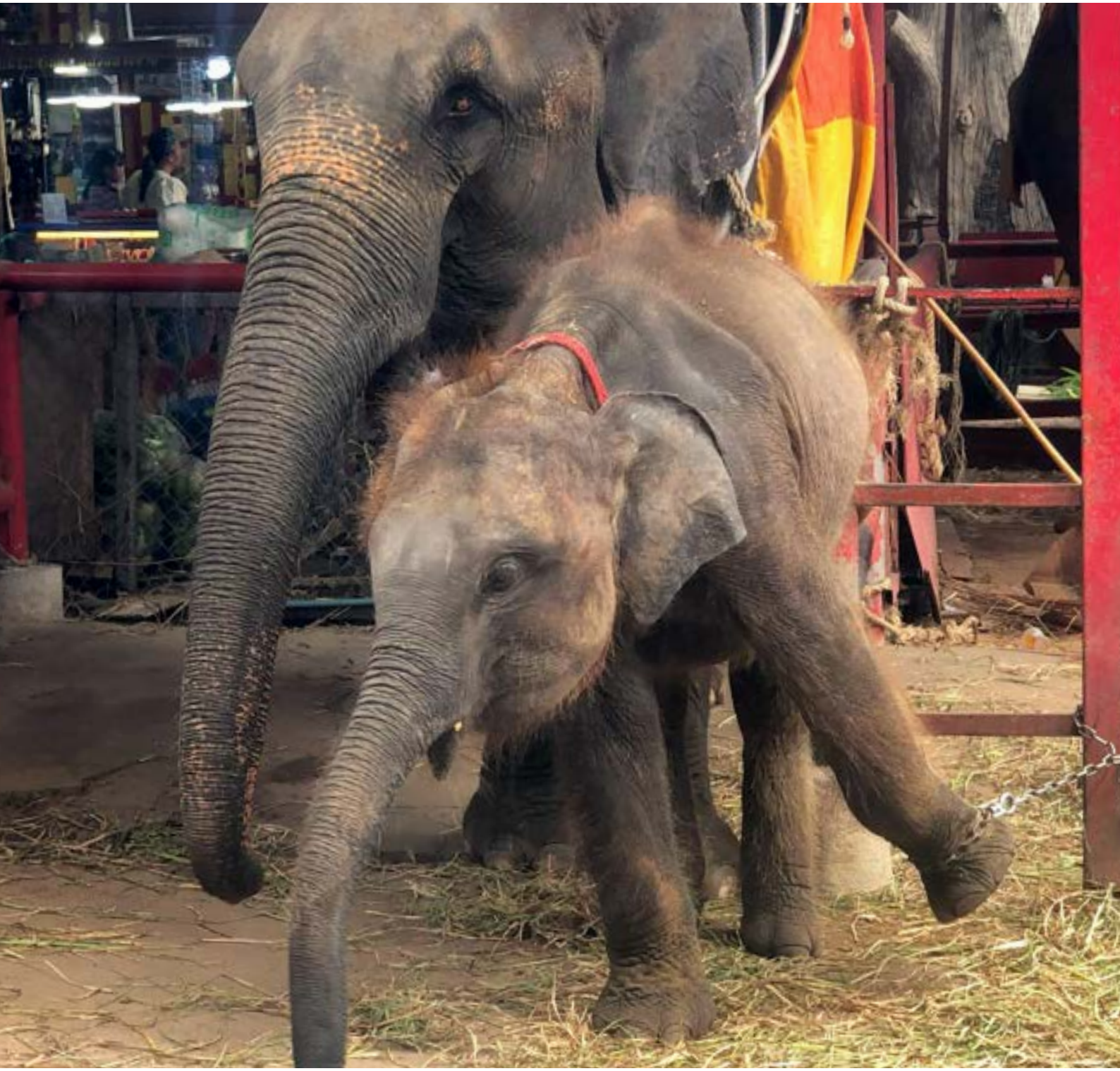
Bred to Entertain

– A new assessment capturing 15 years of Thailand's elephant tourism industry.



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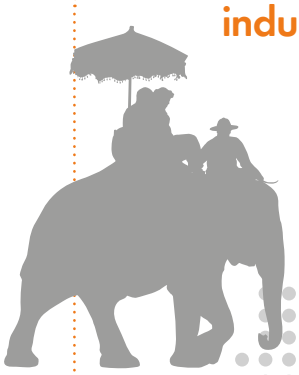
Elephants in a show at a venue in Thailand

Elephants at a riding and show venue in Thailand.

Executive summary

This report presents the most comprehensive assessment to date of Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry. Building on 15 years of monitoring, our research offers unique insights into the scale, practices and welfare conditions of elephants in the country's tourism sector. Through field research conducted between February 2024 and January 2025, we identified and assessed 236 venues holding 2,849 elephants across Thailand. This represents an increase of 73% on the number of elephants surveyed in 2010, but only a marginal increase of 3% compared to our last survey in 2019.

Thailand's captive elephant industry in 2024/25



2,849
elephants identified

236
venues assessed across Thailand

Thailand

+3%
increase in elephants since 2019

+73%
increase in elephants since 2010

➤ Covid-19 slowed down the growth of Thailand's captive elephant tourism, but it is bouncing back and continues to grow.

Key findings

Scale of the industry

Despite disruption by the Covid-19 pandemic, Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry has bounced back. With 2,849 elephants, the number of elephants kept in tourism venues is slightly higher than our 2019 survey revealed. The breeding of young elephants continues, sadly ensuring a steady pipeline of animals for tourism.

Living conditions for elephants

2 out of 3 elephants are kept in poor living conditions at elephant tourism venues. We found that more than half of all elephants were kept on short chains during the day with little or no opportunity for natural social interaction. Only a quarter could interact freely with peers while not chained. Spending long periods of time in concrete standing grounds and noisy environments remains a frequent concern for the many elephants in tourism venues. Daily hygiene was often controlled by humans, rather than allowing elephants autonomous access to bathing or dusting. Meanwhile, faeces and urine often accumulated around the elephant shelters. Nutrition provided to the animals was often unvaried, which contributes to health issues.

Types of tourism activities

Elephant riding and entertainment shows have declined significantly in their prevalence in Thailand, compared to our first survey in 2010. But the numbers remain sadly high: more than 1,200 elephants (42% of all elephants) are still used for rides, and 1 in 5 are housed at venues that offer shows. Our research found that venues offering elephant rides and shows were most likely to offer poor living conditions. Experiences offering close-contact activities such as washing (42% of elephants), hand feeding (92%) and 'care taking' (11%) have surged, marketed as ethical alternatives. Venues with these experiences are often promoted as 'sanctuaries', 'rescue centres' or 'refuges', which contributes to tourists being misled.

In reality, these practices also require punishment-based training, regular restraint and unnatural visitor interactions. They are therefore not the humane, sustainable alternative to more 'exploitative' elephant attractions that they are often marketed as. Observation-only experiences remain niche (7% of elephants in our survey), although these venues consistently achieved the highest welfare scores in our study's assessment.

Role of the travel industry

The travel industry is the critical link between travellers and elephant venues. Every experience offered and every venue promoted directly influences whether elephants are exploited or protected. The global travel industry has shown mixed progress in adopting policies that avoid exploitative experiences. Encouragingly, more than 200 companies have committed to wildlife-friendly policies, ceasing to sell exploitative elephant and other wild animal experiences. Yet many others continue to sell elephant rides or promote washing and hand feeding interactions under misleading marketing, enabling harmful practices to persist. Online booking platforms in particular play a critical role in sustaining demand for exploitative attractions.

The travel industry's influence extends beyond the experiences it sells. By providing travellers with clear information on what responsible elephant tourism looks like, companies can empower them to make better choices – even when exploring the country independently. This is particularly important because elephant experiences are easy to find and book on their own.

Policy and regulatory context

Thailand's legal framework regarding captive elephants remains outdated and fragmented. Wild elephants are strictly protected, while captive elephants are still classified as livestock under laws dating back to 1939. This dual system creates loopholes, permits unchecked breeding, and leaves captive elephants with minimal welfare safeguards. The Prevention of Cruelty and Provision of Animal Welfare Act of 2014 provides broad protection but lacks enforceable, species-specific standards. Enforcement is weak, certification schemes are voluntary and ineffective, and systemic reform efforts have stalled despite strong domestic and international support.

Relevance to animal welfare

Evidence from our research confirms that captive elephant tourism in Thailand remains of fundamental concern in terms of animal welfare. Asian elephants – as endangered highly sentient, social and complex animals – cannot have their physical and psychological needs met in captivity, particularly within high-intensity tourism contexts.

Elephant used for tourist rides in Thailand

Practices such as chaining, social isolation, forced tourism interactions and cruel training methods undermine welfare, cause trauma and pose risks to human safety and public health.

While some improvements are evident, such as the decline in rides and shows, the overall welfare landscape for captive elephants has not meaningfully changed in the 15 years since our first survey. Worse is that unacceptable activities marketed as 'humane' simply mask ongoing exploitation, giving travellers a false sense of ethical engagement – especially if these are promoted and normalised by travel companies.

Elephant at an observation-only venue in Thailand

Recommendations

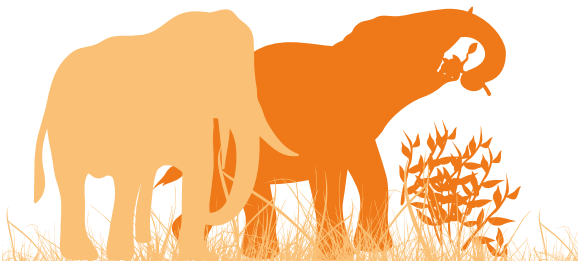
To end systemic suffering and move towards genuine reform of the sector, World Animal Protection calls for:

Travel industry action

- Travel companies to strengthen corporate wildlife policies to exclude all forms of close-contact elephant interaction tourism, including washing, hand feeding and care-taking experiences.
- Promote and prioritise genuine observation-only venues and responsibly and humanely conducted wild encounters.
- Ensure that staff and suppliers understand the corporate policies, implement them reliably, and, in case of non-compliance, for the travel company to take corrective action.
- Audit supply chains rigorously and avoid reliance on misleading certification schemes.
- Use communication channels, including social media, to educate travellers and promote responsible, wildlife-friendly tourism.

Legislative reform in Thailand

- Enact a strong elephant-specific legal framework that brings captive elephant populations under robust protection from commercial exploitation.
- End commercial breeding of captive elephants and phase out exploitative tourist activities that rely on direct tourist interactions or involve inhumane practices such as shows or rides.
- Establish enforceable, species-specific welfare standards recognising elephants' biological needs and their status as endangered species.
- Create transparent, publicly accessible registration and provenance systems for all captive elephants in Thailand.



Support local efforts to transition away from exploitative practices

- Provide financial, technical and marketing support to help conventional elephant venues transition to observation-only models that exercise best-practice welfare standards. This should come from the travel industry and Thai government.
- During a gradual industry phase out and where required, ensure that mahouts (the traditional caretakers of captive elephants), elephant owners and communities dependent on elephant tourism are prepared for adjusting their livelihoods without sustaining inhumane practices for elephants.
- Preserve the culture and traditions around human-elephant relationships in Thailand without sustaining inhumane practices for elephants.

Key takeaways

Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry remains a source of widespread animal suffering, enabled by outdated legislation and sustained by gaps in responsibility by travel companies. Elephants in Thailand continue to be bred primarily as commercial profit making assets for the tourism industry. Incremental improvements are encouraging but remain insufficient. True progress requires corporate accountability, decisive legal reform, and a collective shift towards wildlife-friendly tourism models that avoid exploitative practices and ultimately lead to protecting wild elephants in their natural habitat. This is both a moral imperative and a strategic opportunity – protecting elephants from exploitation safeguards Thailand's global reputation, supports sustainable tourism, and aligns with the growing demand from travellers for ethical, responsible experiences.

Introduction

Worldwide, animals are taken from the wild, or bred in captivity, to be used for entertainment* in the tourism industry. Visits to wildlife tourist attractions are estimated to account for up to 20–40% of global tourism.[1] These attractions are highly profitable, and part of a market that has grown considerably over the past decades.[1,2] The increasing popularity of wildlife tourism has been attributed to a number of factors, including a growth in disposable incomes, better global travel connections, and higher awareness of conservation and environmental issues.[3]

Some wildlife attractions can be considered humane and ethical, contributing to the protection of wild animal populations through tourism's full economic potential. These attractions may include observing animals responsibly in their natural habitats from a safe and respectful distance. They may also involve viewing them in genuine sanctuaries or wildlife-friendly facilities that are part of efforts to phase out captive wild animal use.

Captive wildlife entertainment is one of the most worrying types of wildlife tourist attractions. It involves animals being taken from the wild or bred in captivity and removed from their mothers at a young age. They are then often forced to endure cruel and intensive training to make them perform and interact with people for the tourist entertainment industry. These attractions lead to severe suffering through inadequate living conditions, inhumane handling and training practices, development of behavioural problems, and stressful interactions with visitors. In many cases they may also pose risks to public health, visitor safety and to species conservation, as these experiences fuel demand for wild animals that are again taken from the wild.[4] The cycle continues.

Global efforts are needed to address the animal welfare, conservation and public health concerns inherent in this industry and initiate a phase-out of captive wildlife entertainment.

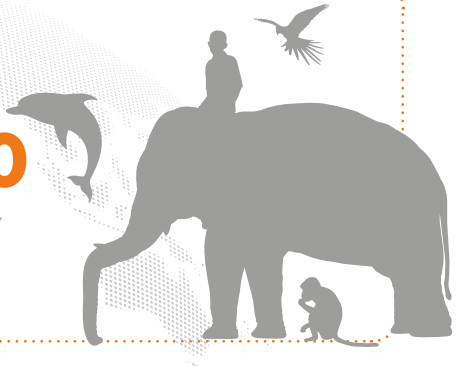
However, this is not a straightforward mission in a huge industry that has regularly outpaced the global economy.[5] In 2023, for example, 1.3 billion tourist arrivals were recorded globally.[6] Wildlife tourist attractions, including both responsible wild experiences as well as exploitative captive ones, account for a large proportion of that tourism, valued at over US$160 billion.[7] This demand highlights the need to address the increasing pressure on captive wildlife attractions.

But conversely, when tourists fail to come, there are severe risks for captive wild animals. In January 2020, the United Nations World Tourism Organization confirmed tourism as 'a leading and resilient economic sector, especially in view of current uncertainties'.[5] But then the Covid-19 pandemic hit, dramatically changing the situation. Covid-19 stopped tourism in its tracks, leading to the suffering of thousands of captive wild animals as their facilities struggled for income. The effects of the pandemic illustrated the urgency of phasing out the intentional dependency of endangered, complex animals such as elephants on commercial tourism.

Global wildlife tourism industry

1.3 billion
tourist arrivals were recorded globally in 2023[6]

US$160 billion[7]
generated annually by wildlife tourist attractions



* Wildlife entertainment includes activities that risk portraying or trivialising wild animals as pets, novelty objects, comedians or domesticated species; that encourage animals to perform behaviours that are either unnatural, unnecessary or harmful; that involve procedures that may be considered stressful or harmful to all or individual animals; that expose visitors or handlers to unnecessary risks of injury or disease; that are commerce-driven beyond sustaining maintenance of the animals at facilities striving to phase-out captive wild animal keeping; or that may risk replication of similar activities in harmful ways in other places.

Wild elephants in a national park in Sri Lanka.

The loss of tourism and the lack of compensative government action led to severe challenges in maintaining elephants bred specifically for the tourist industry, although World Animal Protection and many other organisations and initiatives stepped in to support the animals. While tourism has recovered in many parts of the world since the end of the pandemic, its mark remains on the travel industry.

The vision behind World Animal Protection's global campaign is that wild animals belong in the wild – not in entertainment. Focusing on flagship species such as captive elephants, tigers and dolphins in tourism, World Animal Protection believes finding solutions for their suffering can trigger positive changes across the entire wildlife entertainment industry. We call on people to be animal-friendly travellers and ask travel companies to replace sales and advertisement of captive wildlife entertainment with activities not involving animal suffering. We also call on governments to take steps to prevent further exploitation of wild animals in tourism. Our campaign also encourages elephant venues to adopt more humane practices for their existing captive wild animals and facilitates a long-term transition towards observation-only, wildlife-friendly models.

