



Human Elephant Learning Programs

Advancing Elephant Welfare

Annual Report



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CHAIR'S REPORT 2018-2019

The H-ELP board is staffed entirely by volunteers who bring to their positions a broad range of skills. Among the individual backgrounds of our board and colleagues are a doctor of literature, a former paramedic, broadcast journalist, lawyer, elite equestrian competitors, a banking executive and several high profile business operators.

Delve further into our profiles and you discover some common unifying forces; particularly an appreciation and informed knowledge of animal training and the influence on this of Dr Andrew McLean, our joint founder who currently leads our training program. As a prolific and influential thinker on the subject of equine learning Andrew McLean developed a humane training approach for equids that has seen world-wide recognition and a growing uptake of its principles in many horse related pursuits.

This knowledge and refined techniques are what have been so successfully adapted to the training of captive Asian Elephants through H-ELP's work over the past decade. I documented their inception on Andrew's first trip to Nepal in 2007 and went on to become a founding director of the Human - Elephant Learning Programs Foundation in 2010. In 2018, I was invited to become Chair of this organisation and thus began another challenge for me in relation to our shared mission of improving the lives of captive elephants and their handlers through modern training methods.

As our training team prepare for our next trip to Asia, I would like to reflect on what we have achieved in a decade. Primarily, it is evident through the continued and growing engagement of progressive elephant keeping operations in the countries we have visited that H-ELP is well regarded and our original mission is on track.

However, the pressures of economic conditions, habitat loss, poaching and human-elephant conflict; as well as the well-meaning but occasionally misguided opinions of the general public and the elephant community, means we are constantly questioning, assessing and refining our role and what and where we can contribute.

We rely solely on donations of money and time and the support of our partner organisations to do this work. Due to fundraising activities and careful management, H ELP has sufficient financial resources to dedicate to hands on training as well as a long held ambition to develop an online training resource. Our hard-copy training text has been translated into five Asian languages but we believe an electronic resource will ensure our work has the potential for an even broader reach.

Sourcing personnel who have the necessary experience, knowledge, communication skills and availability to travel into SE Asia and deliver our training is a substantial but not insurmountable requirement of our current training approach. On last year's training camps in Laos and Thailand we welcomed trainee elephant trainers Sophie Warren and Kevin Ovenstone to the team. They both stepped into the role very capably and we look forward to their continued involvement. Our training missions are impeccably organised and facilitated by fellow founding board member and director, Dr Portland Jones.

Behind the scenes we have been well supported by personnel with financial and legal expertise. It is my observation that horse trainers are generally big-picture people who can be painstaking in their approach to training interactions but are often not highly motivated by 'office-work', and I count myself in these ranks, so we are especially grateful for the support we receive from board members, Alex Lilley and Helen Coliero in their respective areas of governance and finance.

Integral, also, to our organisation's development and operation is our relationship manager, Marlee Horobin, who ensures H-ELP's profile is relevant and reaches both key supporters and the broader community through various communication platforms. She is ably supported by our secretary, Tara Clegg and a team that includes Sophie McLean and Eden Panozzo.

In reflecting on the contributions made to H-ELP's growth I would also like to thank Ben Fulton-Gillon, who retired from the board at our last AGM to pursue career and travel opportunities. Ben's enthusiasm for elephant welfare, IT & photographic skills as well as company on many of our formative training missions is acknowledged by all at H-ELP as an important facet of our evolution.

This year we have upgraded and re-launched the H-ELP website www.h-elp.org with the technical and logistical support of web developers Spicy Web. Their brief was to make an informative, modern and interactive website and we believe this was very capably achieved.

We have also been represented by Andrew McLean at two key conferences on elephant welfare and training. These opportunities are an important validation of our regard within the elephant sector and a forum for us to share H-ELP's philosophies and expertise.

