

**An Assessment of the Welfare aspect of
Elephant training at the Elephant Breeding
Center
Khorsor, Sauraha, Chitwan,
Nepal, 2011**



PHOTO: Manoj Gautam



PETA INDIA

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Manoj Gautam
Santosh Khatiwada

Research Methodology

The overall research was based on reconnaissance survey, direct observation, interviews with stakeholders and secondary investigation on a purposive manner.

Study area being Sauraha, the Elephant breeding center, Khorsor and the NTNC Elephant Shelter were the focal observation and study sites.

Physical, psychological and emotional aspects were taken into consideration while assessing the condition of elephants and/or the intensity of pressure imposed on elephants while under training.

Seven days were allocated for the Literature review while all the field work was completed in a period of 12 days, followed by a month long interviewing and discussions with different stakeholders.

Captive Elephants in Nepal

The history of the capture, taming and use of Asian elephants is a long one. Domesticated Asian elephants have long been associated with religious beliefs and practices, and the elephant was a status symbol of a wealthy owner in the past. Now, the domesticated elephants in Nepal are used for forest excursions, and for entertaining tourists in parks and reserves. They have also become an important scientific subject for wildlife biologists, park/reserve managers and field investigators. Elephant camps



PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

have been established along with protected areas located in the lowlands of Nepal, namely the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR), the Parsa Wildlife Reserve (PWR), the Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP), the Royal Bardia National Park (RBNP) and the Royal Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (RSWR) (Kharel, 2000).

Elephant Breeding Center

Realizing the need to conserve the declining population of wild elephants in Nepal, a Task Force was commissioned in 1985 by the Chief Secretariat of His Majesty the King to carry out a study and make recommendations on the management of elephants in captivity. As a result of the recommendations contained in the Task Force Report (1985), an



PHOTO: Gabriel Diamond

elephant breeding center was established at Khorsor in RCNP in 1986. The objectives of the breeding center were to begin scientific breeding and carry out research on elephants. It was also expected to gain experience in elephant management and their use in the management of protected areas. Initially, the elephant breeding center began with 22 elephants (16 from India, four from Thailand and two from Myanmar) (Kharel, 2000). Today, the number has been added by two making it 24, which is comprised as 7 babies with mother, 5 juvenile and 12 adult females.

The Elephant Breeding Center in Khorsor is just adjacent to the Chitwan National Park and all of

the elephants at the center are taken to the park jungle for green fodder during the day time. The proximity of the National Park to breeding center also hosts wild bulls that present themselves as sires for the breeding center. Calves of all ages are free and spend relatively free, healthy and joyful hours in the day time under the protection of their mother. Unlike, privately owned elephants these breeding center elephants get a healthy access to green food materials which makes the breeding center one of the most considerate elephants shelters in the world in terms of welfare and husbandry standards.

Breeding center as elephant training center

Along with the purpose of breeding elephants the breeding center also stood as the place for training juvenile elephants to turn them into obedient working elephants. All of the elephants born in the breeding center or in any other elephant shelters are sent to this center to get trained. Later, even the calves of private sector elephants in case of breeding began to get trained at this center. There were two recent cases of exception to this and the two cases of elephants trained by the private owners were investigated by the observers and are mentioned below in the *Cases 3 and 4*.

Brought in from India, the traditional knowledge on elephant training is still pretty much the same. Even the instruction words for the elephants are still the same as used in the place of origin of the first elephants. The ceremony and rituals involved in the training of elephants is said to be little distorted as it is being handed over to generations of mahouts but the training, its structure, activities involved and the basic concept still is as primitive as it was in the very beginning of the breeding center. Intimidation, pain and harsh desensitization are still the key tools of elephant training at the breeding center.

