



Elephant Rides and Trekking: Big Fun, but at a Great Cost

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*Ethical Traveler¹, in an effort to provide readers with advice on how to travel the world with minimum negative impact, has made a commitment to call out forms of tourism which cause suffering for animals **This brief establishes our position against elephant rides** (also known as elephant trekking), a popular diversion for travelers in Asia.*

Elephants are one of the most iconic species on earth. They are also one of the most beleaguered. African elephants are poached for their ivory, while Asian elephants—which are smaller, and less likely to possess the tusks coveted by the ivory trade—are at risk of capture in order to provide “entertainment” for tourists.

Elephant rides are a popular tourist attraction in several parts of Asia, with the bulk of elephant ride operators working in Thailand. Tourists, eager to spend time with these majestic animals, are often unaware of the cruelty required to transform a wild elephant into a “domesticated” animal used for rides and other entertainment activities. This cruelty is summed up by four “C’s” - capture, crush, coercion and confinement.

Capture: The vast majority of Asian elephants used for tourism are captured in the wild. As wild adult elephants are extremely dangerous to handle, poachers seek elephant calves, usually capturing them via “pit traps” set in the jungle. During a capture, adult female elephants who try to protect their babies are often killed by

¹ Ethical Traveler is a 501(c)3 project of the Earth Island Institute.

poachers. The calves are then transported to training centers, where they endure a process known as *phajaan*.

Crush: The domestication of wild elephants happens via a process called the *phajaan*, or “crush.” The crush involves breaking the spirit of a young elephant, and has been thus described by Animals Asia: “During this long process, the calves are deprived of food and water, tied up and beaten relentlessly, often using primitive instruments such as bamboo sticks with metal nails embedded in the ends. Reports have revealed that many calves die from their injuries, stress or starvation.”

Coercion: Calves that survive the crush are subject to the use of pain as a form of coercion. Bullhooks - long poles with pointed metal tips - are used to control the “domesticated” elephant for the rest of its life.

Confinement: In the wild, Asian elephants roam through many miles of forest each day and inhabit home territories of 100,000-200,000 acres. In captivity, these same animals are generally chained for many hours each day, allowing only minimal movement (except for when they are giving rides or performing for tourists).

In light of the cruelty inherent in elephant capture and training, Ethical Traveler joins the ranks of like-minded travel organizations like [Intrepid Travel](#) and [Responsible Travel](#) in affirming that **we do not support elephant rides as a tourist activity**.

Proponents may claim that elephant tourism is a useful alternative for elephants retired from the logging industry however it is important to note that the majority of elephants used in tourism are captured for that purpose as infants – despite the fact that capturing wild elephants is illegal in much of Asia.² Elephant ride operations in countries like Thailand are fueling the smuggling of elephants into that country from Myanmar.

² Logging was banned in Thailand in 1989, leaving many wild-captured but now “domesticated” elephants without “employment.” Fortunately, sanctuaries like Elephants World and the Elephant Nature Park have been able to provide homes for some of these animals. While it’s true that current sanctuaries may not be equipped to take in every elephant, that doesn’t mean that transferring them to another inhumane setting is the correct thing to do. The answer lies in advocating for and supporting the growth of more sanctuaries. There is increasing pressure on the government of Thailand to take a more active role in creating such sanctuaries,

And whether an elephant was originally taken from the wild for logging or for tourism, it still suffered through the crush—and is still being confined and controlled through force and pain. If it is used in trekking, the elephant is also being forced to carry far more weight than its spine is meant to bear. Though elephants are large animals, their spines are quite fragile and can typically support only up to 200 lbs. without risk of vertebrae damage—yet ride operators generally fit their elephants with metal bench seats meant to hold as many as four adults at a time. The argument that elephant rides help promote conservation is also false, as it is common for at least one adult to be injured or killed during the capture of a calf—and many calves do not survive the forced early weaning from their mothers, or subsequent cruelty of the crush.

The good news is that there are indeed opportunities to spend time with Asian elephants in ethical, humane surroundings at places like the [Elephant Nature Park](#) or [Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary](#). We encourage you to visit them!

Sources (as of July 21st, 2015):

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