Today, more than 200 travel companies globally** have joined World Animal Protection's Wildlife-Friendly initiative, pledging they will not sell or promote captive wild animal entertainment, including elephants, tigers and dolphins. Instead, they have pledged to offer more humane alternatives.

These include visits to genuine sanctuaries, wildlife-friendly venues that humanely care for captive wild animals, and the responsible viewing of animals in the wild.

Although the proliferation of captive wildlife entertainment tourism is a global trend, it is particularly evident in Asia, where millions of tourists flock each year. Upon arrival in Thailand, Asia's second most popular tourist destination[6,8], tourists are often inundated with advertising for captive wildlife entertainment attractions. They are invited to 'ride an elephant', 'wash an elephant', 'see elephant shows', and 'take selfies cuddling tigers', for example.

Over the years, many venues that sell inhumane captive wild animal experiences have adopted language that aims to address the increasing concerns of tourists around the animals' wellbeing. In their marketing material, they use words and phrases such as 'ethical', 'retirement home', 'rescue centre', and 'sanctuary'. To what degree these terms reflect the reality is mostly impossible for tourists to confirm.

** Find the list of Travel Companies globally that adhere to the World Animal Protection's Wildlife-Friendly Pledge: https://www.worldanimalprotection.org/our-campaigns/wildlife/commercial-exploitation/travel-tourism/wildlife-friendly-pledge/

Elephant industry sales

The elephant tourism industry in Thailand has generated up to

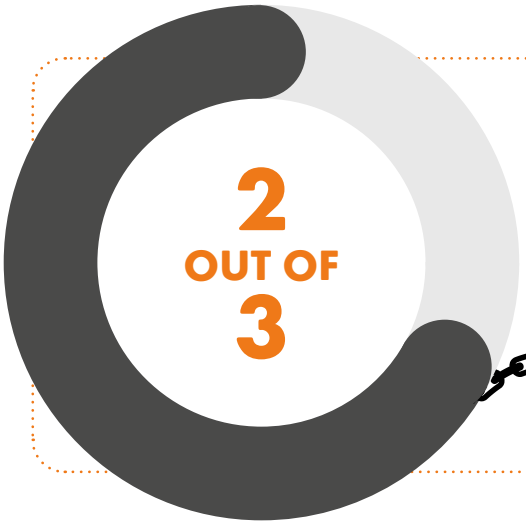
US$770 million

in sales per year.

To enhance transparency on the issue and provide guidance to the travel industry and travellers, we have regularly conducted comprehensive, empirical studies on the welfare conditions of captive tourism elephants in Asia. Our first study in 2010 (Wildlife on a tightrope report) covered only Thailand. Our 2015 (Taken for a ride report) and 2019 (Elephants. Not commodities report) studies included most Asian countries with significant captive elephant tourism.[9,10,11,12,13] In those 10 years we detected a 70% increase in the number of captive elephants used for tourism in Thailand. Pre-Covid we estimated that the captive elephant tourism industry in Thailand generated up to US$770 million in sales per year. Our 2019 research highlighted that 3 out of 4 elephants were living in poor and unacceptable conditions. We also shared investigative findings of the current practices for elephant calf training. This included the highest number of elephant training cases ever documented by an investigation and highlighted the traumatic and cruel process that the calves and elephant mothers have to go through in order to be used for tourism, especially in activities involving close contact with tourists or shows.

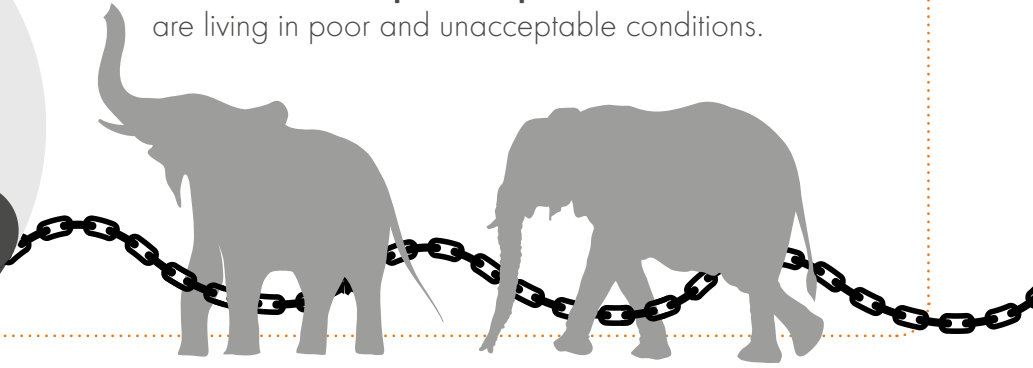
Based on our comprehensive data, our main points of concern for the use of elephants in tourism were:

- Extreme physical restraint by chaining during the day and/or night.
- Limited or no opportunity for social interaction with other elephant individuals.
- Participation in stressful, and in some cases extremely demanding show activities.
- Non-existent or insufficient veterinary care.
- Inadequate nutrition.
- Use of pain-inflicting or fear-instilling tools and practices to train and retain control over elephants.



Our latest research in 2024/25 showed...

that **2 out of 3 captive elephants** in Thailand are living in poor and unacceptable conditions.



Mother and calf chained at a riding venue in Thailand.

This report expands and updates our previous studies and provides insight into the post-Covid situation of the elephant tourism industry in Thailand. In 2024/25, we visited 236 elephant venues in Thailand, collected thousands of data points and assessed the conditions for captive elephants in tourism.

Our results and comparison over the past 15 years have become one of the most comprehensive studies of the welfare conditions for captive elephants in the tourism industry.

Our research aims to help travel industry stakeholders, governments, elephant experts and travellers make informed decisions to better protect elephants.

Elephants and captivity

Species information and population

Asian and African elephants are the largest land-based mammals alive. Adults can weigh between 3,000–5,000 kg with a body length of more than 6 m. Elephants have a long lifespan – up to about 70 years in the wild, although their lifespan in captivity is generally considered shorter.[14]

Pregnant females have a gestation period of around 20 months. In the wild they take care of their offspring for the first 4 to 5 years and continue to supervise them for several years after that. Adult males travel alone, joining a female group for periods or forming temporary male groups.

Elephants are some of the most socially developed mammals in the world and can arrange themselves into a complex social structure. In the wild, they form multi-tiered societies, based on mother-calf units, bonded joint-family units (that stay together), and clans that coordinate their behaviour.[15]

There are three commonly recognised Asian elephant sub-species. These are: the Indian elephant (Elephas maximus indicus) on the Asian mainland; the Ceylon elephant (E. m. maximus) in Sri Lanka, and the Sumatran elephant (E. m. sumatranus) in Indonesia.[16] Populations of these wild elephant species spread across 13 countries (or range states) and are estimated to include between 45,617 and 49,028 elephants.[17]

India has the largest wild population with an estimated 27,312 elephants.[16] There are estimates of fewer than 500 elephants in the wild in each of Bangladesh, China, Nepal and Vietnam and fewer than 1,000 in Bhutan, Cambodia and Laos. The population of elephants in the wild in Thailand is estimated to be between 4,013–4,422.[18,19] As Thailand's wild elephant population is growing, concerns have been raised about the increasing conflicts with people. In response, Thailand has been proposing to explore regulating the wild elephant population through birth control measures from 2025 onwards.[20] In contrast, breeding of captive elephants is commonplace and there has been no meaningful discussion about how to regulate their population, despite the documented welfare concerns and risks to people.

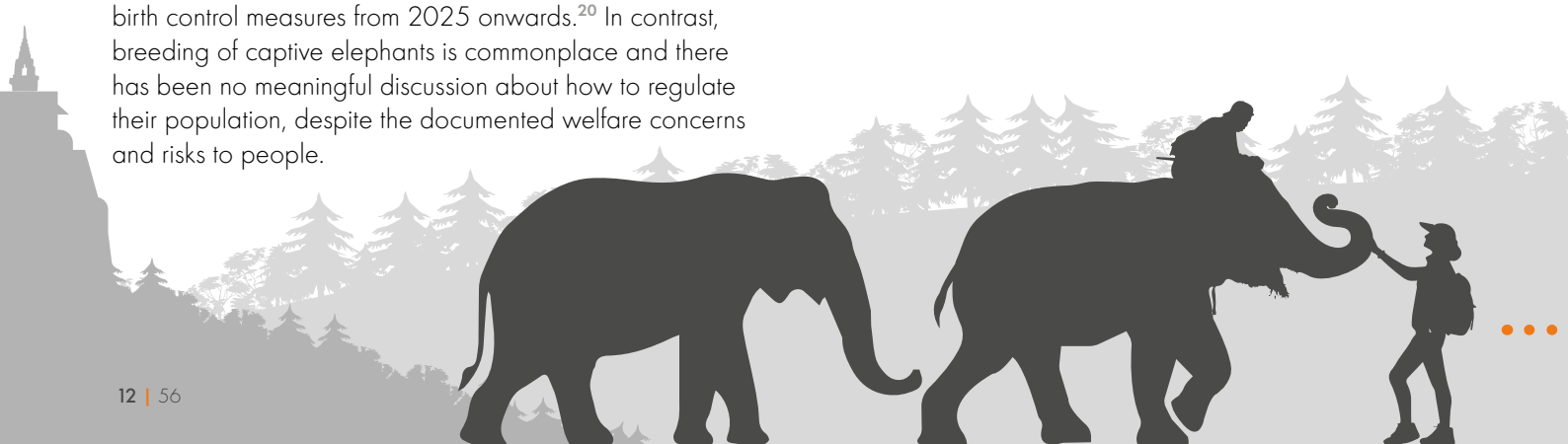
Throughout Asia, there are also significant populations of Asian elephants in captivity, equating to about one-third of the number of elephants in the wild. In 2018, across all Asian countries that are home to wild Asian elephants, 14,930–15,130 lived in captive or semi-wild conditions and were typically used for logging, village work, tourism or temple purposes.[16] Thailand houses a significant share of this captive elephant population. In 2017, official figures reported 3,783 captive elephants, including elephants used for tourism, logging or other purposes.[21,22]

Elephants and domestication

When describing elephants in captivity, 'domesticated' is a term often used to imply they are distinct from their wild counterparts. Travellers and travel industries are exposed to this term in advertising and at elephant entertainment venues where it is communicated through the venue's educational materials and by guides and mahouts, the traditional caretakers of captive elephants. A commonly found argument states that elephants are domesticated because of the long history of keeping elephants in captivity. Even in scientific literature, the term is sometimes incorrectly used to describe captive elephants.

All elephants are wild animals and are not domesticated.[23,24] They have never undergone the process of 'domestication', a long-term socio-biological process. Although discussions continue to better define domestication, it is commonly agreed that domestication occurs through human-guided, selective breeding over many generations.[25,26,27] In each generation, the offspring that carry the desired traits (eg strength, fur, size, behaviour) are selected for further breeding, until a species is achieved that differs from the wild species.

> The term 'domestication' always refers to a whole population. By definition, an individual animal can't be domesticated in its lifespan.



A domesticated species is significantly different from its wild origin species in its behaviours, anatomy and the emphasised traits desired by humans. Dogs, cats, horses and cows are examples of domesticated species and have roots in ancient wild species. While domesticated animals still often display a range of natural behaviours, they differ in the intensity of stimuli required to trigger a certain behaviour, such as stress or aggression-related behaviours. This makes them easier to handle than their wild counterparts.

Throughout the 3,000-year human-elephant relationship, most elephants used by people have been captured from the wild and then used in captivity throughout their lifespan. This means the long history of people using elephants is not a valid argument to label elephants as domesticated. Even today, many adult elephants originate from the wild, while others may have been captive-bred for only one or two generations. Various scientists and animal experts define the case of captive elephants as a classic example of animal taming and training, not domestication.[24]

While elephants are not domesticated, their time in captivity and the close interaction with their human keeper imprints on their behaviour. Some scientists suggest introducing additional terminology between the outliers of 'domesticated' and 'wild', such as 'tamed' or 'captive wild animals'.[25] These are not without flaws though, as 'tamed' is commonly felt to be vague and potentially misleading, considering the persisting dangerousness of the animals, and the fact that inhumane training of young animals is necessary to ensure control over them. The word 'captive' has also been criticised for implying that the animals have been captured directly from the wild, which is not the case for elephants born in captivity.[28]

In the absence of a better term, this report will use the term 'captive wild animals' as it still most closely reflects elephants in entertainment as they remain biologically identical to their wild relatives and many still originate from the wild.[29] This label also allows for stricter regulations of the use of these animals, recognising that their complex needs are identical to their truly wild relatives. The term 'domesticated' is prone to misuse and supports captive elephants' classification as livestock, such as in Thailand's regulations, which enables keeping elephants in unsuitable conditions.[23]

Risks of elephant interactions to people

Captive elephants remain one of the most dangerous animals used in tourism. Anecdotal sources suggest that for every male elephant in captivity, one human fatality will occur.[30] Considering that there are a few thousand elephant bulls in captivity, this is a worrying correlation. It is unclear how many people each year are killed or severely injured by captive elephants, but it is certainly higher than with any other captive wild animal used by humans.

Elephant bull waiting at a venue offering saddled rides in Thailand.

> Between 2010 and 2016, media articles accounted for 17 fatalities and 21 serious injuries caused by captive elephants in Thailand alone.[10] Victims were international tourists, local bystanders and mahouts. As the traditional caretakers of captive elephants, mahouts clearly bear the highest risk and are the most frequent victims. The number of unreported incidents is likely high; there is often no publicity unless a foreign tourist is involved.

Most commonly, male elephants are involved in these incidents. During their 'musth' period, a natural and periodic phase of increased testosterone production, an elephant bull can become unpredictable and often extremely aggressive. Even the most progressive elephant institutions struggle with the management of elephants in musth. In response, they usually chain them in isolation for the duration of the musth. This can be anything from a week in younger animals to up to two months in older ones.[31]

Elephants who turn aggressive and uncontrollable or start expressing severe stereotypic behaviour due to their captive environment, are usually removed from the camps. They are commonly traded to other places, such as logging operations, or isolated spatially. However, a tourism venue will sometimes ignore the signs of aggression and urge a mahout to keep using the elephant to maximise profits. At other times, a less experienced or overconfident mahout might not recognise the warning signs of aggression or choose to ignore them.

The high risks associated with managing elephants highlights their unsuitability for captive environments, especially when in direct contactwith people.

There are also public health concerns for people in close contact with elephants. Tuberculosis in elephants has been well recognised for centuries.[32,33] Tuberculosis is a chronic disease documented in captive Asian elephants worldwide, including Thailand[34], Nepal[35] and in zoos in the US.[36] Tuberculosis has long been recognised as an emerging zoonotic disease, with two-way transmission between people and elephants evidenced in 1998.[37]

Consequently, close contact between tuberculosis-carrying elephants and people within confined workplaces poses a serious infection risk. Molecular studies on four elephants with tuberculosis in Thailand indicated that the disease was most probably transmitted from humans.[34] Studies on tuberculosis in zoos in the US found that Asian elephants carried the disease six times more often than African elephants.[38]

Active and latent tuberculosis has been reported in 20% of captive elephants in Malaysia and 24% of their mahouts, with indication of the disease's two-way transmission.[39] In Nepal, tuberculosis in captive elephants was first identified in 2002. Between 2002 and 2009 seven captive elephants died from the disease, and in 2011, a quarter of captive elephants tested positive for tuberculosis (11 out of 44).[35]

In 2018, the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) examined the then 102 elephants at Amer Fort, in Rajasthan, revealing that 10 elephants had tuberculosis. The AWBI urged that they be removed from tourism activities[40,41] but, local authorities worryingly concluded that the elephants were fit to continue being used for tourist rides.

This example raises serious questions about the public health risk of elephant attractions that allow close contact between tourists and elephants. Activities such as trunk kisses or giving tourists trunk showers may facilitate transmission of the disease. It is crucial for future studies to assess this risk and its impact on the health of tourists. It is also crucial that the risk of transmission of tuberculosis to elephants from people carrying the disease is also assessed.

There may be other diseases too. Sixty percent of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, with most thought to originate from wild animals, their close proximity to people elevating the risk of infection.[42,43] If the Covid-19 pandemic has proven one thing, it is that people should stay clear of handling wild animals.