While it would be easy to get glum about the prospects for captive Asian Elephants, I am always heartened when I reflect on a conversation I had with Andrew after one of my first equine training clinics. I posed the question as to how he envisioned being able to make a difference to the mindsets of equestrian trainers whose methods were not informed by a knowledge of learning theory and thus not always optimal. His answer was simple; 'one person and one horse at a time and to lead by example'. This philosophy has worked well in the horse arena and is evident in what we all strive to do at H-ELP.

Thus, my mantra as member of the H-ELP team is to be mindful that all animals learn similarly but particularly horses and elephants, to take pride in our achievements, and to adapt and evolve with an eye on the ultimate prize; that of a better future for all animals, including humans.

Thank you for your support.

Nicki Stuart - Chair

'Social change and optimal welfare'

Andrew McLean – Senior Trainer & Senior Vice-President

The 2018 / 2019 year was a turning point for the H-ELP foundation. Importantly our foundation is at the helm of social change and we have managed to re-position ourselves in the captive elephant world in a very different way from where we began back in 2010. Our early work was almost entirely focused on humane elephant training with a particular emphasis on the early training of young elephants and ridden elephants for the service of humanity in ecology and forestry surveillance operations. It was an excellent beginning for us because it gave us a raft of skills as a solid base for our new mission in elephant welfare.



The recent focus of our work in Thailand and Laos was the establishment of Mahout training schools, and I was very happy to have Portland's involvement in helping design interactive ways teaching Mahouts about elephant training and learning. I was also particularly impressed with how fast our new trainees Sophie Warren and Kevin Ovenstone not only took up H-ELP's training methodology and especially in the way they interacted with the Mahouts and the patience and engagement in which they carried out their teaching.

During this year I also attended, as a speaker, the Asian Elephant Welfare Conference in Lampang. What I experienced there quite surprised me: the concept of welfare among elephant people including vets was an outdated application of the Five Freedoms Model. While I fully endorse maintaining elephants free of pain, distress etc. I really did expect that they would have moved on to the Five Domains Model, particularly in light of the fact elephants are known to be so socially intelligent. I mentioned this oversight and backwards thinking time and again and I think I made some headway, however I determined to attack this from academic point of view in scientific journals and then come back to them. I'm currently writing, with the help of the number of co-authors a new iteration of the Five Domains Model that specifically targets animals in captivity and that prioritises the importance of the animal's foraging needs, movement needs, social contact needs and the need for consistent training that correctly aligns with 'learning theory'. There is good news on the horizon however because many people became interested in this new model and as result we have been asked to help design ecotourism protocols in South East Asia where the very best welfare strategies for elephants can be implemented.

I was also asked to help design the new ABTA (Association of British Travel Agencies) guidelines for Southeast Asian ecotourism. The existing guidelines were archaic and technically flawed, so I made a significant contribution there and I'm pleased to say that the new guidelines are much better. What is still lacking is an understanding that elephants are necessarily handled and trained from birth by Mahouts and these people urgently need education to relinquish the use of punishment and to adopt the very best and most effective strategies in being able to move and control elephants.

Therefore, our new strategy for the H-ELP Foundation involves the development of Mahout Schools, and being at the forefront of developing better living circumstances for elephants throughout Southeast Asia. It is really important not only for social license but for the reality of the elephant's lives to move into this new world of optimal welfare. With our background and unique history of training elephants to do the most complex behaviours humanely, plus our new impetus in the world of welfare particularly from a strong academic point of view that also translates into the practical elephant camp, I see that the H-ELP Foundation has the potential for a greater impact for elephant welfare than any other organisation on earth.



100 books distributed to mahouts across multiple countries



5 Languages = Thai, Burmese, Laos. English, Malayalam



Countries where we conducted workshops = Laos and Thailand



Mahouts we trained = 35

Were able to educate **2** elephant trainers.
One from Australia, the other South Africa.

Attended **2** elephant welfares conferences.



