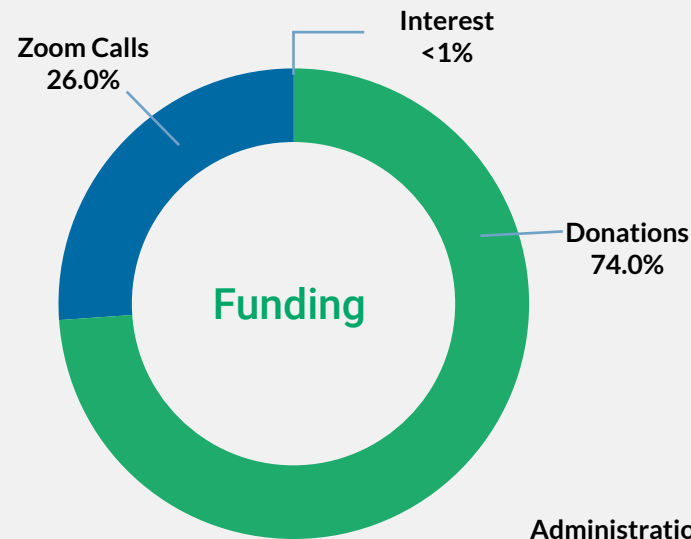
[ElephantStay](#)

ElephantStay, located in the Royal Elephant Kraal Village in Thailand, works to conserve, help and protect elephants whilst encouraging the culture of nurturing elephants. They have a specific focus on caring for retired working elephants, with 70 in their care at the moment. They also have projects targeting older elephants' nutrition, a breeding program, working with wild elephant rescues/conservation, growing food for elephants, and training/retraining of elephants.



Financial Review

To ensure the survival of H-ELP and our initiatives, it is important that we receive donations each year. We would like to thank our on going donors for their support year on year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we have had to shift the direction of our funding due to travel restrictions. For the past financial year, donations to H-ELP have contributed to the overall welfare of the elephants at our partnered sanctuaries as well as our broader initiatives.



1. Administration expense includes website maintenance, meeting expense (Zoom) and merchant fees (Shopify).

2. Donations to partners was a new initiative this year, and a result of the challenges faced by our partners as a result of the pandemic. Payments were made to Animal Doctors International, Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, Elephant Stay and Lao Elephant Initiative to assist in the feeding and care of elephants.



Human Elephant Learning Programs

Advancing Elephant Welfare

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