Captivity and animal welfare

Animal welfare refers to a combination of mental, physical and behavioural states of an animal. Wild animals have evolved to thrive in their natural habitat. In captivity, their welfare is compromised in many ways due to the limitations of their environment and our lack of knowledge of what they actually need to thrive. Ensuring high standards of welfare for elephants in captivity is particularly challenging. This is due to their physical size, complex social needs, high level of intelligence, vast home ranges, diverse diet and large behavioural repertoire, to name just a few factors.

In captivity, elephants will face situations that they would rarely or never experience in the wild.[44] Understanding how captivity affects elephants and how to assess their condition has been a topic of dispute between stakeholders for a long time.

Tourists in close contact with elephants at a venue in Thailand.

When assessing the conditions of captive elephants, most attention is usually placed on the parameters that are readily measurable. These include the conditions of their bodies, their health status and glucocorticoid (sometimes referred to as 'stress') hormone levels. Consequently, animal welfare is still often defined as the absence of negative states, such as the absence of disease, hunger or pain.

Yet the welfare of animals, especially highly sentient species such as elephants, is vastly more complex. Not only are we still lacking fundamental understanding of their physiology, but a deeper recognition of their psychological needs is of crucial importance.[45] Insights into neuro- and behavioural science over the past 15 years highlight that sentient animals are likely to be much more sensitive to environmental and social factors than previously thought.[46] These insights have led to a revision of previous animal welfare concepts, such as the 'Five Freedoms'.

As one of the original animal welfare concepts, the Five Freedoms is now recognised as limited in its assumption that the absence ('freedom') of negative states ensures high welfare. The more modern concept of the Five Domains considers nutrition, environment, health behaviour, and mental state as governing inputs that result in a range of positive or negative mental states.[47]

Combined with concepts such as the Quality of Life spectrum, these tools can help reduce negative experiences and enable positive experiences to ensure the highest welfare throughout an animal's life.[48] To what degree such high welfare can be achieved depends on several factors. These include whether a species has adapted to captivity through domestication, our knowledge of and ability to fulfil species-specific needs, and each individual animal's characteristics and preferences. It also depends on the available resources and people's motivations to prioritise welfare over the animal's value as a commodity.

It can be challenging to measure an individual animal's physical and psychological welfare. However, information about longevity, health status, range of natural behaviours, foraging opportunities, autonomous decision-making and opportunities for social interaction can paint a picture.

Some zoos and genuine sanctuaries have mostly advanced to elephant management styles that allow the animals to freely roam enclosures, while staff only interact with them through protective barriers. This 'protected contact' system was established partially to enable higher welfare standards, but also to protect the elephant keepers from injuries and fatalities. Yet in the Asian elephant range countries, 'protected contact' elephant management styles are not common or often not feasible.

In Asia, a caretaker usually controls the elephant through direct contact, relying on restraints and tools to ensure compliance. This requires elephants to be trained to understand a range of commands and that not complying with the caretaker will lead to punishment. Despite claims from within the elephant industry that today's methods to train elephants are not cruel, World Animal Protection carried out an in-depth investigation into the most common training practices of a community renowned in Thailand for breeding and training elephants. The details of that investigation are described in our 'Elephants. Not commodities.' report from 2019 and the respective peer-reviewed publication and showcase incredibly cruel and traumatic practices.[11,13] They include early-age, forceful separation of calves from their mothers, weeks long extreme restraint through chains or ropes, and repeated exercises that involve cruel punishment. The impact of these on the welfare of captive elephants is severe.

Using elephants for tourist interactions, rides or shows requires them to be trained cruelly.

In Asian range countries, elephant venue managers understandably prioritise their own interests and the safety of the caretakers over the elephants' psychological or physiological needs.[49] However, even the caretakers are often facing inadequate employment situations. In a 2017 study by World Animal Protection and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Chiang Mai University, we interviewed 200 mahouts from randomly selected elephant venues.

The study demonstrated that the job of a mahout comes with serious health risks, leaves families economically vulnerable and has changed from a valued, traditional, skilled role to one of a labourer.

While many mahouts loved elephants and liked their work, very few actually stated a preference for their children to take up the profession. The study concludes that the perception of the traditional mahout role is no longer valid. The growing tourism industry and the shift in scale and quality of elephant tourism attractions has led to the traditional role of mahouts being increasingly taken over by conventional labourers, who often lack skills and training. The findings revealed that it is not only elephants suffering in low welfare wildlife entertainment venues, as mahouts across Thailand are also taken advantage of.

These captive management systems resemble the 'intensive management' systems experienced by livestock. This contrasts with 'extensively' managed farming systems, where animals such as sheep seasonally enjoy a significantly enhanced behavioural freedom through free roaming access to land.[50]

Mahout with 'ankus' or 'bullhook' - a tool to control and guide the elephant, but also to punish and force it into submission when needed.

When managing elephants intensively it is crucial to recognise that inhumane or even cruel procedures may be necessary to safeguard the caretaker, the visitors or the property from harm. However, the necessity for those cruel procedures does not make them any more acceptable for the elephant.

The following typical examples highlight this dilemma:

Chaining, tethering or keeping elephants in enclosures is often necessary when managing them. But this directly affects their behavioural freedom, which is critical to ensuring better welfare.

Providing a diet that consists of only 3 or 4 different components may be a necessity in captivity due to economic or logistical limitations, yet it negatively affects the elephant's welfare. In the wild, studies have shown that elephants are very selective in what plants they eat and depend on the availability of between 20 to 75 different plant species.[51,52,53,54]

Maintaining control of a 3,000–5,000 kg elephant may require using tools, such as hooks, sticks, nails, axes or spears that create strong enough pressure or pain to prevent the elephant from aggressive or unwanted behaviour. However, this leads to punishment, induces fear, and limits behavioural freedom.

Training of elephants to be used in tourism activities that offer direct interactions or rely on performing tricks requires aversive, punishment-based training to ensure sufficient compliance by the animals to perform the various tricks and activities. Studies have shown the development of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder from such traumatic incidents in an elephant's youth, and increased mortality several years after training.[55,56]

Elephant chained on concrete substrate, likely relieving discomfort in her left hind leg. This elephant will spend hours every day in this way.

Through our expertise and understanding of elephant venues' practices, we developed elephant-friendly guidelines that help transition venues to incorporate best-practice animal management and avoid further increasing the captive elephant population. Such venues will allow elephants more autonomy, more opportunities to engage in natural behaviours, and will avoid direct contact with visitors. These factors have the potential to offer vastly higher welfare than venues using conventional elephant management techniques, direct interaction with visitors and common elephant restraint practices.

Of course, there are challenges in implementing such improved practices and not all captive elephants may benefit from them. But these arguments should not prevent striving for such improvements or calling for a decrease in captive elephant populations.

After all, even high-welfare observation-only practices can only be a compromise to fully meeting all of an elephant's needs. They cannot serve as a justification for continuing to keep and breed elephants in captivity for tourism beyond the current generation of elephants.

The notion from many proponents of the captive elephant industry that there is an acceptable way of keeping elephants within a commercial industry is restricting elephants' autonomy, social interaction and natural behaviour when using elephants in tourism highlights their unsuitability for captivity.

World Animal Protections' elephant-friendly guidelines help transition venues to incorporate best-practice animal management and avoid further increasing the captive elephant population. Such venues will allow elephants more autonomy, more opportunities to engage in natural behaviours, and will avoid direct contact with visitors.

Elephant at an observation-only venue foraging for food.

Methodology

This elephant venue assessment, conducted between February 2024 and January 2025, assesses the scale of the captive Asian elephant tourism industry in Thailand. It provides clarity about the situation the elephants face in the industry by assessing conditions that affect their welfare at each venue.

This research is the fourth iteration of its kind, following our 2010 study on elephant welfare conditions in Thailand and the more comprehensive studies from 2015 and 2019 which had an Asia-wide scope. This recent study concludes a 15-year timeframe of monitoring welfare conditions of tourism elephants in Thailand. It is the longest and most comprehensive study of its kind to date and can help identify trends and concerns in the captive elephant tourism industry.

The assessment focusses on elephants in venues created for tourism; it does not reflect the entire captive elephant population. Elephants are sometimes kept privately for religious ceremonies, used for logging and carrying heavy loads, or they may be maintained by government authorities. A welfare assessment of the conditions experienced by animals in these situations was not within the scope of this research. This choice of focus on tourism elephants does of course not suggest that elephants in other captive situations do not suffer or do not require attention.

The aim was to identify and assess as close as possible to 100% of the existing captive elephant tourism venues in Thailand. These included elephant riding camps; elephant shows; elephant-care or elephant-washing experiences; and venues focusing on providing better alternatives to captive elephants without offering performances or direct visitor interactions.

We identified the venues through a review of internet sources, guidebooks, interviews with local experts and street-by-street physical scouting for venues in tourist areas likely to have elephant attractions. Previously collected GPS locations of the venues identified in our 2010, 2015 and 2019 studies were also very useful.

All venues were visited by the researchers in person at least once, sometimes repeatedly, to document the situation and ensure an objective assessment not reliant on hearsay or anecdotal evidence. In most cases, the visits were conducted unannounced and for each venue, researchers collected a range of information. This included everything that researchers were able to observe or extract through casual conversations and interviews with staff. They focussed on the number and genders of elephants; the way they were kept day and night; stereotypic occurrences; daily routines; interaction with keepers; and activities the elephants were used for. Researchers took photographs and videos to document the findings.

A rapid welfare conditions assessment was completed for each venue using a score sheet approach. This score sheet covered nine criteria considered to have a significant direct impact on an elephant's welfare, and were based on the well-established WelfareQuality® assessment system often used for livestock.[57] Each criterion was scored along a 5-point scale from 0–4 for each venue.

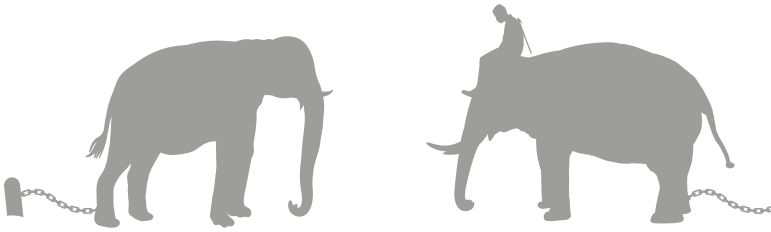
The total score of all nine criteria for each venue was converted into a single final score on a scale from 1 (poor conditions) to 10 (best possible captive conditions). Where rounding was required, scores of .0–.4 were rounded down, while scores of .5–.9 were rounded up to the next digit.

Elephant chained at a tourism venue with notable scarring from chains or ropes on both legs.

Elephant bull chained and saddled, waiting at a tourism venue.

It must be stressed that even a best score of 10 would only indicate best-practice captive conditions and is not suggesting that these would be adequate for elephants. A good score can indicate positive contributions to animal welfare but should not justify captivity. As outlined previously, captivity is not an adequate place for elephants as their needs can never be fully met in a captive environment.

This rapid welfare conditions assessment was created to allow for the large scope of this study; it does not attempt to be fully comprehensive. It also does not provide a direct measurement of an individual elephant's welfare; this would require long-term monitoring of behaviour combined with physical health parameters. Instead, it evaluates the daily conditions that affect the elephants' welfare. In previous published studies, this methodology has proved successful in giving a good indication of the situation for elephants in captivity.



Current status of elephant tourism in Thailand

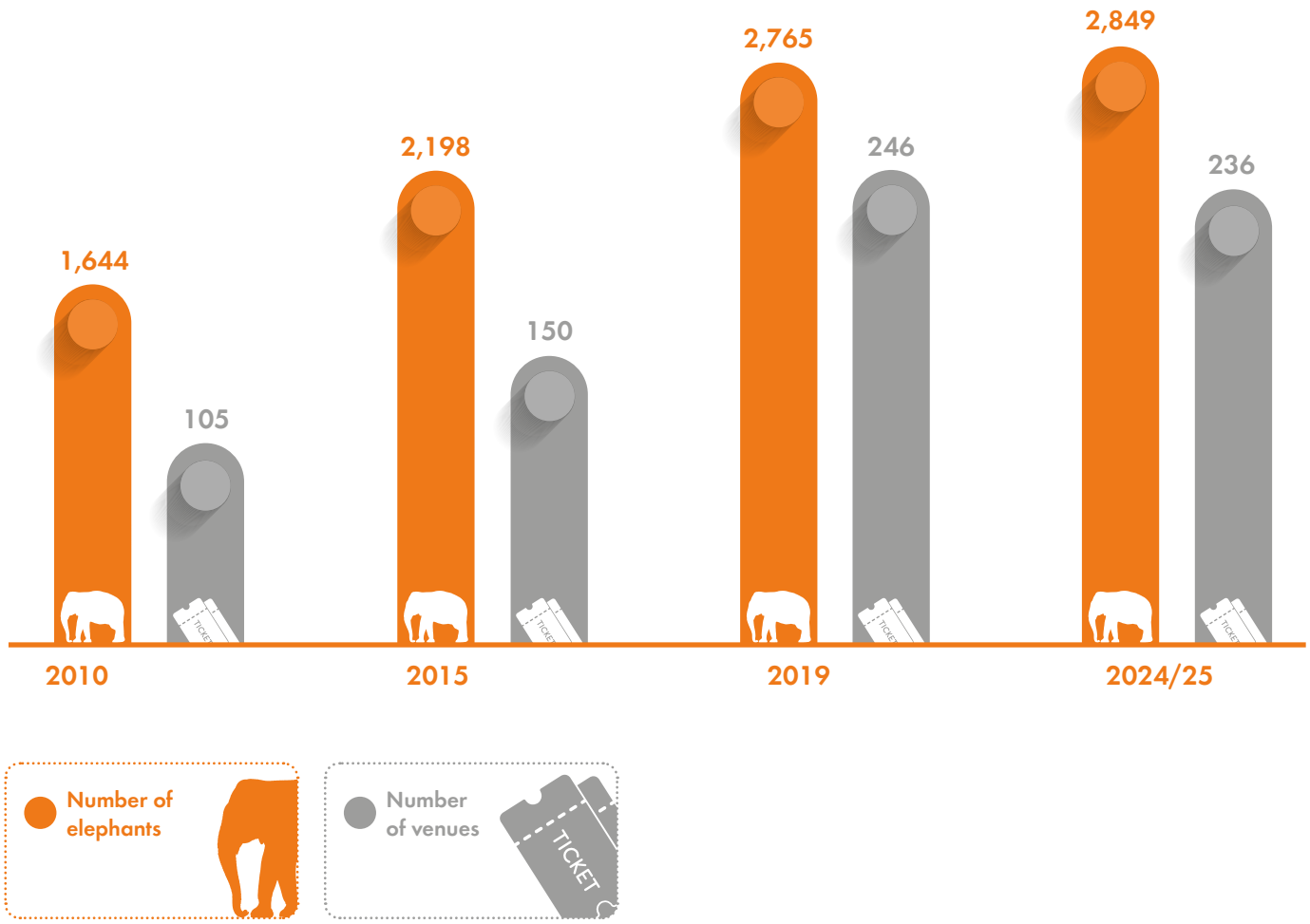
Scale of the industry

In 2024/25, we identified and assessed 236 elephant venues open to tourists in Thailand. A total of 2,849 elephants were reportedly kept at those venues, 1,684 of which our researchers were able to observe directly. The total number of elephants increased by 3.04% compared to our last survey from 2019, where we identified 2,765 elephants in Thailand.

That five-year increase is significantly lower than the ones we found from our studies in 2015 and 2019 (25.8% increase), and 2010 and 2015 (33.7% increase).

> The industry indicates that the industry hasn't grown as strongly as it did previously, but that it remains stable even after the Covid-related impacts on tourism.