Changi Rai Thailand
4 elephants



Mahout School Laos
4 elephants



Mandalao Laos
7 elephants

‘A life worth living’

Portland Jones –Mahout Training Co-ordinator



One of my roles within H-ELP is to nurture long term relationships with our overseas partners. This is incredibly rewarding because I interact regularly with elephant keepers all over Asia. I really admire the people we work with – they are trying to bring into balance history, culture, economics, welfare and the public's ever evolving perceptions of working elephants. They are doing an incredibly difficult job and doing it with grace and with the elephant's needs as top priority.

Everywhere I have travelled with H-ELP I have found that the people involved with elephants are ready to listen and ready to learn. It is humbling to stand in front of a class of 20 mahouts, (some of them with more than six generations of elephant trainers in their family tree)

and see their thirst for knowledge. It is a huge responsibility to help them to modernise their practices so that the age old traditions and culture can be sustained for the future. Every time I travel with H-ELP I am reminded that there are few things as precious as knowledge and education.

Every year it seems that interest grows in our work. We have a full trip with three trainers planned for October 2019 and I am already discussing the possibilities for 2020 with some new partners who are passionate about improving the welfare of elephants in their area. I see the work that H-ELP does becoming of increasing importance in the future. Tragically, the Asian elephant is endangered in the wild which means that to preserve this wonderful animal we must navigate the complexities of managing captive populations in sustainable ways. At H-ELP we have expanded our mission to include supporting elephant keepers both employ evidence based training and also to help them manage their elephants in the most ethical way possible.

The future for H-ELP looks both bright and busy. The road ahead may be full of challenges but our small and close knit team is ready for them. After all, there is no better goal than to give a working elephant, not just a life, but a life worth living.

H-ELP Financials June 30 2019

Reconciliation of bank accounts

Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 532 Opening balance 1 July 2018 **\$29,537,61**

Income to 30 June 2019

Closure of CBA Account	\$99,75
	\$1,250,00
Elephant Brooch	\$412,73
Paypal Credits [new bank account set up]	\$0,23
Total Income	\$1,762,71

Expenses incurred to 30 June

Account keeping fees	-\$102,20
AGM Expenses	-\$629,04
ASIC	-\$707,00
ASM Eclipse	-\$185,13
Hard drive for photos	-\$179,00
Insurance	-\$1,977,34
Miscellaneous Ball Expenses (R Staples reimbursement, Flower Girls & Co)	-\$539,74
Printing of manuals	-\$1,210,39
T-Shirts	-\$147,95
Trip Expense Reimbursement B Fulton Gillon	-\$777,00
Trip Expense [A Mclean reimbursement for Trip Jan 18]	-\$357,60
Trip Expense [October 2018 Trip1 Airfares & Accomodation]	-\$7,297,31
Trip Expense [Kevin Ovenstone]	-\$1,520,55
Trip Expense [ACEWG Meeting 25 & 26 January 2019 A McLean Airfares & Accomodation]	-\$2,116,21
Trip Expense [Denver Colorado - M Horobin Melb - Denver - Melb] [2019/2020 expense]	-\$1,257,13
Website (vimeo)	-\$111,10
Zoom (Meeting expense)	-\$251,88
Total Expenses	-\$19,366,57

162 091 532 Closing Balance 30 June 2019 **\$11,933,75**

1. October 2018 Trip - our volunteers travel economy class [insert how we source airfares], Melbourne (and Perth) to Bangkok & return. Internal flights are booked [insert how] and accomodation is sourced [insert the level of accomodation].

Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 516 Opening balance 1 July 2018 **\$33,322,81**

Income

Interest	\$61,19
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Total Income **\$61,19**

Expenses

Ball expenses (incurred in June 2018)	-\$23,404,00
Victoria Amateur Turf Club (hire of venue) \$21,654 & Artist at Work (\$1750)	
Total Expenses	-\$23,404,00

162 091 516 Closing Balance 30 June 2019 **\$9,980,00**

Bendigo Bank - Total Cash at Bank 30 June 2019 **\$21,913,75**

Paypal Account - Opening Balance 1 July 2018 **\$1,099,58**

Donations Received	\$5,963,97
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Closing Balance 30 June 2019 **\$7,063,55**

2018/2019 Profit and Loss to 30 June 2019

Income to 30 June 2019

Closure of CBA Account	\$99,75
Donations (Paypal)	\$5.963,97
Donations (Peter Horobin)	\$1.250,00
Elephant Brooch	\$412,73
Interest Earned	\$61,19
Paypal Credits [new bank account set up]	\$0,23

Total Income	\$7.787,87
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Expenses to 30 June 2019

Account keeping fees (Bendigo Bank)	-\$102,20
AGM Expenses	-\$629,04
ASIC	-\$707,00
ASM Eclipse	-\$185,13
Hard drive for photos	-\$179,00
Insurance	-\$1.977,34
Miscellaneous Ball Expenses (R Staples reimbursement, Flower Girls & Co)	-\$539,74
Printing of manuals	-\$1.210,39
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Trip Expense [Kevin Ovenston]	-\$1.520,55
Trip Expense [Denver Colorado - M Horobin Melb - Denver - Melb]	-\$1.257,13
Website (vimeo)	-\$111,10
Zoom (Meeting expense)	-\$251,88

Total Expenses	-\$19.366,57
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Operating loss 2018/2019 To 30 June 2019	-\$11.578,70
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2018/2019 Assets & Liabilities 30 June 2019

Assets (cash)	
Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 532 Closing Balance	\$11.933,75
Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 516 Closing Balance	\$9.980,00
Paypal Account Closing Balance (30 June)	\$7.063,55

Total Assets	\$28.977,30
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Liabilities

Total Liabilities at 30 June 2019	\$0,00
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Assets - Liabilities	\$28.977,30
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H-ELP Financials July 31 2019

Reconciliation of bank accounts

Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 532 Opening balance 1 July 2019	\$11.933,75
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Income to 31 July 2019	
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Total Income	\$0,00
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Expenses incurred to 31 July

Account keeping fees	-\$0,40
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Printing of manuals	-\$467,50*
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Zoom (Meeting expense)	-\$20,99
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Total Expenses	-\$488,89
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162 091 532 Closing Balance 31 July 2019	\$11.444,86
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Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 516 Opening balance 1 July 2019	\$9.980,00
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Income

Interest	\$4,13
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Total Income	\$4,13
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Expenses

Total Expenses	\$0,00
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162 091 516 Closing Balance 31 July 2019	\$9.984,13
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Bendigo Bank - Total Cash at Bank 31 July 2019	\$21.428,99
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Paypal Account - Opening Balance 1 July 2019	\$7.063,55
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Closing Balance 31 July 2019	\$7.063,55
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* Charged \$233.75 24 July and 27 July - check

Profit and Loss

Income to 31 July 2019

Interest Earned	\$4,13
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Total Income	\$4,13
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Expenses to 31 July 2019

Account keeping fees (Bendigo Bank)	-\$0,40
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Printing of manuals	-\$467,50
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Zoom (Meeting expense)	-\$20,99
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Total Expenses	-\$488,89
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Operating loss 2019/2020 To 31 July 2019	-\$484,76
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Assets and Liabilities

Assets (cash)

Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 532 Closing Balance	\$11.444,86
Bendigo Bank Account 162 091 516 Closing Balance	\$9.984,13
Paypal Account Closing Balance (31 July)	\$7.063,55

Total Assets	\$28.492,54
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Liabilities

Total Liabilities at 31 July 2019	\$0,00
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Assets - Liabilities	\$28.492,54
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‘The human element’ Kevin Ovenstone - Trainer

My first trip with H-ELP to Laos and Thailand was an incredible experience. My knowledge of Learning Theory and work with horses made the transition to elephants so fluid. This continued to be my experience with each new place we visited and trained. I also became more comfortable being around these impressive animals and perhaps a better sense for reading their behaviour.