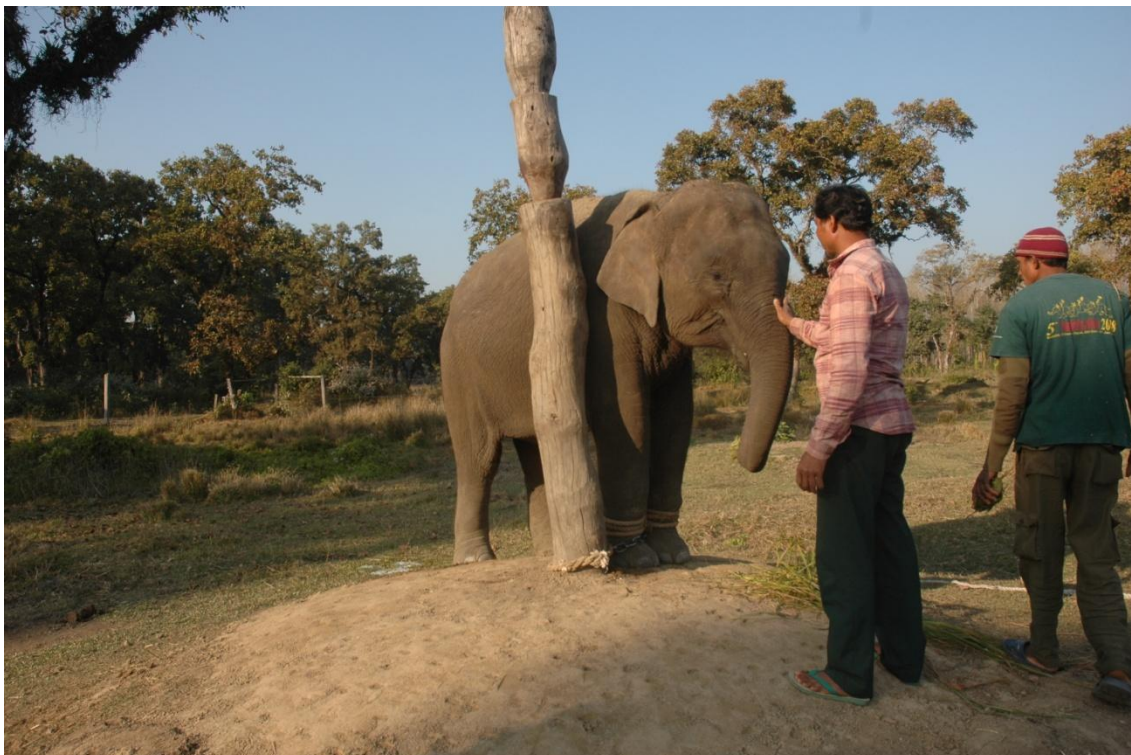


PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

A five years old calf being readied for desensitization session on the mud dome

Training, its structure and content are listed and elaborated as below.

Training Practices

Phases of Training (as sketched through observation and investigation)

1. Separation from mother

Baby Elephants from as early as two years are separated from their mother and are tied a couple of meters away from each other. Calves cry and try to reach mothers all the time for the first few days of separation but slowly get accustomed to it. (America Chaudhary, In-charge, Elephant Training in Khorsor)

2. Ceremony before formal training

This is the commencing point of isolation of the calf selected for training. There is certain ritual that the trainers and their group perform before they actually start with the desensitization.



PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

A calf separated from its mother was repeating efforts to break the chain.

3. Desensitization (fire, crowd, noise, mounting, physical sensation)

Calves above 3 years of age are put into harsh training sessions that includes intimidation by a group of people with the use of loud noises, fire, repeated beating, riding on it, scrubbing its body parts, poking etc, while they are tied tightly on a pole from their neck and are shackled in both their hind and fore limbs.

This is supposed to desensitize the elephants of the instinctive fear for fire, crowd, loud noise etc. and to get them used to with people riding them,



PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

Punti under desensitization course

touching or scrubbing them etc. *This session goes on for 2 hours every night normally for about 2 weeks, which can go longer just in case the calf does not give up (get tamed)* (America Chaudhary, In-charge, Elephant Training in Khorsor)

CASE 2: Preparation for the training of Loktantra Kali aka Punti was on peak while the observation team reached the breeding center. A team of people were seen preparing *kutani* (special cotton ropes that are soft but strong to be used as shackles). Later, the rituals were performed and Punti was brought to this isolated post in the middle of a small recently made mud dome. There, she was tied tightly to the post from her neck and was loosely shackled. She spent nearly three hours there until the men came after dinner. 3 men mounted her and the shackles in her both the hind and fore limbs were tightened. Punti could only tightly revolve around the pole while 5 men started to rub sticks on her legs, trunk and belly. Everyone started to sing specific songs while the men with sticks were breaking the rhythm of rubbing by hitting Punti at times. A couple of people were engaged in lighting

stacks of dried elephant grass and were winging the burning stacks around Punti very close to her, sometimes very close (by 5-6 inches) to her eyes. At some interval of time she was being poked by the burning stack of the grass, not enough to burn her but to make her feel the sensation of the heat related with the fire. As everything was ongoing a guy among the trainers was assigned to hit Punti at the tip of her trunk in a repeated manner. Punti was trumpeting out of horror and was revolving around the post which was only making the crowd around her, more aggressive. Punti's eyes were wider than ever and she was seen to be trying to hide the tip of her trunk in her mouth but the guy who was supposed to be hitting her at the tip of the trunk was being assisted by a couple of others who were not letting Punti hide the tip of her trunk.