The scale of captive elephant tourism in Thailand since 2010



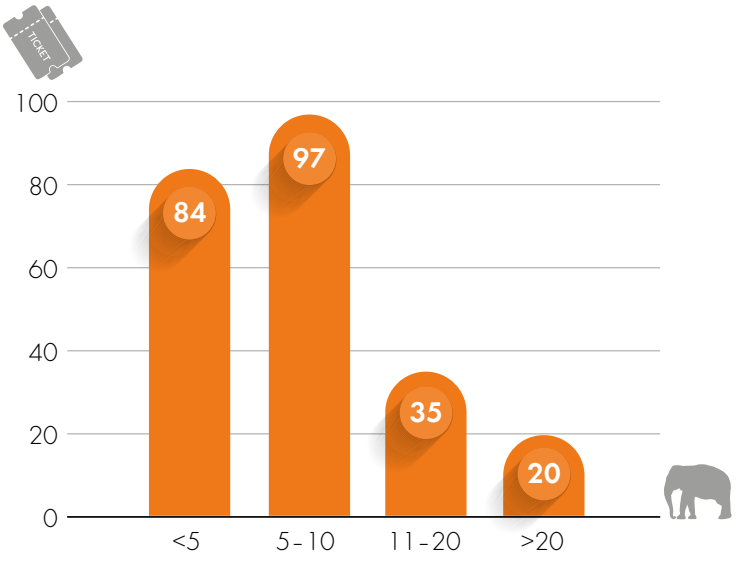
A few months old calf by its mother being paraded for tourists.

We found a continuously high number of young elephants (226 of less than five years of age, or 1.6% of all reported tourism elephants per year) at the venues. This number does not account for all elephants born since the last assessment, as only approximately two-thirds of all captive elephants are housed at tourism venues. A study that analysed Thai captive elephant databases between 2005 and 2010 found that on average 63 elephants were born each year, approximating 1.7% of the overall population.[21] This figure is very comparable to the figure in our study (1.6% births of all reported elephants), suggesting that the births detected in tourism elephants reflect the wider captive elephant population in Thailand.

Our assessment documented that 3 out of 4 adult elephants at tourism venues were female. This is a slightly higher ratio than in the overall Thai captive elephant population where 2 out of 3 elephants are female.[21] This is likely due to females being easier to manage, providing additional economic benefits once they give birth to a calf, and because males regularly undergo hormonal phases ('musth') during which they often can't be used for work. The ratio of females to males has remained surprisingly constant across all previous studies, despite the significant increase in the total number of elephants over the years. This suggests that males are systemically removed from the tourism elephant population and shifted elsewhere. Captive breeding has been the predominant route to sustain the Thai elephant population for the past few decades. Captive breeding will commonly generate an almost equal number of males and females. Therefore, across the entire captive elephant population, the ratio of males and females will eventually reach an equilibrium. Previous demographic studies have confirmed a tendency towards reaching a gender balance, with studies from 2013 showing that in elephants below 20 years of age 56% were female and 44% were male.[21]

Contrary to the increase in the number of elephants, the number of elephant tourism venues has slightly decreased – down from 246 in 2019 to 236 in 2024/25. This indicates a reversal of the previous trend towards more and smaller venues. In the current assessment, the average elephant venue holds 12.07 elephants, which is slightly more than in 2020 (11.24 elephants) but still quite a bit lower than in 2015 (14.65 elephants) and 2010 (15.66 elephants).

Figure 1: Number of elephants per venue



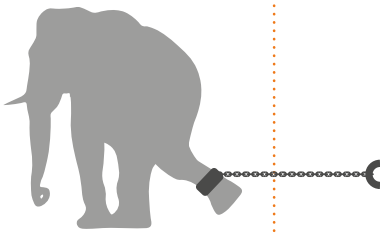
Breakdown of the number of venues by the number of elephants at each venue.

Living conditions

During the day, the majority of observed elephants (950, 64%) were being kept on short chains of maximum 3 m lengths when not used for tourism experiences. This was followed by 12% being able to roam freely. However, in some of those 'free roaming' cases the elephants were restricted from venturing far by their mahouts. Our research found that 5.4% of elephants were not chained and had access to space between 200 and 2,000 m^2, and 5.3% of elephants were not chained and had access to space between 2,000 and 10,000 m^2.

The majority of observed elephants (74%) were not able to socialise naturally with other elephants.

64%
of the elephants
were being kept on short chains of maximum 3 m lengths



Two elephants in a medium sized enclosure, able to forage and freely interact with each other.

A herd of elephants roaming freely at an observation-only venue. Supervised by mahouts, they are able to forage and to socialise naturally in a group.

We found 44% of elephants were not able to physically touch other elephants and could only see or hear others, 27% of elephants were able to interact physically with another elephant but only while being restrained, e.g. while chained. While this is better than not being able to interact physically at all, it severely limits the choice of elephants as to who they interact with and the quality of that interaction. 3% of elephants were kept solitary at venues. Only 1 in 4 elephants were able to freely interact with one or more others.

Two elephants chained on concrete substrate. Only limited interaction is possible between them.

The research found that 3 out of 4 venues allow their elephants to stand on natural ground when resting, such as grass, dirt or sand. However, elephants at 22% of venues did not have this option and they were standing on concrete or gravel substrate for substantial time each day. This kind of substrate is non-yielding and can lead to the development of joint and foot problems. At such venues, the elephants will commonly stand on this substrate for most of the day, every day – and sometimes at night. The proportion of venues having concrete or gravel substrate has remained unchanged across the past 15 years, showing little improvement in this area.

In terms of daily hygiene practices, 55% of venues offered at least one daily water hose or bucket shower by mahouts, while 65% of venues offered baths under the supervision of a mahout. Some venues offered both, depending on the elephants and mahouts. It was rarer for venues to offer the opportunity for elephants to bath freely without the control of a mahout. Only 18% of venues offered this kind of free bathing. Offering mud puddles or sand pits are of additional benefit to elephants. In their natural environment, these would be essential aspects of their regular hygiene and health management. 1 in 4 venues offered mud puddles – although in many circumstances the benefits of the elephants covering themselves with mud is diminished by tourism activities washing the mud off straight after. As outlined in the next chapter, elephant washing is one of the most popular activities offered at tourism venues. If they are given access to mud puddles, this commonly occurs before they are led into the water, which eliminates the purpose of the mud cover. Sand pits for dusting were only available at 7% of venues.

Tourism activities

In this research, we have distinguished between the following activities:

Elephant riding

– visitors riding on the back or neck of an elephant, either with or without a saddle.

Elephant used to give a ride to a tourist family.

Elephant show

– performances offered to an audience, where elephants display tricks and trained behaviours.

Male elephant performing in a show for tourists.

Elephant washing

– visitors can wash and/or bath with an elephant, either in a river or lake, or with buckets of water. Some of these experiences include additional time spent with the elephants to prepare and provide food or to follow the elephants on a walk before the washing.

Elephants used for washing activities with a group of tourists.

Elephant care-taking

– these activities are often called 'be a mahout' and tend to offer a more comprehensive experience with the elephants, introducing the visitor to verbal commands that mahouts use to control and manage the elephant. It usually also includes food preparation and provision, as well as washing.

Elephant used in a care-taking activity

Tourism activities

Hand feeding

– visitors provide food to the elephants, which can occur as part of other experiences or as a separate paid experience. In some cases, visitors approach the elephants directly or in other cases, over a protective barrier.

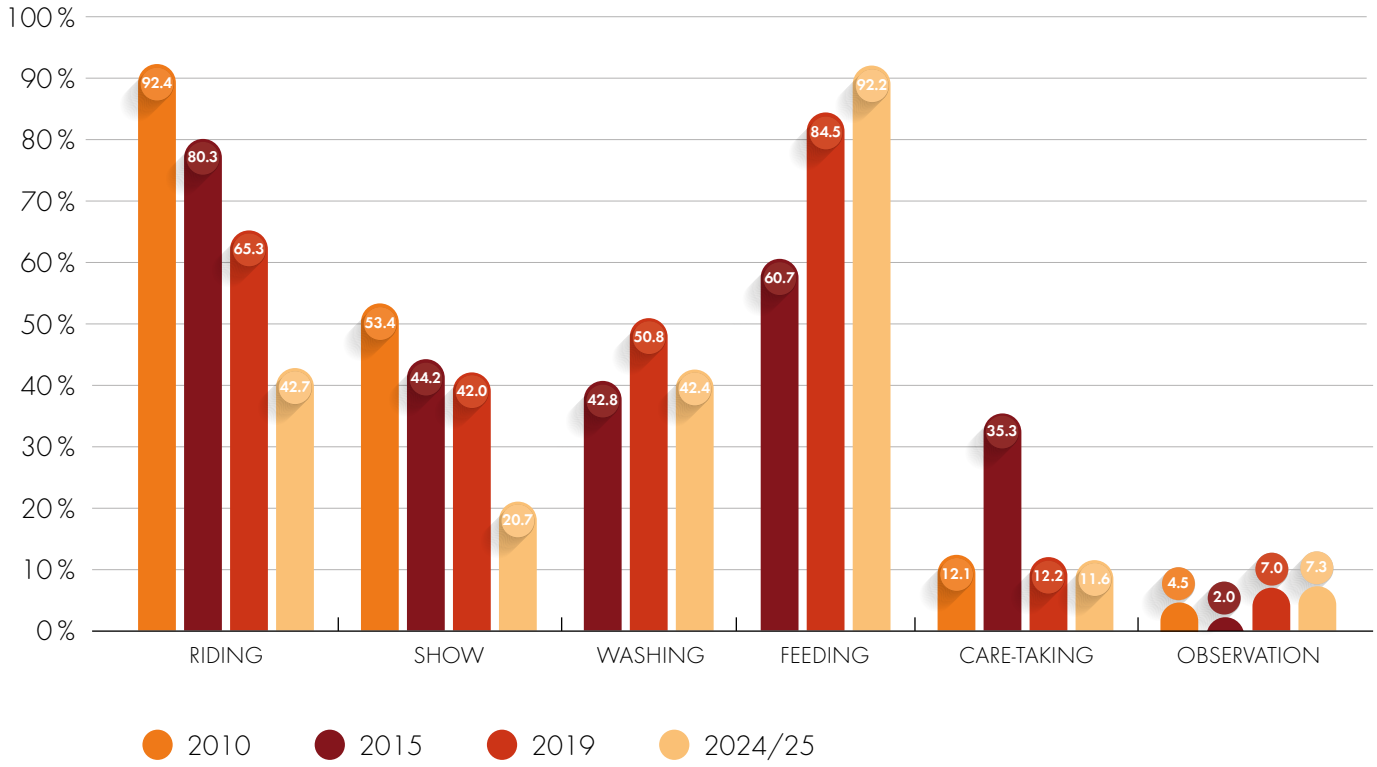
Elephant used for feeding by tourists without a barrier.

Observation

– visitors observe the elephants without directly interacting with them. This may be done from the ground, while following elephants on a walk, or from viewing platforms that allow the observation of elephants in an enclosure. When coupled with best-practice elephant management, occurring in a suitable environment, this tourism activity has the highest potential for providing the best welfare conditions to the elephants.

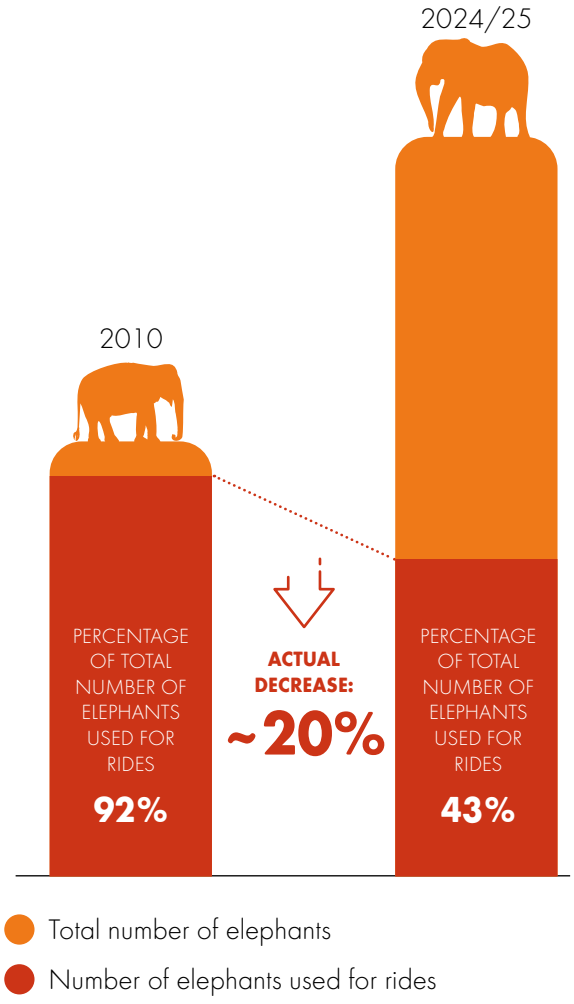
Observing an elephant taking a voluntary bath.

Figure 2: Percentage of elephants at venues that offer the listed tourism experiences



Most notably, since our first survey in 2010, we have seen a steep and consistent decline in the availability of elephant rides in Thailand. In 2010, 92% of all elephants were used for rides, which gradually decreased to 43% in 2024/25. However, while impressive, this drop needs to be put into perspective as the overall number of elephants has increased by more than 70% in the same timeframe. Therefore, the actual number of elephants used for rides has only decreased by 20% (from 1,519 elephants in 2010 to 1,217 elephants in 2024/25).

A similar trend can be seen in the offer of elephant shows. In 2010, half of all captive elephants were housed at venues offering shows. While not all of the venue's elephants would necessarily participate in these daily shows, they would have had to perform at some point during their time there. In 2024/25, only 21% of elephants were housed at venues offering shows – significantly less than in previous surveys (42% in 2019, 44% in 2015, 53% in 2010). While this proportional decrease is encouraging, some particularly popular venues have massively invested in their elephant shows.



Elephants, including calves being ridden, preparing for a show.

Elephant shows are typically accompanied by loud-speaker music and repetitive announcements.

Across all venues that offered shows, we measured an average noise level of 83 dB during the shows, with maximum values of 99dB. This equates to factory noise levels, and employees would usually be wearing ear protection.

This equates to factory noise levels, and employees would usually be wearing ear protection.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many elephant owners struggled to maintain an income due to a lack of tourists. This dramatically demonstrates why it is irresponsible to sustain and expand an industry that relies on paying tourists for the survival of thousands of endangered elephants and their families – a clearly unstable income source. Through our research, we discovered that during the pandemic, some elephant owners developed a strong social media presence and started streaming their daily activities with individual elephants and elephant performances. While this started as a necessity, many of the owners built up an online presence of mostly domestic followers that continues today and helps supplement their income, particularly in the Surin region – an area often associated as a heartland of elephant keeping in Thailand.

In contrast to riding and shows, elephant washing and elephant care-taking experiences have become much more common. In 2024/25, half of all elephants (54%) were kept at venues that offered either washing or care-taking activities. These experiences are often disguised in the advertising as 'ethical' or 'humane' activities by the venues. While many of these venues do provide captive environments that may contribute positively to better welfare, fundamental concerns remain. Elephants do not need visitors to wash them. Washing is usually conducted by the mahouts and serves not only as a hygiene measure but as an opportunity for a medical check. It can also be a training and relationship-building activity during which a mahout's control is reestablished. In captive environments that allow elephants free access to water, mud baths and sand pits, the elephants are more than capable of washing themselves.

Elephants that were led into a river and commanded to remain until being washed by tourists.

Tourists washing an elephant on Phuket, Thailand.

All elephants used for washing or other direct interactions with visitors will have to be trained through punishment in order to ensure the necessary safety for visitors.

Elephants do not need visitors to wash them. If given a choice, captive elephants will avoid close contact with people they are not familiar with.

At washing venues, they do not have that choice, and their compliance is achieved through a mix of associating the presence of visitors with food, through punishment if an elephant doesn't comply, and through the regularity of those interactions.

Nonetheless, there have been frequent incidents where elephants have injured visitors – either by accident or because their patience was pushed beyond their limits.

In such events, the elephants will be punished and in severe cases, the mahouts would often be made the scapegoat to face legal repercussions for not controlling their elephant sufficiently.

Observational experiences have seen a steady ncrease over the years, though they remain more of a niche experience.

In 2010, only 4.6% of all elephants (75 animals) were kept at venues offering observational experiences. In 2024/25, we documented 7.2% of all elephants (207 animals) at venues offering observation – almost three times as many elephants as in 2010. However, one venue with a significantly high number of elephants that offers primarily observational experiences couldn't be assessed due to a flood catastrophe. If this venue had been included in the research, we would see an even more pronounced increase in the proportion of observational experiences. While interactive experiences such as riding, washing and shows are often offered by the same venue, we found that observational experiences tend to be more exclusive, typically not including other activities beyond, in some cases, elephant hand feeding. In many instances, venues offering purely observational experiences have received the highest welfare condition scores in our research as they also adopted best practice elephant management routines. However, just because a venue offers observational experiences, better welfare for the animals is not guaranteed. For example, offering observational experiences only helps if elephants are given the space and quality of natural environments that allow them to forage and explore; they are encouraged and enabled to maximise their environment autonomously; they have opportunities for socialising with other elephants; and mahouts are skilled in managing elephants humanely.