But what makes a trip with H-ELP so much more dynamic and interesting is not just seeing the significant positive changes with each elephant we worked with but to engage, train and educate the Mahouts and the local population. It is the Human-Elephant Learning Programs after all and it is this human component that can be the most challenging yet rewarding. Translating all of these ideas and concepts into Laos and Thai adds another challenge because these languages are very descriptive and often there are no simple translatable words from English. We conducted workshops with the Mahouts introducing concepts of animal welfare, foreign viewpoints of elephant conservation in SE Asia and of course improving their knowledge of learning theory and its applications. It is vital to uplift both the elephant and human experience.

This segues into another invaluable insight I gained from this trip. It involves the controversial and hotly debated topic of the way forward for elephants in SE Asia. Not surprisingly people (especially back home in the western world from the comfort of their couches) seem to have a fairly black and white viewpoint. I must admit I was fairly ignorant to these issues too but after my time with H-ELP, I see that it is much more complicated and that it will take time, patience, education and progressive evidence-based training practices to create sustainable ways forward for the elephant.

In closing I am so thankful for Dr. Andrew Mc Lean and all the amazing people and trainers of H-ELP. It is a brilliant team that made every moment enjoyable. I see now first hand how this incredible organization lives up to its name. It is a large undertaking but I look forward to the challenge. The Elephants and Mahouts deserve it!



'A place for elephants'

Sophie Warren - Trainer

Most people will never get to see an Asian elephant in the wild – those days have long passed. The question we face now is how to train and manage the captive elephant population so that our children and grandchildren can see them outside of petting zoos and picture books.

As a horse trainer I privilege evidence based training systems so I'm always looking at things with my scientific goggles on. I like to think they strip back the years of anthropomorphic thinking and the notion that the horse is there to do a job for us and help us to train according to the ethology of the horse and the scientific principles of learning. This background in equitation science has really helped me to be confident embarking on only my second trip with elephants.

Without the human the horse would be extinct, the same could easily be true of elephants in a matter of years so it is important that we find a place for them in tourism because there is very little natural habitat left. While logistically more difficult to keep because of their size, food requirements and how much space they need and the number of miles they need to walk each day, it seems to me that if the training is done in an ethical and evidence based way it's no different to keeping a horse.

Michael Vogler and his team and partners at Mandalao Elephant Conservation in Laos are striving to keep their elephants in the

The elephant is a species at a crossroads. Caught between 5000 years of tradition, an ever-diminishing habitat and a growing tendency towards anthropomorphism.

best way possible by understanding their ethology and designing their management accordingly. We are working with their young male elephant, Kit, aiming to improve his forward and backwards responses and testing his understanding of these by consolidating his 'park'. Kit has now learned to lift both hind legs onto a stump for future foot treatments as well. We worked closely with Will Thomas from Animal Doctors International who looks after the veterinary work at Mandalao to weigh the elephants, do general health checks and to gain an understanding of what training would be useful to aid him in his work. The elephants at Mandalao are kept in as natural environment as possible which helps to also reduce the risk of many common issues in captive elephants.

We've been working closely with the mahouts to explain the differences between habituation (or getting an elephant used to something, such as the mahout touching her feet) and training a response (for example getting the elephant to lift her foot onto a stump to have it touched). The mahouts are very interested and engaged in the learning and training, we feel our work here will make a lasting impression as the mahouts work each day to try and understand and improve the training of their elephants.

The scientific understanding of learning and behaviour is only around half a century old, on the other hand elephant training, like horse training, is around 5000 years old and steeped in tradition and folklore. It is easy to see why science is slow to gain traction in these deeply traditional practices, just like it is in the equestrian industry. However, so far we have had a great reception everywhere we go – it is such an efficient way of training and the Mahouts have great relationships with their elephants.