Some bruises were observed at the legs caused by the tight rope-shackles, by the end of the session and the trainers were seemed to be concerned about it and were discussing about



Punti under desensitization course

PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada



Bruises showing in Punti's legs

PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

some ointment they could use on it next day. Puntí was numbed and was left tied with the shackles off from the legs for the night. She was heard trumpeting for quite some time after every one had left, as if in serious disapproval of what had just happened.

The same thing happened every night for 18 days however the intensity of harshness was gradually lowered down every day and on the later days it was limited to caressing, swinging fire and singing. The day time was relatively relaxed for the Puntí as she roamed in jungle and did not have much of harsh instructions or treatment to suffer.

During all these days of desensitizing sessions no veterinarians or WWF staffs (observers) or any senior government officials were present at the sessions.

4. Ride

PHOTO: S. Khatiwada



Barbed Shackle

In most of the cases observed, ears of the elephants were pierced and hook was used in the pierce holes for pulling it to instill the sense of direction in the

elephants and also as a safety measure, to keep elephants in control in case of any incidents. The trainees are tethered to an adult elephant and are taken for a walk in the jungle with saddle and some men on them.

In the first few days during walk, trainees are only taken out in barbed shackle in one leg the end of which is tied tightly to the stump of the saddle on the top of the same trainee, such that fast or reckless movements of the trainee is limited and controlled.

A short stick was always observed to be used by the trainers which they used to hit in the head of the trainees to remind them of the mistakes and many times just to create pressure on them to do desired stuffs.

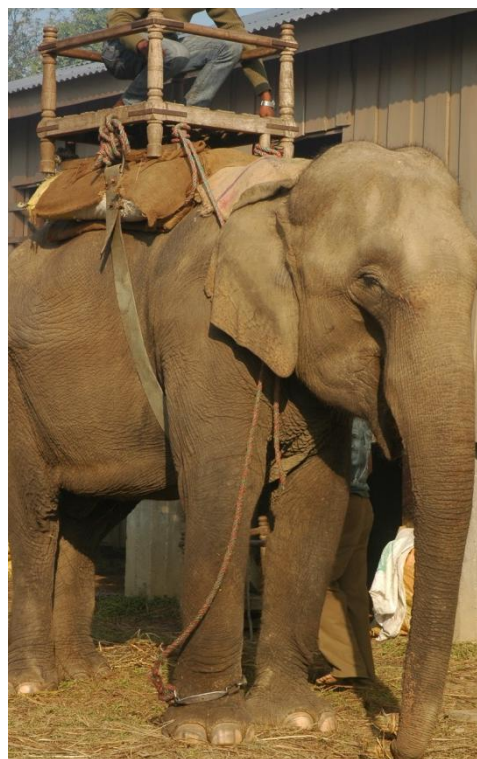


PHOTO: Santosh Khatiwada

Barbed Shackle tethered to the saddle

5. Introduction to different aspects

In this phase of training, the trainers take the trainees to jungle and introduce them with animals like deer, wild boars, Rhinos and Tigers if possible. This is an important part of the training as the elephants are supposed to lead researchers, park authorities and tourists to such animals in their work life. So, the repeated exposure to such animals makes the elephants accustomed and they shed the fear of such animals and can perform better. Similarly, exposure

to automobiles and highway is another important learning for the elephants. During such exposures when the trainee elephants refuse to continue or if they retreat, they are beaten in the head with a stick and the back of their ears is continually pressed hard so as to make them move further.

6. Work (carrying logs)
7. Trust building



PHOTO: Manoj Gautam

Improvement initiatives

WSPA/WWF Humane Elephant Training Program introduced the Humane Way of training elephants in Bardia and Shauraha. The results of the training were said to be visible and pronounced in Bardia whereas in Chitwan it was not noticeable in the practice of mahouts. However, the practice now as compared to its form in past years as mentioned in literatures seemed to be less cruel. At least, the mahouts were conscious of and thus influenced by the presence of visitors around while treating elephants. In these circumstances the mahouts were seen to be very mild and generous towards elephants, caressing, feeding and talking to the elephants while trying to assure them that they were doing well. Even the tone of voice of the mahouts could be read different in presence of visitors than while just with other park staffs. This shows that the mahouts must have been oriented about the concept of welfare and the way world sees the cruel ways of dealing with animals. Also, about 80 visitors (in average) that visit the breeding center in Sauraha, some of whom express disappointment over the ways elephants are treated, this could be another possible reason causing mahouts and center staffs to act differently when visitors are around.

