

Teaching immobility | Andrews Blog

Day 2

First thing this morning we were dropped off at the Mahout Training School to see the aggressive bull elephant. I might add here that the Mahout training school isn't really a school for mahouts, it's a place where tourists can go and do a short course in learning how to become a mahout in 10 days! It apparently involves a lot of cleaning carting away elephant poop. Anyhow this bull elephant was lined up with 6 other elephants that also had some behaviour issues. The trainer there in charge is a man who I had grown to respect. Very knowledgeable and well respected though quite young in this elephant world – still in his 30's.



Morning training with the elephants that were showing signs of disobedience

He had a list of commands that would enable him to assess trained behaviours such as go stop, backwards, pick up each foot etc. The problem as I see it that this assessment is too vague and the assessment criteria too general. I'd like to see more precise behaviours that show up behaviour problems such as alterations of speed in backward and forward as well as checking for the lightness of the aid, the self-maintenance of speed and straightness, and a host of things on the ground.



The behaviour grading form. I've asked for a translated copy so I can suggest some changes

He informed that the elephants could only be trusted in a group setting when ridden, but not on the ground. So here lies the problem that I have seen all along here. Just a small problem because the ridden work is certainly of the best standard I've seen, but the work on the ground is not so good. Most elephants don't stand still and most move their feet when the mahout moves his feet, which creates fidgety unstable insecure animals. To my mind, these deficits contributed to the bull elephant's dangerousness on top of his early coercive training (in Israel).

We left the mahout training school for the elephant training centre where our workshop is situated. We began with Keow, the small untrained elephant and got him going again picking up sticks and letting go of them. Timing was the issue again, where the mahouts needed constant reminding of the order of the voice command for let go (suare) followed immediately by the secondary reinforcer and then the food. The elephant wasn't making any progress until they stopped muddling this up. As soon as they got this right, Keow was doing very well. In her afternoon session we also added the voice command for 'raise trunk' to pre-train the giving of food to the mounted mahout. We then worked on Keow's stop go and stay commands which again went well when the mahouts got the training sequences right. She was now looking like a well-trained elephant.

Next it was Yaya's turn. Yaya was a lot bigger but still untrained. Almost all of our time was spent perfecting her groundwork. The problem of course wasn't Yaya, it was the mahouts. One of the issues with this work is that you have to be fast, and that is hard when the translator may not exactly know what you mean and the mahout may not be used to paying attention to timing. Nevertheless, Yaya finished the second session of the day much calmer and staying in one place until given the signals for moving in any direction.



Our final elephant of the day was Kaelang. Her mahouts had already shown yesterday that her ridden work was excellent. For a five year old, she hardly made a mistake. She would stand still, and wait to be told to move. There seemed to be no confusions there. However her work on the ground was totally different. She was nervous, unsteady and fidgety. Once again her biggest deficit was that she didn't stand still and as soon as the mahout moved, she moved. It was back to the drawing board for her in terms of groundwork. I intervened and showed them how to train the elephant to park in one place. I showed how I could move away from the elephant while I was facing forward or backward from side to side and even running away and the elephant had to stay still and if she moved, I'd step her back a step. As soon as this was cleared up, the difference was a dramatic wave of calmness.



Kaew was an exceptionally curious elephant



It was raining, so we moved indoors

I gave a wrap up talk explaining how impressed I was with their work under saddle here mostly because of their adoption of positive reinforcement 5 years ago. I then explained how we needed to patch up the groundwork because the elephants are too stressed on the ground and it was entirely due to the fact that the commands were unpredictable and unreliable. Mainly that the elephants moved when their mahouts moved and there was no discrete signal for staying still that worked. This would be our focus tomorrow.



Royal Mahouts enjoying the exceptionally delicious lunch that was provided each day.



Happy Mahouts make for happy elephants