Hand feeding experiences were offered by the vast majority of venues (92.2%). This is sold as an additional activity for visitors at large-scale entertainment facilities, or as a quick experience to visitors stopping at a roadside venue. It is also offered at washing, caretaking and even some observational venues. The last of these venues would usually only allow this over a barrier or in some cases only offer the preparation of food, hiding it in contraptions and then watching the elephants forage for it. Some leading observational venues have either never allowed hand feeding, have dropped it, or have recently announced abandoning this practice.[58]

Elephants at an observation-only venue where tourists can deposit food in feeding contraptions for the elephants to search for on their own.

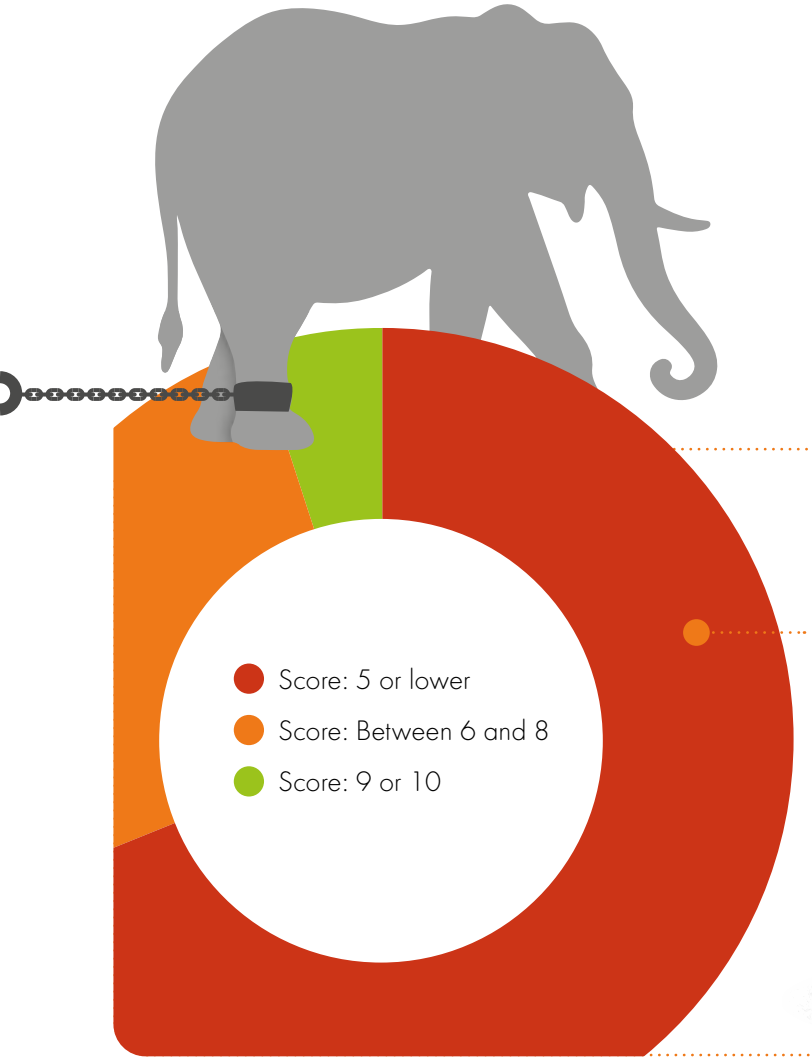
Animal welfare condition scores

During the survey, we scored each venue across nine criteria that contribute to the elephants' welfare condition. The scores ranged from 0 (poorest welfare condition) to 4 (best welfare condition) and all nine criteria were then combined into a single score between 1 (poorest) and 10 (best) for the overall animal welfare condition score (AWCS). A list of all venues that received highest scores (9 or 10 out of 10) can be found in the Appendix 2.

Across all 236 venues, we calculated an average AWCS of 5.22. This score is almost identical to the survey score of 5.28 in 2020.

This demonstrates that the serious concerns about the welfare of elephants in tourism venues remain largely unchanged.

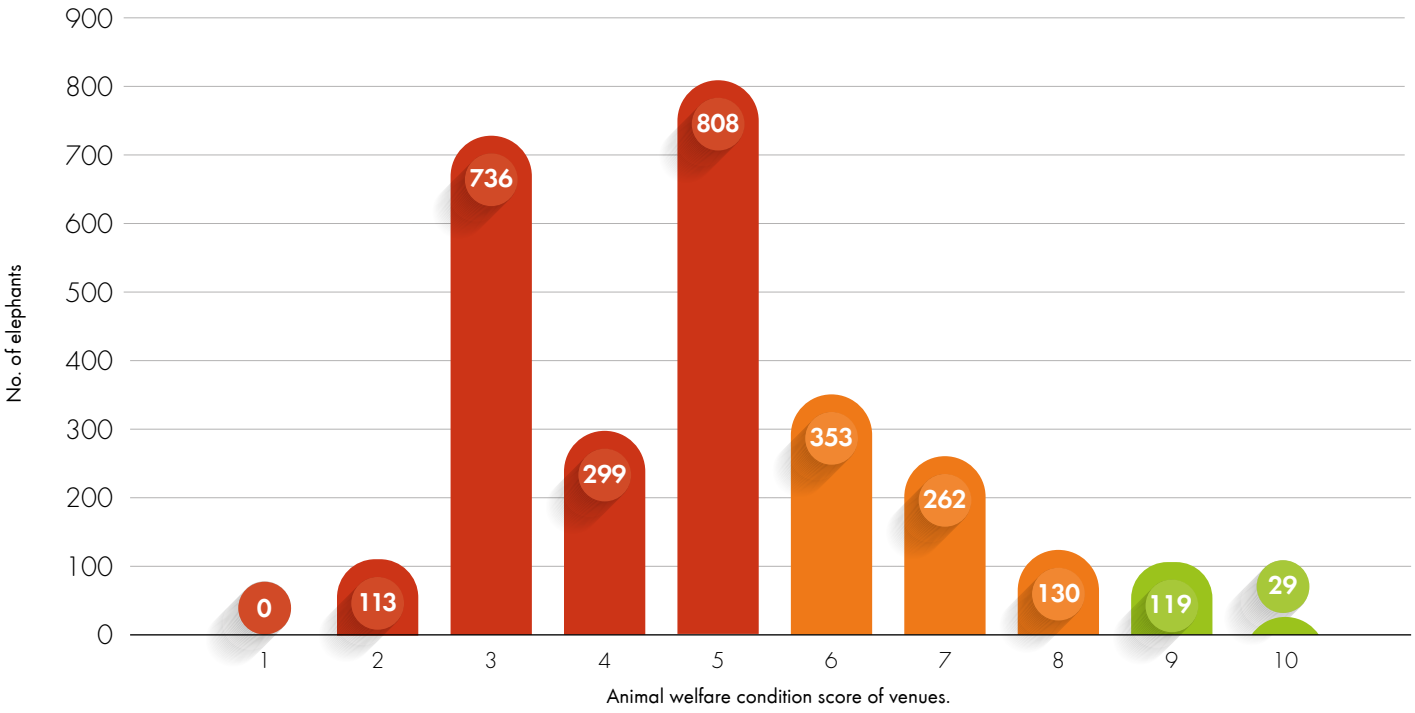
Of the 2,849 elephants kept at the venues assessed during this research, 69% (1,956 elephants) were kept at venues scoring 5 or lower, representing poor conditions. One in four elephants (26%, 745 elephants) were kept at venues with improved conditions scoring between 6 and 8. Only 5% (148 elephants) were kept at venues with the best possible conditions, scoring 9 or 10. However, one venue that in previous years received high scores could not be assessed this time due to a flood disaster. The number of elephants at that facility would have significantly increased the proportion of elephants living under the best possible conditions – obviously depending on that venue achieving those scores.



69%

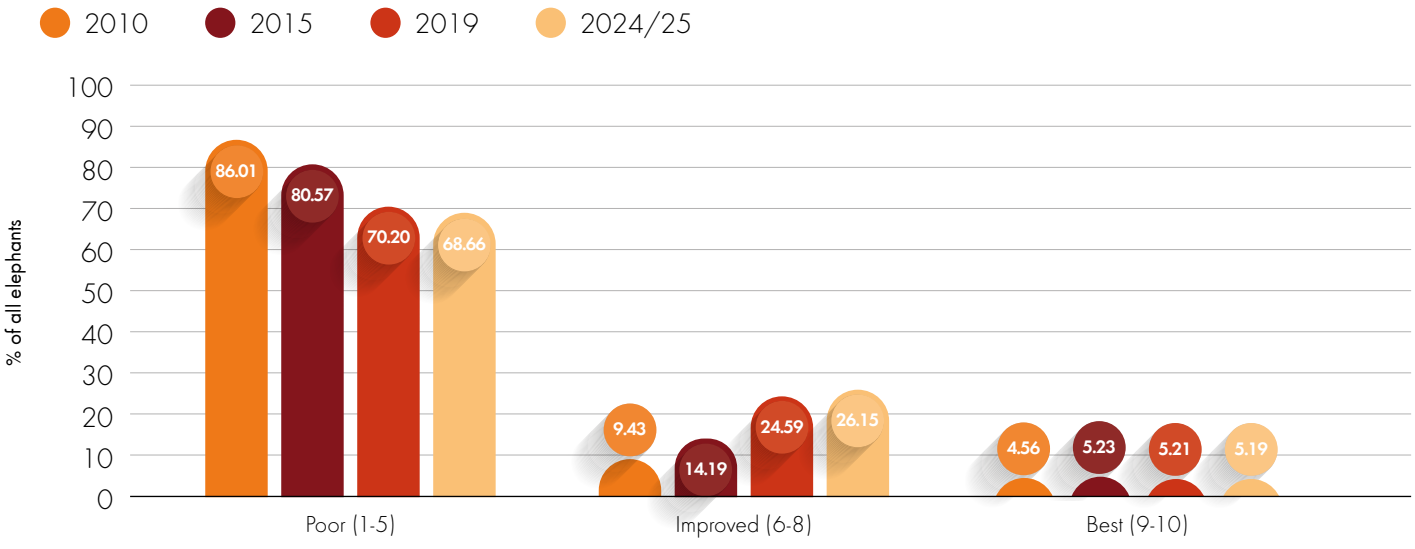
Of the 2,849 elephants kept at the venues assessed during this research 69% were kept at venues scoring 5 or lower, representing poor conditions.

Figure 3: Number of elephants at tourism venues by their animal welfare condition score.



Over the 15 years of our assessment work, we have noticed a trend towards improved conditions (see Figure 4). This is partially reflected in the change of tourism activities offered by the venues. We found that many venues try to capitalise on the diversity of tourism demands by either offering a range of activities at the same venues, or by having established satellite facilities where activities are branded as more ethical, while continuing to offer rides and shows at the main facility. This means that elephants may be used for different activities depending on demand. As a result, travellers can unknowingly end up supporting the very practices they are trying to avoid. While the trend towards improved conditions must be acknowledged, we also recognise that the number of captive elephants at tourism venues has considerably grown over that time period. That growth has only recently slowed (but not halted). Severe concerns remain that while the elephant tourism industry in Thailand is adapting to a change in demand from tourists, it is not yet showing signs of phasing out or systematically addressing the fundamental concerns over these practices.

Figure 4: Percent of tourism elephants at venues with poor, improved or best conditions.



Percent of tourism elephants kept at venues providing poor (AWCS of 1-5), improved (AWCS of 6-8) or best possible (AWCS of 9-10) conditions for elephants by research period since 2010.

Elephant at a low-scoring venue due to concrete ground, short chains, and unhygienic conditions.

We observed significant differences in the scores when breaking them down by the offered tourism experience. Venues that offered elephant shows received the lowest overall AWCS (an average score of 3.05), closely followed by venues offering elephant riding (average score of 3.32). The low scores are not only due to the activities themselves, but also a variety of factors that are commonly found at those venues which contribute negatively to animal welfare.

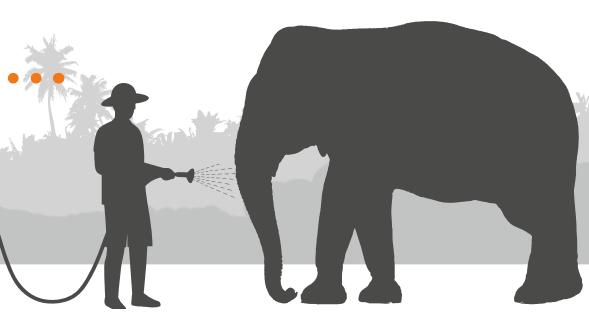
Elephants at a venue offering rides and shows, chained on concrete substrate, exposed to urine smell, and no stimulation in any way.

Such venues usually cater to large numbers of visitors who do not want to travel far or spend too much time at the venue. Therefore, the elephants need to be easily accessible for tourists, limiting opportunities for them to roam freely or access natural habitats. It also means that noise levels at those venues are higher, tourists are often uninformed about how to behave around elephants, and opportunities for social interaction between elephants will be rarer than at venues that can offer more natural environments.

Although our results show that fewer elephants are now used in riding and shows, this shift has not translated into a meaningful increase in overall welfare scores. This suggests that while some harmful practices are declining, their replacements such as washing and hand feeding often maintain similar levels of restriction, control and human interaction, limiting the potential for real welfare improvements. This concern was also raised in our 2020 findings, where we flagged that such changes may improve public perception without delivering genuine welfare benefits.

> When rides and shows are removed, visitors may assume the venue is now acceptable, overlooking other critical factors.

This disconnect risks creating a false sense of progress, where the experience appears more humane from the outside but continues to fall short of meeting the elephants' needs.



Elephant in an artificial concrete pool for a tourism washing experience, directly adjacent to a road.

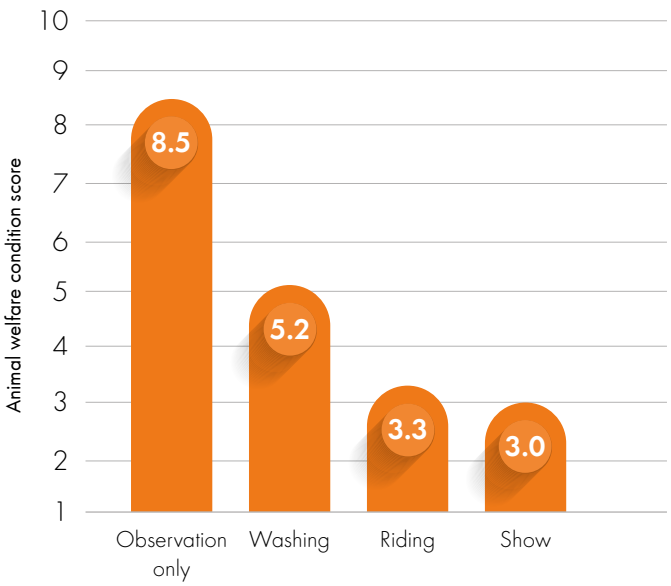
While venues offering elephant washing tend to score relatively higher (an average score of 5.16), their scores represent the average found across the industry and therefore remain of serious concern. The better scores compared to riding venues are due to some of those washing venues being located more remotely, catering to smaller groups that sometimes prefer a more natural, exclusive experience. At some washing venues, this allowed elephants to have more opportunities to socialise within a small herd of elephants and to be less restrained by chains or ropes. However, several venues that offered elephant washing were not at all better than venues offering elephant riding or shows. These venues were typically found close to roads and would offer very short washing experiences at any time of the day, which then brought with it a variety of contributing factors that decreased the welfare conditions for the elephants.

Venues only offering observation of elephants scored the highest AWCS (average score of 8.5)

Observation only venues would almost always be located wihtin or adjacent to natural habitat, prioritise the welfare of the elephants over the visitor experience, and enable as many as possible opportunities for elephants to engage in purposeful, natural behaviour and to be in social groups. These steps tend to reduce the stress on the animals through increasing the distance from visitors and can contribute to a safer environment. In addition, many of these venues would put extra effort into working with their mahouts to build their confidence in allowing the elephants more freedom without losing control. A list of all the highest scoring venues can be found in Appendix 2.