As a horse trainer I've also done work training camels, dogs, and our own cats. At home we use the principles of equitation science in both our foundation training programs and for retraining of ex-racehorses and solving behavioural problems in difficult horses. The uptake of behaviours seems to happen at a very similar rate across the species we've worked with which I find very interesting. Camels and elephants are slower in their movements and less flighty than horses which changes some of the initial focuses of the training but effectively they are both big, strong, fast and potentially dangerous animals so the training initially begins with controlling the movements of their legs.

We're looking forward to our next training camp where we will work with mahouts from several different elephant camps across Luang Prabang and Thailand.



The Asian Elephant Welfare Conference 2018

Report from Andrew McLean



I arrived at the National Elephant Institute, in Lampang, in time for the opening ceremony of the Asian Elephant Welfare Conference. This was a dual effort of both the Copenhagen Zoo and the (Thai) National Elephant Institute.

We began the conference itself with the presentation entitled: Captive elephant welfare - An overview by Bjarne Clausen, Denmark. Bjarne has been an extraordinary support for H-ELP and the work we do. Bjarne's underlying theme was underscored by his quotation "when man takes animals into his service, it is his duty to treat them well". Following Bjarne's presentation, I gave an overview of the work done by Human - Elephant Learning Programs (H-ELP). I was very aware that the concept of conflict theory is not understood by most people, even behaviourists, and seems difficult to grasp. The more you have worked with elephants, the more you are drawn into the traditional paradigm of thinking. So I emphasised that the behaviour problems that are seen are frequently symptoms of dysfunctions in the use of negative reinforcement. And further, that our remit is not to do away with the negative reinforcement but to teach people around the world to do it better, so that SIGNALS are consistent, clear and that they shrink to light versions of the tactile pressure and voice commands.



The National Elephant Institute, Lampang, Thailand.

Following my presentation, my old friend and supporter from The Wildlife Trust of India, Dr Ashraf Naduvilvappil gave a presentation on "Compromised welfare and measures to address it".

Dr Ashraf confirmed the uptake of H-ELP's work throughout India and the struggle to change old ways.

Almost all of the presentations addressed at this conference approached the topic of animal welfare entirely from the veterinary perspective. Other topics presented included 'Elephant Endotheliotropic Herpes Virus' by Kathryn Perrin of Denmark, 'Bull management and control' by Kushal Konwar Sarma of India, 'Translocation and transportation initiatives' by Zaw Min Oo, from Myanmar and 'Contingency plans for elephant related emergencies-public and health' by N. S. Manoharan of India and Chandana Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka.

In the afternoon we formed groups to discuss welfare impacts of the above topics within the framework of "The Five Freedoms". In fact The Five Freedoms concept was central to this entire conference and can understand that because of the importance within the concept of avoiding pain, poor nutrition etc however I think the conference would have been more up-to-date had it focused on more recent model of David Mellor's "The Five Domains" which is not only focuses on the negative aspects of poor welfare in nutrition, environment, physical health and behaviour but also includes the signs of positive welfare in these areas and furthermore this model shows that the insults to these domains all impact on an animal's mental health, and this is of vital importance.

The next day, further presentations were again from the veterinary perspective and included 'Pain relief of sick and injured individuals' by Carsten Grøndahl of Denmark and Christopher Stremme of Indonesia and 'Sedative immobilization of elephants' by Vijitha Perera of Sri Lanka and Khajohnpat Boonprasert of Thailand. Following these presentations, Nepal's chief elephant vet, Dr Kamal Gairhe and Prasop Tipprasert (another of H-ELP's big supporters) of Laos spoke about 'Restraint procedures for sick and injured elephants'.

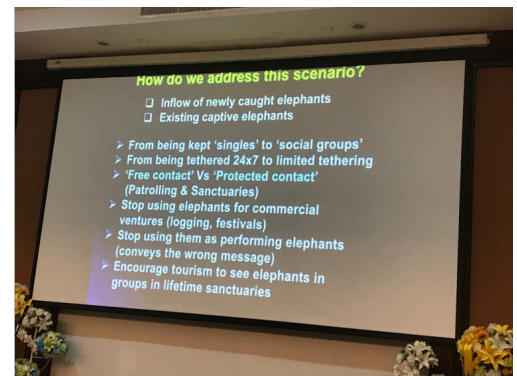
In mid-morning, we took a shuttle bus to the Elephant Hospital in Lampang. There we had presentations on endoscopic diagnosis, medical management including life support, immobilisation of elephants, dealing with osteoarthritis in geriatric elephants, and nutritional management.