CASE 2: There was a calf of about 5 years old that was still under training (advance level) which seemed to be little adamant and still wild by temperament. It was shackled (with barbs inside) in one leg and the end of the chain was tethered to the post of its saddle on its own back so as to limit his speed. This juvenile was deployed at the Elephant Shelter of the National Trust for Nature Conservation. It was observed to be treated relatively well while in presence of the team of observers whereas the mahouts were observed to be hitting the juvenile on its head with a stick repeatedly as soon as they would take it a little further towards the jungle. The thud sound of the stick striking the head would be heard for a long time even after the juvenile was out of the sight, inside the jungle.

Fusion Approach

The impact of the training for the mahouts on training the elephants as explained by the shelter staffs and authorities was that now they train their elephants in rather mixed approach (fusion of traditional ways and method of positive reinforcement). During the observation period, it was noticed that the natural love and affection for elephants among the mahouts had remained same and no remarkable changes had been induced in the mindset/comprehension of mahouts regarding the concept of positive/negative reinforcement. As stated in the report 'Elephant Training Project Nepal, December 2007', by WSPA/WWF, the idea of pre-school training for the yearling is crucial to the installation of Positive/negative reinforcement. However, it was noticed that calves below 3 years of age were not receiving any pre-schooling or any kind of treatment to gradually accustom them to the things that they would have to do in the days to come.

There was no written Training Protocol that was being followed or any reinforcement schedule which was guiding the training. The training seemed to have resumed the same traditional model and schedule after the WSPA/WWF training was over.

Moreover, the one shot, cruel and abusive way of desensitizing the calves which runs for about 2 weeks is still practiced, which cannot otherwise be accommodated under humane training model.

According to the Humane Training Model introduced by WSPA/WWF, the ear signals instructions were gradually introduced to a year old calf in an open, mild and calf-friendly environment in a joyful way. However, during the observation period, the ear signal instructions were observed to be imposed on the trainee elephant in a rather cruel and clinically wrong manner within the duration of Desensitization Session, while several other instructions were being introduced to the trainee at the same time.

Hence, the observation team disagrees with the statement that the current practice of training elephants in Elephant Breeding Center in Khorosor, Sauraha is a fusion of Traditional and Humane way and testifies that besides taking relatively less cruel actions upon trainee elephants (previously the trainees were fed less during training and were left with big scars and incisions made by metal hooks on the ears and forehead and now it is just some rashes/bruises made by rope shackles by the end of desensitization), not much in the way of training has been changed.

Justification to the Compromise in Elephant Welfare

As justification, for the cruelty in elephant training, the staffs and authorities state that it is integral part of the training. Mahouts and Fanets involved in training elephants have been using cruel ways of breaking down the elephants' wild behavior. The cruel method of training elephants, coming from as far as from the time when wild calves were caught and trained, still is deeply instilled in the mind set of traditional trainers and is reflected in their practice. The traditional method is what everyone (handlers and authorities) trusts in as it is the only way that has been practiced so far in the country. Trust has always been a big factor in handling elephants, as mahouts keep getting killed at an average rate of 1 mahout in every 2 years.

America Chaudhary, the in charge of the training was quoted as saying '*Mahouts cannot take any chances on handling elephants trained otherwise, as no such examples of success are ever known to exist in our place. Moreover, any case of murders of mahouts by elephants is attributed to the liberal training*'.

Similarly, the Chief Warden of Chitwan National Park Mr. Narendra Babu Man Pradhan stated *'The elephants are the back bones of the overall operation of the National Park Management. They are crucial element of conservation, research and tourism which means they are supposed to be able to deal with situations like forest fires, encounters with poachers, flood, crowd, other wild animals and vehicles. For this, they need to be prepared and so they are. The call*



PHOTO: Gabriel Diamond

Captive Elephants deployed for conservation purpose in CNP

of Animal Welfare here does not count as the compromise to the welfare of elephants here is inevitable. We have to make a choice between conservation and elephant welfare, and it is of course conservation for us. They are after all beasts, handlers need to make sure of their own safety and at the same time make the elephants do their jobs, and this is a grey line. Besides, the elephants are taken good care of. Welfare activists should understand this.'

Special Cases

Training by private sector -

CASE 3: Bhawani Kali

She is a 4 and half years old juvenile owned by a private house named Hotel Jungle Vista in Shauraha. She was born in captivity and looked after by the family members that owned her mother. The special thing about this female juvenile is that she was trained by the same people who brought her up and she didn't have go through all the phases of trainings as in the Breeding center. She is now mounted with 3 people and is showing tourists around Shauraha though not yet inside the jungle.

Training for Bhawani Kali started while she was one year of age.