Elephants at a washing venue awaiting a new group of tourists. Here they were kept at their dedicated spots in isolation from each other.

Figure 5: Average animal welfare condition scores



Animal welfare condition score (1=poorest, 10=best) by offered tourism experience.

Breaking down the welfare conditions along the specific criteria that we used to assess them helps us to understand some of the concrete elephant welfare concerns behind those worrying scores. The criteria that received the lowest scores were 'mobility', followed by 'entertainment intensity' and 'diet quality'. The criteria 'hygiene' and 'daytime rest area' received slightly higher scores. Scores across most criteria remained relatively consistent with the scores of the previous survey.

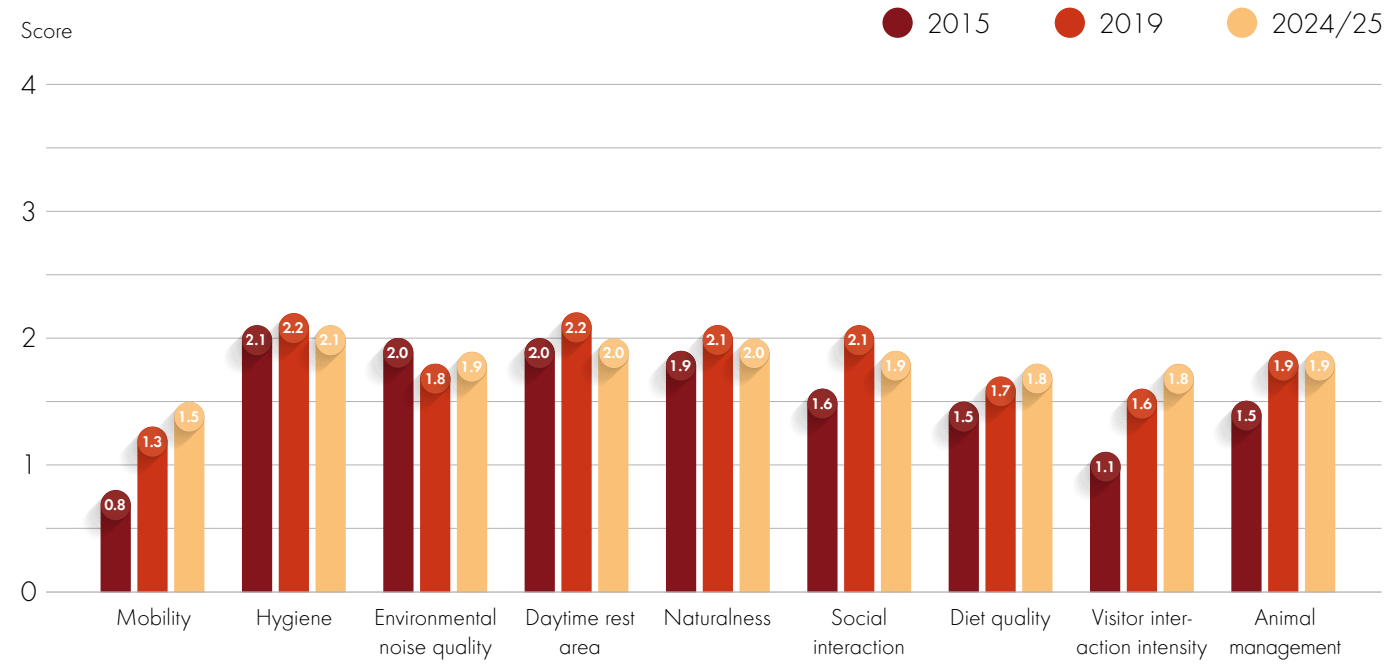
The **'mobility'** criterion gauges the ability of elephants to make self-determined choices for when and where to move at the venue, and to what degree they are given opportunities for movement. At lower scoring elephant venues, when elephants were in between tourism activities, they would typically be kept on chains and ropes or closely supervised by their mahouts to ensure they didn't stray. Although some elephants would not be physically restrained, such close supervision still limits the elephant's freedom of movement, driven by the operational needs of the venue rather than the elephant's own preferences.

It is crucial to recognise that welfare-impacting procedures in conventional elephant management – such as chains or ropes – are often used to safeguard the mahouts, visitors or property from harm or damage.

However, while chains, ropes or other welfare-impacting procedures in conventional elephant management, may be necessary to ensure human safety, they remain problematic for the elephants. The reliance on these practices highlights the principal inadequacy of captivity for elephants.

Some proponents of elephant tourism have previously flagged that elephant riding contributes positively to the health of the animals by providing exercise. While activities such as these can provide exercise if the alternative would be for the elephant to be chained up, there are risks around the activity's repetitiveness, the substrate it is carried out on, the weight carried and the need for training.

Figure 6: Average scores (0=worst, 4=best) for each animal welfare condition criteria for Thai elephant tourism venues



These factors can be detrimental to the elephant's welfare. The highest 'mobility' scores were typically achieved by venues that allowed and encouraged elephants to autonomously explore and forage natural environments, traversing different but mostly natural substrates and landscapes – either in large-scale enclosures or supervised in community forests.

'Hygiene' entails aspects that contribute to the elephants' ability to protect their skin, eyes, feet, trunk and tail from parasites, infection, sun damage and other risk factors. This criterion ranks highest among the welfare condition criteria as it is probably one that is commonly acknowledged by the mahouts as of critical importance. While a few venues still only offer bucket or water hose showers, many venues do provide their elephants with access to rivers or lakes. Commonly noted concerns on hygiene also included the presence of rubbish (at 17% of venues) or more than day-old faeces (at 30% of venues) in the vicinity of the elephants, as well as moist standing ground (27%) and noticeable urine stench (21%).

'Environmental noise quality' covers the elephants' aural environment. It considers the presence and scale of artificial noise, such as that caused by loudspeakers, traffic, construction or visitor crowds. Natural sounds that would occur in the elephants' habitat, such as bird, insect or vegetation noises are not considered a negative impact for this criterion. Typically, venues that receive walk-in visitors or are located close to main roads tend to experience higher levels of crowd-related disturbance, which can negatively impact elephant welfare. These venues often attract spontaneous visits from tourists, which means there is less control over the number of visitors and the timing or number of tours. As a result, groups tend to be larger and more unpredictable. Because these visits are unscheduled, there is typically no opportunity to properly brief guests in advance about how to behave around elephants. Without guidance, visitors are less likely to understand the importance of remaining calm and quiet, avoiding sudden movements, and keeping a respectful distance. Together, these conditions can contribute to increased stress for the elephants. In contrast, venues that rely on scheduled visits and incorporate educational sessions before tours are better able to create a calm and controlled environment, which significantly benefits the animals' welfare and may also help increase safety for people.

'Daytime rest area' reflects on the infrastructure where the elephants would spend most of their time when not actively participating in tourism activities. This includes the substrate that the elephants are standing on or where they occasionally lie down. Non-yielding substrates such as concrete can be particularly damaging to the elephants' joints. This criterion also considers how well the elephants can protect themselves from the elements. In their natural habitat, elephants would typically be able to access thick canopy or cover themselves in mud/sand layers as a natural barrier to protect themselves. In captivity, this is often not possible and if elephants are not given the option to take shelter from the sun or storms, they could be harmed.

At this top-scoring observation-only venue, elephants have conditions that resemble those in the wild.

'Naturalness' acknowledges elephants not being a domesticated species and therefore benefitting from an environment that offers natural scents, sights, textures and audible stimulation rooted in their genetic heritage. A natural environment can enable more species-specific behaviours than an artificial environment, such as urban venues or those designed for visitor convenience rather than elephant wellbeing. Natural environments are often viewed as impractical by venues that prioritise visitor access and control, since they can make it harder to monitor elephants or guarantee close encounters. This points to a fundamental misalignment between conventional tourism demands and the conditions and environment required to ensure high elephant welfare.

'Social interaction' gauges the ability for elephants to interact and communicate with other elephants at the venue on their own terms. Elephants, especially females, are incredibly complex animals socially. Females create close and often lifelong bonds with herd members and with individuals of other herds. Males also thrive on social contact and often bond with other males or choose to join herds temporarily. In tourism venues, this is often not possible. As uncovered in our 2019 report 'Elephants. Not commodities.', many of the young elephants in venues are separated from their mothers at a young age and may never return to them. The frequent trading of elephants between venues also does not guarantee a stable herd structure. In addition, many mahouts restrict their elephants the ability to freely interact with other elephants out of fear of conflict between the animals or of losing control over them.

Commonly, elephants at conventional tourism venues would only be able to have physical contact with one or two adjacent elephants or communicate with others from a distance.

In venues offering interactive experiences in more remote settings, elephants are often given opportunities to be in social groups – but this is often interrupted by the visitor experience, for example, when a group's schedule means the elephants must move on to washing or hand feeding activities, which leads to mahouts ushering the animals on. Social groupings are more common at observation-only venues, but not guaranteed – especially at small venues that may have only 2 or 3 elephants.

Overall, our assessment results point to a system where elephants are often treated as individual performers or service providers rather than as members of a social, wild species with complex needs.

'Diet quality' reflects on the quality, diversity and quantity of the provided food and water to the venue's elephants. While there are typically limitations to what our researchers are able to assess during a visit, many aspects of the diet regime are visible or shared by mahouts. At the lower end of the scale are venues with a diet consisting of a few items that are often agricultural byproducts, such as pineapple plant tops or palm tree branches. At the higher end of the scale are venues that provide a much more varied diet, with elephants given access to habitat that encourages foraging for an array of plants. This criterion is typically closely linked to the criteria around 'mobility' and 'naturalness', as elephants with more freedom to move within a natural environment are also more likely to access a wider variety of foraged food. These increased foraging opportunities support a more diverse and nutritionally balanced diet, which in turn contributes to better health and wellbeing.

Elephants at an observation -only venue searching for food that was placed by visitors in these contraptions.

'Visitor interaction intensity' assesses factors that indicate an impact on the elephants' welfare through the activities offered to visitors. Regular shows with acrobatic tricks, very high density of visitors in the vicinity of elephants or very frequent and repetitive experiences such as saddled rides contribute to low scores. Meanwhile, visitor experiences that are non-intrusive, and that enable or encourage elephants to engage in natural and meaningful behaviours according to their preference scored higher. Our assessments show that this criterion has seen a consistent improvement across past studies, which points to a tendency to reduce intensity and frequency of visitor interactions. This is an important and positive observation that underlines some of the great efforts we see in travel companies advocating for more humane and natural traveller experiences.

'Animal management' is a broad criterion that combines a wide array of elephant management aspects. This includes access to veterinary services, the intensity and quality of interaction between the mahouts and their elephants, and the venue management's efforts to prioritise animal welfare. The way mahouts use tools to control elephants during and outside of visitor experiences is often a good indicator of the quality of animal management.

Elephants – even those in captivity – are still wild animals. As long as there is the 'need' for their direct handling, some form of training and cruel tools to control them in these high-risk situations is heartbreakingly necessary to safeguard keepers, visitors or property from harm.

However, this necessity for control over the elephants does not make these techniques any more acceptable and they remain deeply traumatic for the elephants as they are typically enforced by fear.

The reliance on these tools highlights the principal inadequacy of captivity for elephants. Simply removing these tools, eg bull hooks, is not always the best solution if either the mahouts aren't comfortable with alternative methods or if an uncontrollable elephant could lead to injuries or damage. Instead, it is critical to change the captive environment to one that doesn't require as stringent control and to enable mahouts to refrain from using those tools unless in emergency situations, eg similar to a fire extinguisher.

Overall, the low scores across all assessed criteria confirm that the needs of complex wild animals such as elephants can't be met sufficiently by tourism venues. The limitations inherent to captivity are severe and the need to generate profit often leads to prioritising visitor experiences over animal welfare. Observation-only experiences can provide significantly better conditions for elephants when compared to close-contact experiences or shows. But they also need to be combined with best practice elephant management, ensuring all staff have the knowledge and skills to care for the elephants humanely, and that there are safe conditions for the caretakers and for visitors.

However, such best-practice elephant venues can only serve as an interim improvement – they cannot replace the urgent need for a just phase-out of captive elephant tourism practices altogether.

Two elephants at an observation-only venue accessing a river.

Travel industry and governmental policy implications

Travel industry and travellers

For more than a decade, World Animal Protection has worked side by side with the tourism industry to help bring positive change for animals. We aim to bring hidden welfare issues to light, reveal the consequences of travel companies' choices and give companies the tools they need to make a positive impact. We also challenge the travel industry when they continue to prioritise profit while condoning animal cruelty.

Our reports not only show the state of captive elephant entertainment but also provide reliable data that companies and travellers can base their decisions on, helping them to move away from harmful offers towards responsible alternatives.

When travel companies choose to change, we support them with practical advice to develop wildlife policies that give clear direction, help staff and suppliers apply these policies, and point to responsible alternatives that travellers can enjoy instead. We do not only highlight issues but also help to build solutions that work for animals, businesses and travellers.

Through engagement and campaigning, by 2018 we secured the commitment of more than 200 travel companies to join our list of elephant-friendly travel companies pledging not to sell elephant rides and shows. We were encouraged by the interest of these global players and their commitment to elephants.

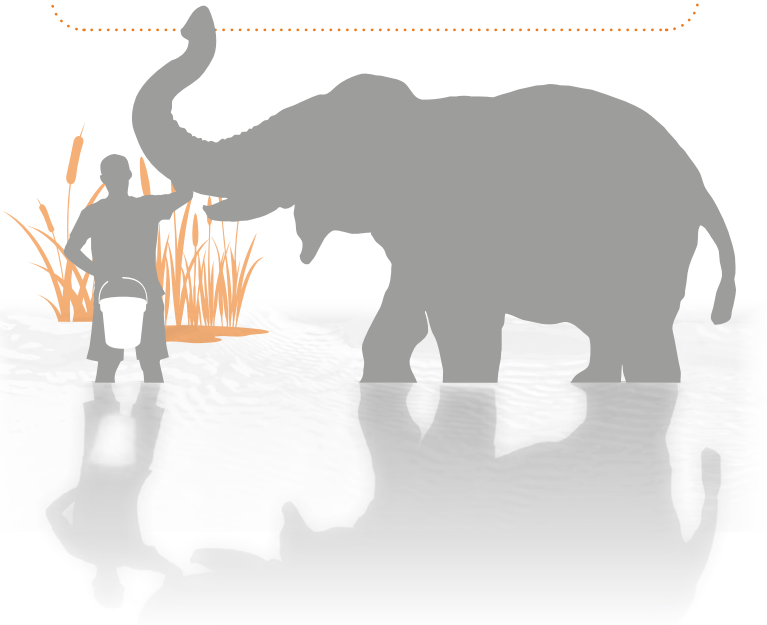
However, the exploitation of elephants has not disappeared, but simply shifted. As rides and shows have become less socially acceptable, many venues across Asia have replaced them with activities such as washing. These experiences are often marketed as ethical alternatives, appearing to be kinder than riding, yet they still depend on control and restraint to keep elephants available for tourists.

To make these experiences sound ethical, the elephant venues frequently describe them with reassuring terms such as 'sanctuary', 'rescue centre' or 'retirement home'. These words suggest safety, care and high welfare, but in practice they don't reflect the reality for the animals.

What may look like a natural or gentle activity has been designed for the pleasure of the visitor rather than for the elephant.

While elephant rides and shows have declined, the exploitation of elephants has shifted toward new activities such as bathing and photo opportunities, often promoted as ethical or rescue-based experiences. But these still rely on control, restraint, and misleading "welfare language" (e.g. "sanctuary," "rescue centre") that disguises poor conditions.

For travel companies, continuing to promote these venues risks misleading customers, damaging trust, and sustaining practices that compromise elephant welfare.



This use of welfare language can easily mislead well-meaning travellers who believe they are supporting a responsible cause, when in fact the fundamental welfare problems remain unchanged.

For travel companies, continuing to promote such activities carries the risk of confusing customers, undermining trust and sustaining practices that compromise elephant welfare.

In other words, travellers who may once have ridden an elephant and now seek better alternatives are falsely led to believe they are helping by washing an elephant instead.

Through our engagement with the industry, we are actively moving companies to be more aware of their supply chains and the potentially cruel experiences they sell and promote, including on social media platforms, which can change the mindset of travellers.