In the afternoon we went back to the conference venue and discussed within the group setting topics such as pain relief, sedative and mobilisation and restraint procedures from the viewpoint of The Five Freedoms.

The following day, we took a field trip to the Phang-Lha Elephant Rehabilitation Center, a place for very old elephants and very dangerous elephants: elephants that had killed people. These elephants were chained and heavily monitored by their mahouts who at least had a bond with the elephants and were with them almost all of the day night. At this centre there was also display of the various locally grown herbal medicines used to cure various diseases and behaviour problems. There was also talk on the 'Management of musth in bull elephants' by Petthisak Sombatputorn, as well as a presentation on the approaches to pain management of terminally ill individuals and the care of geriatric elephants.



Dr Ashraf and his address on compromised welfare



Encouraging signs in the presentations of a few delegates suggesting the importance of socialisation and greater freedom to move.



An elephant restrained for treatment at the hospital



An old bull elephant that had killed 3 people



Group discussion on stereotypes and frustration behaviours

At the end of the day certificates were handed out to all delegates and finally we departed for our hotel and ultimately travelling home to our various countries.

After the conference, I had a very productive discussion with Nina Brask, (H-ELP's most valuable supporter from the Danish Welfare Society) Michael Vogler and Dr Will Thomas (both from the Mandalao Elephant Conservation centre in Laos where we have worked in the last couple of years). This discussion centred on the dire need at these elephant welfare conferences to focus on behaviour training, including the myriad desensitisation techniques that we have been using for many years with great success and without the need for physical restraint. In general, throughout Asia we need a much broader, safer and more up-to-date approach to the way elephants are trained and handled 24-hours per day.

Michael Vogler offered to take a big leap in this direction by suggesting that the Mandalao Elephant Conservation Centre to host the next elephant welfare conference in November, 2019. From my point of view, it would be most educational to have a balance of both veterinary and behaviour management aspects from the framework of The Five Domains. I believe that this approach will provide a greater guarantee for the safety and welfare of the captive elephants that constitute a significant percentage of the Asian Elephant population.

I would very much like to thank all our donors including the Danish Animal Welfare Society for enabling need to attend this conference. Because we now have not only our clear sights set on the next elephant welfare conference in Laos, but we will have more progressive agenda there that will undoubtedly accelerate improved elephant welfare throughout Asia.



Our final group photo at the rehab centre with some geriatric elephants in the background

The Asian Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG) meeting

Report from Andrew McLean

The first day of this meeting began with a presentation from John Roberts on what ACEWG is all about. We all introduced ourselves and then began a discussion on the need throughout Asia to improve the welfare of the Asian elephant. I began to realise very quickly how heavily outnumbered I was in this room from my standpoint. Of the people directly involved with elephants at this meeting, most were either vets or zoo-based trainers who go to Asia to teach target training and who work in protected contact (i.e. from behind a wall). What we do with H-ELP is very unique because we work in a free contact (directly with the elephant) situation.