The separation from her mother was agonizing for us so we tricked it by bringing another female close to baby Bhawani which would get the baby Bhawani away from her mother without anyone suffering. This way we got both the mother and the daughter separated in a very humane way, however, it was a continuous process repeated for two months – Ramsharan Silwal, Owner of Bhawani Kali.

The owners claim that their method of training was not painful to the elephant except that they had to pierce the ears and that they use hook to pull the ears from the pierce-holes to stop Bhawani Kali from making reckless moves. The pierce hole was observed to be still in use.

The overall, training of Bhawani Kali was a gradual playful experience of learning over an extended period of time – Ramesh Silwal, Brother of Ramsharan Silwal, if which is in case true,

can be new model for training elephants in an humane way. Another positive side of Bhawani Kali's case is that she is a well built and healthy female now who has outgrown her peers from other private resorts and from government breeding centers.

CASE 4: Subha kali

Another privately trained elephant from the Gaiinda Camp Resort was also studied during the visit. The calf of above 4 years of age seemed to be severely underfed and very abnormally small for her age in size, almost half of the size of Bhawani Kali. Suva kali was trained by Camp staffs inside the camp premises. Training for Subha Kali was said to have started from one year of age. Practices like singing and



PHOTO: Gabriel Diamond

One of the research team members interacting with Subha Kali

introducing fire were avoided in this case; however, one day ritual in the first day of training was performed just to keep up with the traditional/religious norms.

"We never used fire and kerosene during the training", said Surendara Gurung Kasariya Fanet of the elephant. "We did pierce the ear of the elephant and did beat her as well. We did not use axe but used the iron hook for pulling the elephant towards right direction. The first 15 days of the training were very difficult. We used to take her to long walk. She is not fully trained yet but we are satisfied with her progress and current performance." We never tied the elephant tightly during the training, Kasariya added.

CONSTRAINTS OF THE STUDY: The study was limited to the 12 days of field work which allowed the study team to investigate and observe only limited cases. Besides this, the permission for the filming and desired observation of the overall training of Loktantra Kali was not provided by the local authority as well as the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), despite of a formal submission of application for the permission together with a research proposal to the DNPWC. This was the major hindrance for the research work.

CONCLUSION: The traditional method of training of elephants in Shauraha is prominent and widely trusted method, which, with no doubts is cruel to Elephants and seriously violates the norms of animal welfare. As an addressing initiative, WSPA/WWF Humane Elephant Training Program introduced Humane Method of training focusing on the idea of Positive Reinforcement

and trained the Mahouts of Elephant Breeding Center in Khorsor. This initiative was observed to have certainly been able in making a breakthrough in the long running trend and the mindset of people involved (local and central) in the training of elephants. However, the study team concluded that the one-shot initiative has not been able to bring about any tangible change in the practice of Elephant Training, favoring elephants. The current practice of training goes unmonitored and quick follow-ups seemed to be lacking. The initiative, however, has led the path and has created space for follow-ups and reinforcing attempts from various sectors.

Recommendations:

- The training to the Mahouts about how to train and treat the elephants humanely must be provided on a regular basis because as stated by the WSPA/WWF training team the authority and the mahouts were positive and receptive, but one shot training didn't seem to have any remarkable impact.
- Monitoring from senior level officer during the training time is highly recommended.
- Presence of a veterinarian during the intense sessions of training is highly recommended.
- The process of separation of calves from the mother needs to be more creative to turn it into a gradual process, making it less harsh on both mothers and the calves.
- The exposure to the fire, vehicle and crowd can be done while the calf is of 1 or 1 and half years of age, in a gradual and playful manner.
- Overall Domestic Elephant Management Policy needs a serious review and the clauses need serious enforcement.
- The number of staffs at the Elephant Breeding Center (EBC) needs to be increased so that the mild training of the calves from the early age becomes possible, as the limited number of workmen was said to have hindered the overall functioning of the EBC.

QUOTE: *'The Government of Nepal brings a policy that states discontinuation of recruitment of the same number of peons as before from offices and the tragedy hits mahouts as the administrative definition of PEON includes mahouts as well, and most severely the tragedy hits the elephants.*

In the given circumstances we have less number of people than what we need to look after each of our elephants. Many times one mahout is bound to handle more than one elephant; this causes the loss in personal bondage between mahouts and elephants and often leads to disastrous incidents where mahouts even get killed.

Elephant caretakers (Fanets, Mahouts and Pachhuwa) are not normal peons, they cannot be generalized as normal peons, they are specified staffs with special skills and we need them here in the number proportionate to the number of elephants we have (the proportion being three caretakers per elephants) – Lal Bd. Bhandari, National Trust for Nature Conservation, Sauraha, Chitwan.

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