Members of the tourism industry have a responsibility to educate their staff on animal welfare; end their sale and promotion of cruel captive wild animal experiences; recognise how their promotion of captive wild animal experiences on social media is problematic; and support their customers to understand how to be responsible travellers and wildlife-friendly travellers.

As the true welfare impacts of keeping captive elephants in entertainment venues are becoming clearer and harder to ignore, travel companies have an increased responsibility to their customers to sell ethical wildlife experiences that do not cause distress.

We know travellers want to see wild animals on holiday; they should be able to do it responsibly. The tourism industry must support this endeavour to help protect their brand, their customers and, of course, wild animals.

Legislation and governmental policies

Regulatory fragmentation

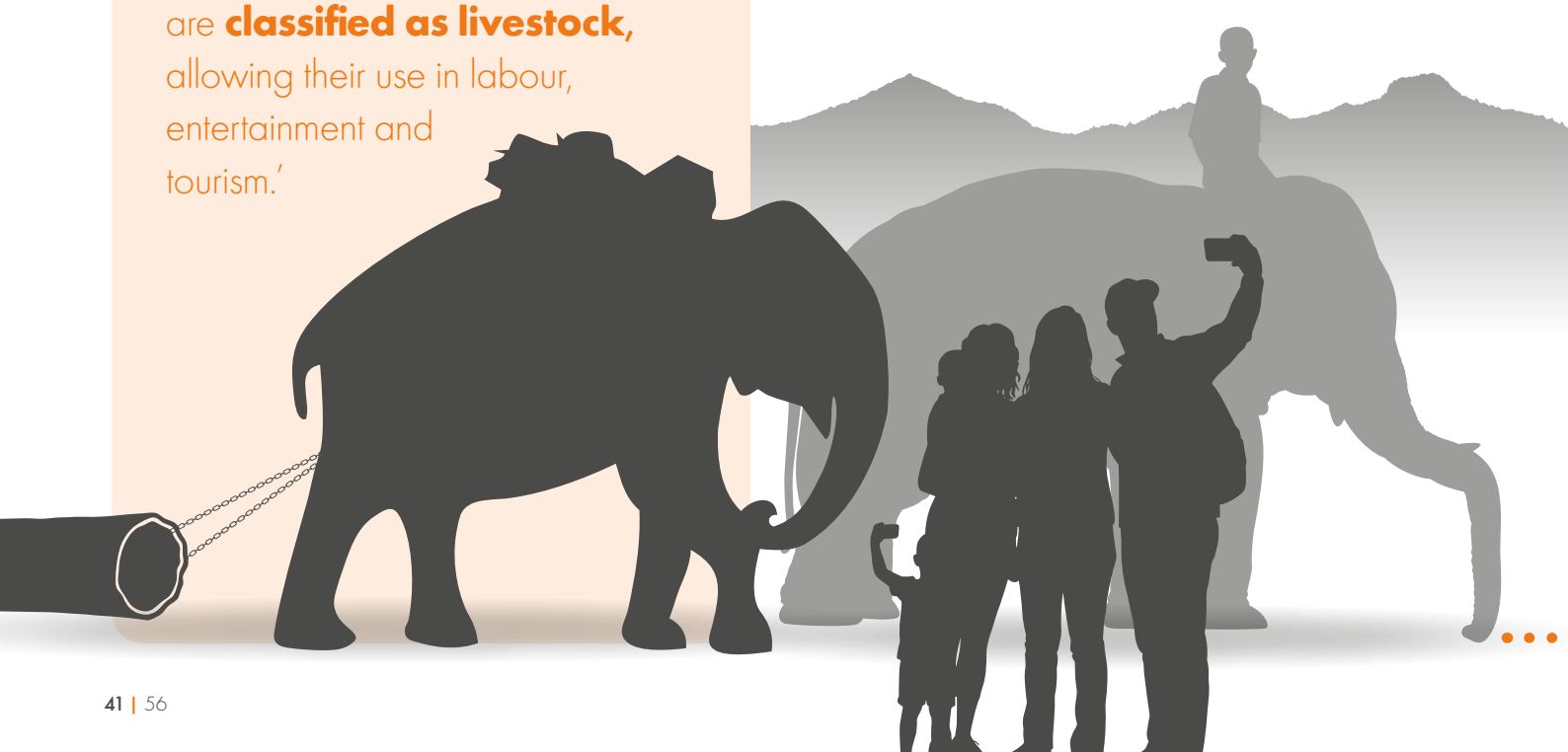
Thailand's legal treatment of elephants hinges on a fundamental distinction between wild and captive populations, despite both belonging to the endangered Asian elephant species (Elephas maximus), as listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which outlaws international commercial trade in elephants, and classified as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature' (IUCN) Red List. Wild elephants are protected under the Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act (WARPA), B.E. 2535 (1992), while captive elephants fall under the Draught Animal Act, B.E. 2482 (1939), which governs them as 'beasts of burden'. This legal bifurcation underpins many systemic issues affecting captive elephant welfare.

WARPA, enforced by the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP), prohibits the killing, possession or trade of wild elephants, reflecting their status as protected wildlife. In contrast, the Draught Animal Act, overseen by the Department of Livestock Development (DLD), classifies captive elephants as livestock, allowing their use in labour, entertainment and tourism.

This dual legal situation results in drastically different levels of oversight and protection for elephants based solely on ownership classification.

This framework also complicates monitoring elephant provenance. WARPA theoretically protects wild elephants from being captured and laundered into the tourism industry, yet the longstanding legal category of 'domesticated elephant' creates loopholes. Captive elephants born in tourism camps are considered legal private property.

'In Thailand captive elephants are **classified as livestock,** allowing their use in labour, entertainment and tourism.'



While microchipping and DNA registration have been introduced, the absence of a central, publicly accessible database undermines transparency and prevents independent verification of population figures, births, transfers and deaths. The lack of a unified, elephant-specific legal framework contributes to enforcement ambiguity and jurisdictional fragmentation, leaving captive elephants without meaningful protection despite their endangered status.

Thailand's current legal regime is also inconsistent with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' 2019 Guidelines for Wildlife Tourism, which call for non-contact, observation-only experiences, robust welfare protections, and the phasing out of performance-based attractions. Nor does it meet World Organisation for Animal Health recommendations on the welfare of working and wild animals in captivity, which emphasise meeting behavioural needs, preventing harmful practices, and avoiding unnecessary human interaction.

Breeding, trade and commercial captivity

Captive elephant breeding remains entirely legal and unregulated under Thai law. There is no cap, permit requirement or strategic national policy guiding breeding rates – despite elephants being listed under CITES Appendix I and protected under international agreements.

As Appendix I-listed species, CITES prohibits international commercial trade of Asian elephants but does not prohibit domestic breeding or trade within Thailand.

> **Legal gaps enable commercial exploitation that aligns with Thai law yet conflicts with conservation principles..**

This contradiction becomes more apparent when compared to the approach towards wild elephants. Thailand's DNP has even initiated fertility control programmes in certain national parks – most notably Khao Yai National Park – to address overpopulation and human-elephant conflict, with wild females receiving contraceptive vaccines. Meanwhile, captive elephants continue to be bred without restraint to satisfy tourism demand.

Moreover, while government authorities have implemented DNA-based registration systems to prevent laundering of wild-caught elephants into the captive population, enforcement remains inconsistent. The DLD mandated DNA sampling for newborn captive elephants to verify parentage, and microchipping is required for those over eight years old. However, irregularities in registration practices persist, and the ownership and transfer of captive elephants often occurs without transparent oversight.

Several elephant calves without their mothers. They all wear ankle chains, indicating that they will be chained regularly.

Elephants chained in horrible conditions at a venue that was reported in the past for welfare concerns. The official investigation concluded without substantial results due to weak legislation.

The tension between Thailand's status as a CITES signatory and its permissive domestic breeding policies remains unresolved. CITES trade restrictions are applied differently to captive-born animals, but ...

> ... when the resulting industry relies on performance, forced labour or harmful tourist activities, the legal distinction becomes ethically untenable.

Welfare legislation and enforcement gaps

The main law intended to protect animals from cruelty in Thailand is the Prevention of Cruelty and Provision of Animal Welfare Act (CPWAA), B.E. 2557 (2014), which criminalises acts such as starvation, overwork and violence. While elephants are nominally covered under this Act, enforcement is rare and no minimum welfare standards specific to elephants have been codified. The law uses broad definitions and offers few actionable benchmarks for oversight authorities.

In practice, captive elephants are still subjected to prolonged chaining, bull hook use, forced performances, and unsanitary conditions in many camps. These practices are widely condemned by veterinary experts and welfare organisations yet remain legal due to the absence of explicit prohibitions in any law.

Enforcement of welfare legislation is further limited by weak penalties under the CPWAA – cases involving elephant mistreatment rarely result in prosecution and violations are often resolved informally or ignored altogether. Sections 381–382 of the Thai Criminal Code also provide for penalties against animal cruelty but are similarly underutilised and outdated.

A voluntary certification programme for elephant camps, initiated by the DLD and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, was designed to recognise facilities that meet basic welfare and safety standards. However, uptake has been extremely low. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports continues to promote elephant tourism as part of Thailand's cultural tourism portfolio, without differentiation between exploitative and ethical models. Incentive structures for tourism operators remain tied to visitor volume, indirectly rewarding high-intensity, welfare-compromising attractions. Without enforcement or incentives, the certification scheme has failed to meaningfully influence camp operations or tourism practices.

In the absence of binding regulation, welfare outcomes depend almost entirely on individual elephant venue operators. Some facilities, supported by NGOs or international partnerships, have transitioned to observation-only models. But many others continue exploitative attractions including elephant rides, show performances and elephant washing experiences.

Systemic inaction

Despite repeated public and NGO pressure, the Thai government has not enacted legislative changes to address systemic issues in captive elephant management. In 2020, during the collapse of international tourism caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, 192 NGOs signed an open letter, drafted by World Animal Protection, urging the government to at least temporarily end commercial breeding of elephants and enhance welfare protections. The letter received no formal response.

In 2020

192

NGOs signed an open letter, drafted by World Animal Protection, urging the Thai government to at least temporarily end commercial breeding of elephants and enhance welfare protections.

The letter received no formal response.

In 2022, 15,938 Thai citizens signed a petition urging the Thai government to pass the elephant bill, drafted by World Animal Protection Thailand in collaboration with civil society partners, aiming to end commercial elephant breeding and establish enforceable welfare standards. Subsequently, in 2024, over 172,000 individuals from 26 countries added their voices to a global petition, further pressuring the government. Despite this overwhelming domestic and international support, the bill has not yet been tabled – partly due to the prevailing political situation – and none of its provisions have been incorporated into existing laws.

Currently, no single agency has authority to lead reform or monitor compliance across breeding, registration, welfare, trade and tourism domains. The DLD (responsible for captive elephants), the DNP (responsible for wild populations), and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (camp certification and promotion) share fragmented jurisdiction with little coordination or accountability.

In the absence of centralised oversight and robust legislative mandates, captive elephants remain in legal limbo.

This silence reflects a broader institutional reluctance to challenge profitable tourism interests. Though the industry seems to have paused in its growth post-pandemic, elephant tourism remains economically significant in certain regions, reducing political will to restrict practices deemed popular or culturally acceptable.

Continued legality of exploitation

One of the most striking regulatory gaps is the continued legality of exploitative tourist attractions. Activities most associated with welfare abuse such as circus shows, elephant painting and rides are not banned under national law. These practices persist not because the state endorses them, but because no legislative framework prohibits them.

The National Elephant Conservation Action Plan (2023–2030) mentions ethical tourism models and improved veterinary care but does not commit to phasing out exploitative attractions or restricting breeding. As a result, commercial elephant use continues with minimal disruption, despite growing international recognition that these practices are inherently harmful.

Although some international tourism operators have ceased promoting such venues, market shifts have not been matched by domestic regulation. Most tourists still have access to these attractions, and demand from local and regional visitors remains significant.

Elephant calf chained to its mother during a show performance.

Two elephants at an observation-only venue, being allowed a maximum of freedom of choice by roaming and interacting with each other freely.

Pathway to comprehensive reform

To address Thailand's systemic captive elephant welfare gaps, a unified, elephant-specific legal framework is urgently needed to replace the current fragmented regime, bringing both wild and captive populations under consistent protection.

> Core reforms should include a ban on commercial elephant breeding; enforceable mandatory welfare standards tailored to elephants; and the phased elimination of exploitative tourism activities such as rides, performances and painting shows.

This must be backed by robust enforcement mechanisms and transparent registration and provenance tracking via a publicly accessible database. There must also be a centralised authority with oversight and jurisdiction across breeding, trade, welfare and tourism, ensuring compliance, accountability and alignment with conservation principles, despite economic pressures from the tourism industry.

While pursuing these long-term policy changes, a critical interim step is to shift the elephant tourism market by actively supporting venue transitions to genuine elephant-friendly models.

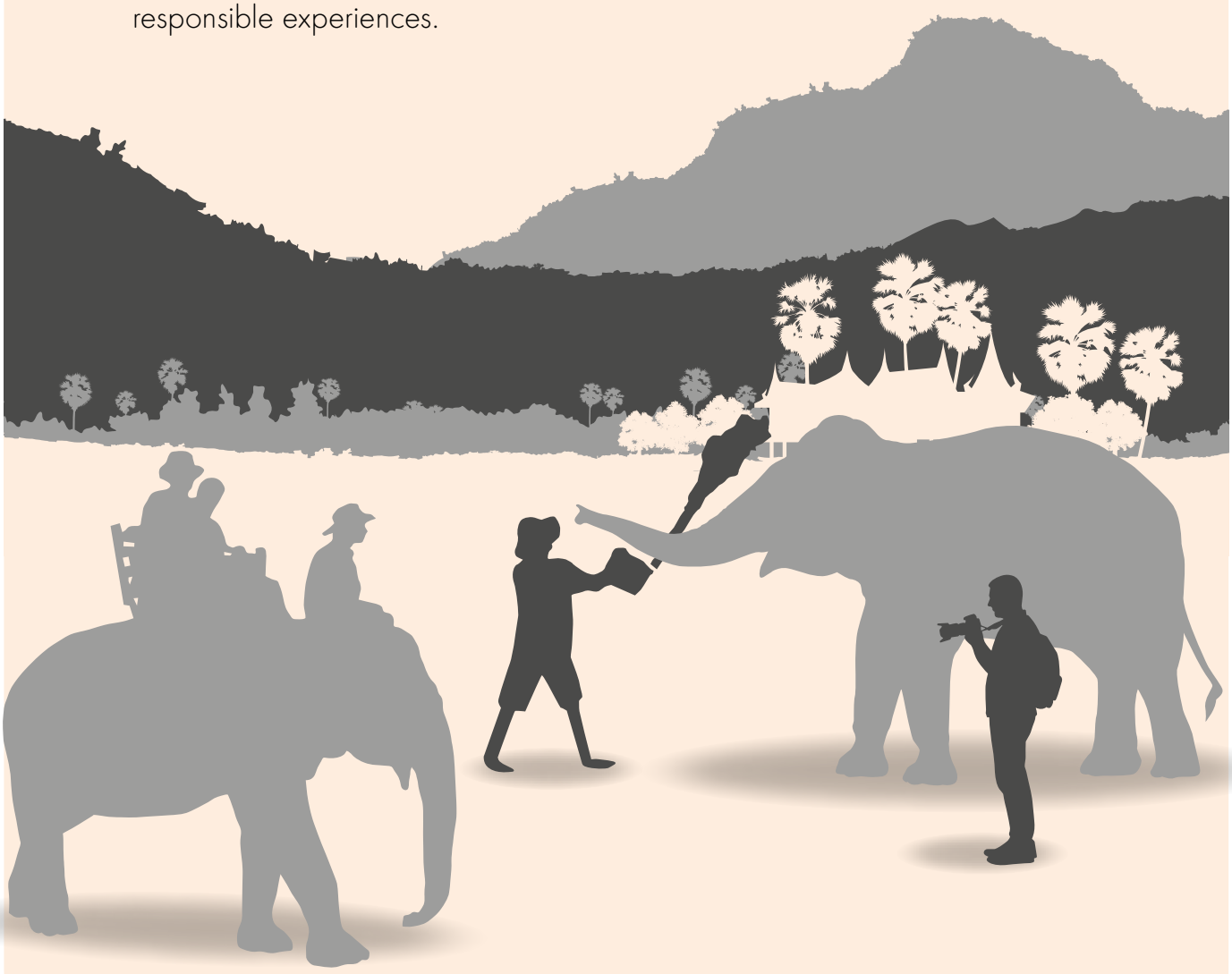
These venues – prioritising observation-only experiences, larger natural habitats, and the elimination of direct visitor contact – can serve as tipping points for industry transformation. By increasing the supply of ethical options and strengthening their visibility in the tourism market, demand for exploitative attractions can be reduced, creating both market pressure and public expectation for higher welfare standards.