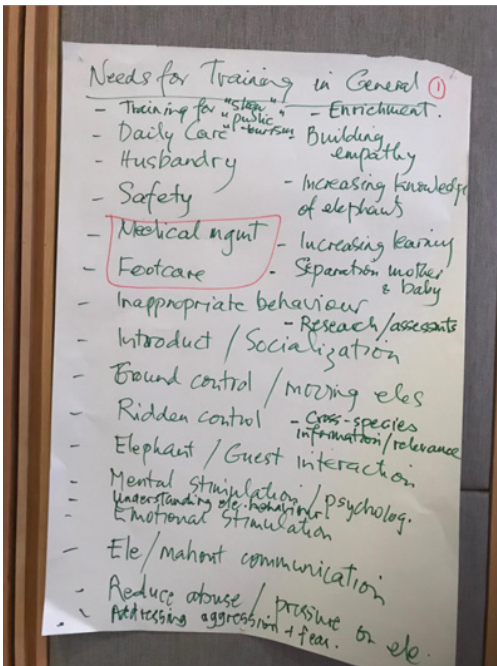
We heard via the grapevine that there was an expectation that we would all end up disagreeing with each other especially between H-ELP's approach and the approach of the target trainers. I networked with the target trainers and we found common ground so that when we arrived at the meeting the next day we were able to support the work of each other which is most important, because there is no strength in splintered ideologies that mostly share common ground. The main difference however between our two approaches is that H-ELP's work is more holistic in that we train mahouts to train and interact with their elephants in a more safe and efficient way both on the ground and where relevant, when riding the elephant as well as dealing with all manner of behaviour problems in the free contact situation with a large array of techniques including various desensitisation techniques. On the other hand, the target training people work in protected contact and utilise positive reinforcement where they train the elephant to move toward and touch a target with a specific and targeted body part and they use this method as the solution for all behaviour problems. For example, if an elephant showed resistance to having its eye touched by a human, H-ELP would use the counter conditioning technique which utilises positive reinforcement whereas the target training group would train the elephant via target training to move its eye toward the human. Both techniques are valid.

The next day we had further discussions about specific aspects of training and welfare and with the aim to teach the non-trainer delegates to understand the differences and fundamental similarity in terms of learning theory, between the various training approaches. From my perspective I wanted them to recognise that even the zoo trainers and ourselves come from the very same place in that we use learning theory as the basic framework of our work but there are many roads to Rome in the techniques that are used.

Following this, there was a Council meeting of ACEWG and as I'm not a member of this group, (my membership is of the IUCN-based Asian Elephant Specialist Group, the AESG) I left the meeting. The following two days were set aside for trainers to form a specific Asian Elephant Training group and formalise this. We did just that and we



The ACEWG group focuses on improving conditions for captive elephants which account for a third of Asian elephants



Some of the points raised about current training needs

formed the unwieldy named Asian Elephant Behaviour Management Working Group (AEBMWG). As time goes on will probably change our name into something like the International Asian Elephant Trainers Association.

This meeting spanned two days and we spent much time setting up a framework for this group that included a mission statement, vision, objectives and outputs. Because there were five zoo-based target trainers and only myself from H-ELP, I emphasised the clear distinction between the protected contact training of the target trainers where they worked behind a three or four sided wall for safety's sake and outside their target training framework they do not train the mahouts to implement combined reinforcement for their 24/7 interactions whereas H-ELP's work is in free contact and we focus on training the mahouts on how to train their elephants in a more humane and efficient manner in all their interactions with their elephants using combined reinforcement.

The target trainers showed surprise that H-ELP works in free contact however I explained that using very subtle tactile pressures that induce an immediate correct response that in turn is reward by positive reinforcement as well as the termination of the tactile reinforcement very quickly makes the elephants calm and in all our years of doing this in five countries we have never encountered and aggression in training. My biggest concern is that outside of the training wall, if the mahouts are not trained to reconfigure their training and abandon punishment that, regardless of method, the elephants will still be subject to injury and pain and are likely to become aggressive. In fact, we have seen in such scenarios recent injuries where the mahouts are using their ankuses on the animal and with visible and recent wounds on the head and ears. What I learned from meeting this group and hearing in detail of their methodologies, that H-ELP's work is critical. Therefore, the work outside the target training pen is paramount and would greatly assist the elephants to be calmer at the outset for the target training.

I am grateful to all our donors for their support in enabling me to obtain a clearer picture of the current new wave of elephant training in SE Asia and as I mentioned it highlighted H-ELP's relevance more than ever.