

# HELP visits the TECC | Andrew's Blog

*Lampang, Thailand, Day 1*

We were glad to have the first day in Thailand resting because the trip was a long one. We began with a 4 ½ hour car ride to Guwahati at midday and then flew to Kolkata, then Bangkok and then arrived in Chiang Mai at 7.00 the next morning. A direct flight might have taken only 3 hours but there weren't any.



*The Thai Elephant Conservation Centre (TECC)*

The place where we were to work is called the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC) and there were three elephants to train. One was an untrained male 2yo calf, called Kaew, a 3yo untrained female called Yaya, and a trained 5yo female called Kaelang. My job on the first day was to give 3 demonstrations of training.

My biggest challenge was to now forget all the Assamese and Hindu commands and now learn the Thai commands for: good! go, stop, stay, back, pick up object from ground, take object from person, lift up trunk, let go, and give. I had to get to know these pretty fast because timing is so important in training.

Next morning we went to the amazing elephant conference centre in Lampang where I gave a lecture – actually some movies of our work in other Asian countries to show the different signals that we use according to each country's tradition and to show that we weren't there to change everything and it wasn't about a new 'method' but was more of an upgrade, a refinement of what they already do. There was just one exception: to get rid of the early harsh containment in breaking in and punishment that is widespread across Asia and is supposed make the elephants submissive but in fact all it does is make them dangerous later on because they learn that unpredictable punishments occur in training. I was in for a surprise.



*Andrew gave a lecture to begin the workshop*



I taught Kaew to take a step or two backwards, to go forward and to stop and this went pretty smoothly. Next I showed just how fast it can be to use positive reinforcement. I taught Kaew to take a stick from my hand in a few minutes. Next I taught him to release it to me. In this Thai elephant camp they had already been taught to use positive reinforcement which is very unusual. What they hadn't enough understanding of though was the gradual shaping of responses from the very beginning where you want to make the answer as obvious as possible to the elephant. For example, the elephant only has to touch the stick to get a reward at first. And so on with gradual increases in complexity. What I was to learn here in Thailand was that this people have quite advanced skills in modern training and much of their work is very impressive. There are quite a few things to refine but nothing very serious. Just things that lower efficiency and affect calmness. Fortunately they have abandoned the early punishment system which is by far and away the most important achievement. As time went on I was to be more impressed by what they have achieved and the precision of their management of the whole training operation. They began this revolution some 5 years ago after being the target of criticism from the west.



*The training ground where demonstrations and training was given. Many of the Mahouts wore black, paying their respects to the recent passing of the Thai king.*



*Andrew giving an interview for local news*

Next I worked with Yaya to achieve better obedience to step-back and go and stop. She was restless and frustrated. I used her to show the importance of the train of commands of: voice, pressure-release, voice praise-food and tactile reward. The last part is very important I believe because elephants are tactile and the hands-on caressing of the forehead is vital for achieving total calmness, providing the other things are in place too. I felt the demonstration went very well – in a short time I had her responding from a light touch of my fingers as well as voice commands. She became very calm and then began a lot of investigative behaviour which often follows when a lesson is well learned and they are calm. So she sniffed me all over, especially my face which need a good clean up afterwards.

The next demonstration was with Kaelang who had already been trained. This wasn't going to be a demonstration – for me I wanted to see the quality of the training that she had undergone. This is when I realised just how good the training is here. She was foot and trunk perfect in most mobility responses as well as the use of her trunk and sitting and laying down. The only flaw I could see was that sometimes she didn't always stay immobile. There was a hint of nervousness that I assumed would soon be gone once she had learned to park in one place. So we set about working on that and she became more relaxed. I have to say that these guys did a very good job training her. There are a few things I can help them with here but the majority of their work is a very high standard. Tomorrow they want me to look at a fully grown bull elephant that had attacked and killed a mahout before coming to this place. The elephant had begun to show aggression to his handler and he was clearly concerned.