Such interim transitions can be facilitated through targeted support from NGOs, the tourism industry, other members of the private sector and governmental bodies. Support to make the shift could include training, technical assistance, marketing partnerships and financial incentives. Promoting these venues as flagship destinations for responsible travel can help build consumer demand for ethical tourism now, while the slower processes of legislative reform and policy advocacy continue.

A just and inclusive transition must also consider those who would be negatively affected – such as mahouts, tourism workers, owners and local communities dependent on elephant tourism – by enabling them viable alternative pathways to participate in the emerging ethical tourism economy.

Conclusion

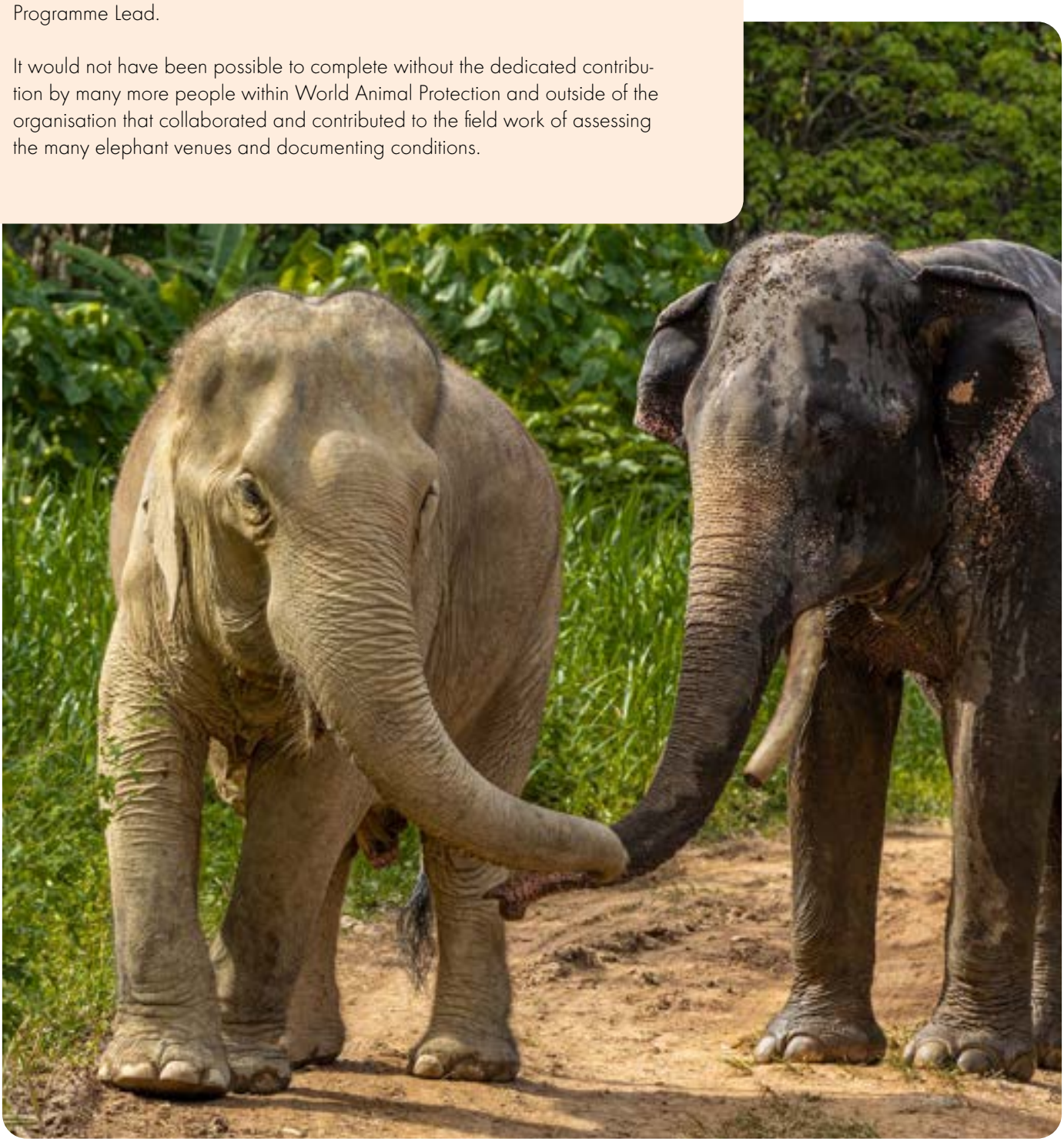
- Thailand's elephant tourism industry remains a source of widespread animal suffering, enabled by outdated legislation and sustained by gaps in corporate responsibility by the tourism industry.
- Incremental improvements are encouraging but remain insufficient.
- True progress requires corporate accountability, decisive legal reform, and a collective shift towards wildlife-friendly tourism models that avoid exploitative practices and ultimately lead to protecting wild animals in their natural habitat.
- This is both a moral imperative and a strategic opportunity – protecting elephants from exploitation safeguards Thailand's global reputation, supports sustainable tourism, and aligns with the growing demand from travellers for ethical, responsible experiences.



Acknowledgement

This report was authored by **Dr Jan Schmidt-Burbach**, World Animal Protection Denmark's Director of Wildlife Research and Veterinary Expertise; **Chokdee Smithkittipol**, World Animal Protection Thailand's Programme Lead; **Amy Squires**, World Animal Protection's Private Sector Engagement Manager; and **Stephanie Kruuse Klausen**, World Animal Protection Denmark's Wildlife Programme Lead.

It would not have been possible to complete without the dedicated contribution by many more people within World Animal Protection and outside of the organisation that collaborated and contributed to the field work of assessing the many elephant venues and documenting conditions.



Elephants at an observation-only venue interacting with each other.

Appendix 1

Animal welfare condition scoring criteria and guidelines. The conditions applying to the majority of elephants at the assessed venue inform the scoring.

Criteria/score	0	1	2	3	4
Mobility	Activity <20% self-determined; outside of activity mostly inactive or severely restrained (short chains <3m); intense trekking activity or on poor terrain (road)	Activity 20–40% self-determined; outside of activity often inactive or moderately restrained (long chains > 3m/controlled); moderately intense saddled trekking or walking activity	Activity 40–60% self-determined; outside of activity in pen 20-200 m^2 or similar, regularly active in saddle-free trekking or walks	Activity 60–80% self-determined; access to natural space/enclosure 200-2,000m^2 day and night or >2,000 m^2 day but long chain (>10m) or pen at night	Activity >80% self-determined; free and unrestricted movement in natural space/ enclosure >2,000 m^2 day and night.
Hygiene	Old faeces and urine present, moist surface, stench, no access to pool/shower	Old faeces and urine present, some drainage, showering, no baths	Only recent faeces and urine, dry ground, short baths	Clean and dry surface, regular baths	Clean and dry surface, free choice of clean water, baths and dust/mud baths
Environmental noise quality	Direct vicinity to traffic, loudspeaker, large crowds	Intermediate of 0 and 2	Occasional traffic or small visitor groups, no electronic noise	Intermediate of 2 and 4	No noise except natural sounds
Daytime rest area	Concrete ground, unavoidable exposure to sunlight/rain	Intermediate of 0 and 2	Dirt ground with medium shelter possibility (eg single tree)	Intermediate of 2 and 4	Natural ground with sufficient and adequate shelter options
Naturalness	Urban or fully artificial environment with no resemblance of natural habitat at all	Intermediate of 0 and 2	Natural environment surroundings but immediate vicinity only artificial structures	Intermediate of 2 and 4	Fully based in natural environment
Social interaction	Solitary – no visual contact with other elephants	Visual but no tactile contact	Tactile contact but no social grouping	Small social grouping possible	Possibility of free interaction with creation of social network
Diet quality	Inadequate amounts (<75 kg/1,000 kg body weight) and limited variety	Adequate amounts but limited variety and quality, only cultivated foods	Adequate amounts, pre-selected good variety and quality, mostly cultivated, always food available, not free water access	Adequate amounts, pre-selected cultivated and natural foods, ad-libitum water and food	Sufficient natural food sources to select from, free choice of consumption
Visitor interaction intensity	Regular shows including unnatural behaviours, very high density of visitors in vicinity of elephants (>20 per elephant a day/venue), frequent repetitive (<=1h) activities (eg saddled rides), direct visitor interaction with elephants	No shows or shows with only natural behaviour, frequent repetitive (<=1h duration) activities, direct visitor interaction with elephants, high density of visitors in vicinity of elephants (11-20 per elephant a day/venue)	Smaller visitor groups (<=10 per elephant/ day/venue), less repetitive activities (>1h programmes) through mostly unvoluntary elephant participation (eg washing, 'be a mahout')	Visitor interaction with elephants very limited and non-intrusive (eg protected feeding) and entirely voluntary elephant participation	No direct interaction with visitors, elephants only displaying voluntary, natural behaviour according to their preferences
Animal management	No welfare understanding, inappropriate usage of ankhus, visible wounds on elephants, elephants constantly saddled, no vet treatments	Minimum welfare understanding, strong use of ankhus, treatment only by annual or bi-annual vet visits, elephants constantly saddled	Moderate welfare understanding, use of ankhus restricted only to required situations, call or transport to vet, no saddle unless ready to ride	Intermediate of 2 and 4	Very strong welfare understanding and focus on best situation for elephants, use of positive reinforcement training where feasible, resident vet or strong vet support

Elephants kept in conditions that allow for foraging and social interaction at an observation-only venue.

Appendix 2

Captive elephant tourism venues in Thailand that received highest scores in our 2024/25 assessment. None of these offer shows, riding or washing experiences.

Venue name	Region	No direct interaction	Observation	Elephant-friendly*
Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary	Sukothai			
Burm and Emily's Elephant Sanctuary	Chiang Mai			
ChangChill View Doi	Chiang Mai			
ChangChill Hillside	Chiang Mai			
Elephant Forest Phitsanulok	Phitsanulok			
Elephant Hills	Khao Sok	1		2
Elephant Nature Park	Chiang Mai	1		3
Following Giants Koh Lanta	Koh Lanta			
Folllowing Giants Krabi	Krabi			
Global Vision International	Chiang Mai			
Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation	Chiang Rai	4		2
Hidden Forest Elephant Reserve	Phuket	1		2
Isara Elephant Foundation	Chiang Mai			2
Khao Sok Elephant Sanctuary	Khao Sok	1		2
Kindred Spirit Elephant Sanctuary	Chiang Mai			
Mahouts Elephant Foundation - LIFE Project	Chiang Mai			
Mahouts Elephant Foundation - Palata Project	Umphang			
Phuket Elephant Nature Reserve	Phuket			2
Phuket Elephant Sanctuary	Phuket	5		
Samui Elephant Sanctuary	Koh Samui	1		2
Somboon Legacy Foundation	Kanchanaburi			
Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand	Phetchaburi	1		2

* World Animal Protections' elephant-friendly guidelines help transition venues to incorporate best-practice animal management and avoid further increasing the captive elephant population. Such venues will allow elephants more autonomy, more opportunities to engage in natural behaviours, and will avoid direct contact with visitors.

1 Hand feeding over a barrier is offered. We encourage visitors to avoid participating in direct interactions.

2 Conversations on Elephant-friendly practices are yet to be held with the venue.

3 Due to a legal investigation, this venue is temporarily removed from the Elephant-friendly list.

4 Hand feeding and rinsing elephants with a hose over a barrier is offered. We encourage visitors to avoid participating in direct interactions.

5 Venue confirmed phasing out hand feeding from 1st of April 2026.

The list shown in this report reflects the Thailand status during 2025, but the online version will include venues from other countries as well and will be updated whenever changes occur: https://www.worldanimalprotection.org/our-campaigns/wildlife/commercial-exploitation/travel-tourism/elephant-friendly-tourist-guide/

Elephant at an observation-only venue covering itself with mud as part of its cleaning routine.

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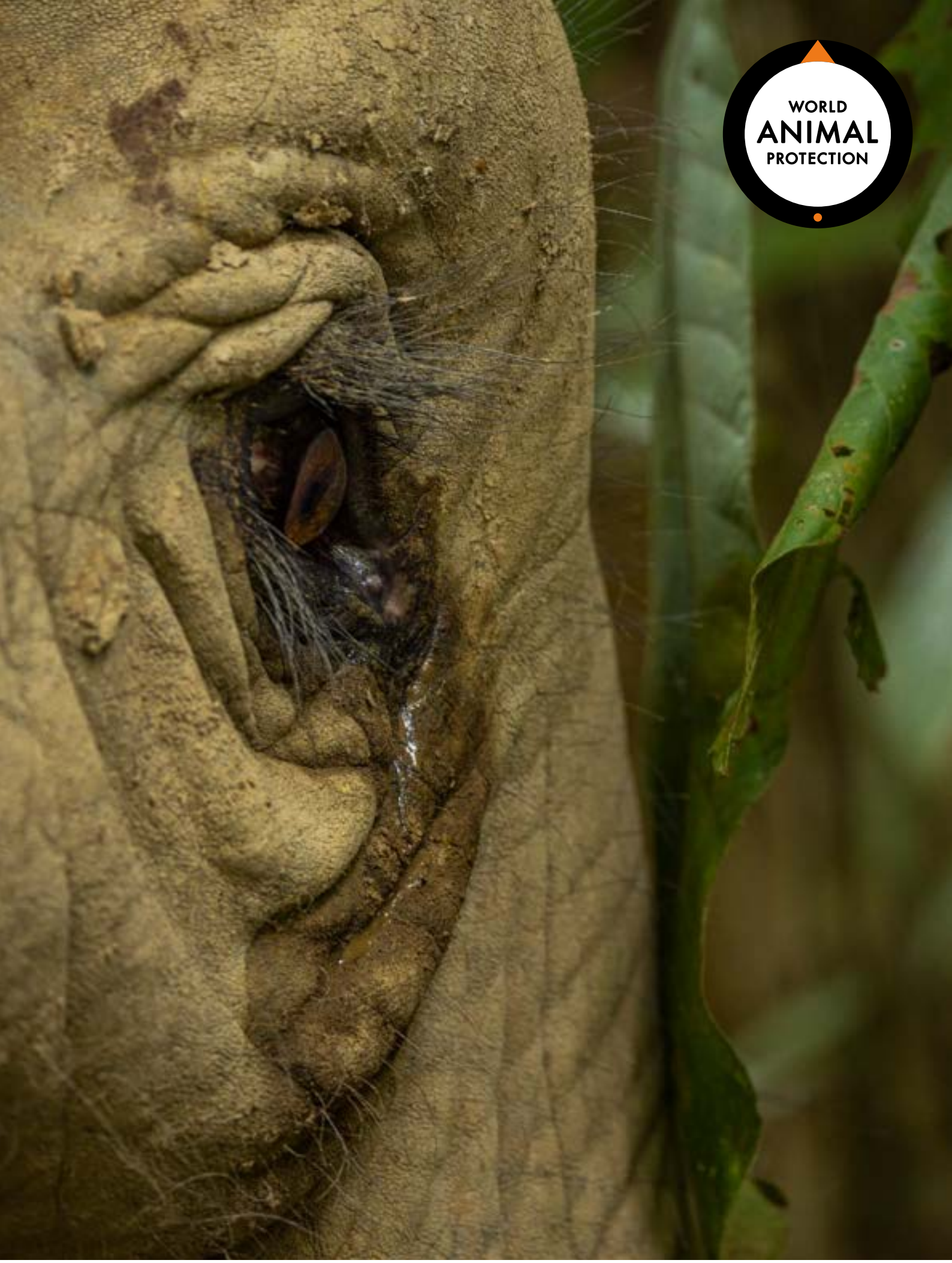
Elephants free to choose to do what they like at an observation-only venue while being monitored by their mahout.



Together, we can transform the lives of animals across the world.