

## **From War Elephants to Circus Elephants: Humanity's Abuse of Elephants**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the historical human use and abuse of elephants in an attempt to connect the contemporary use of performing elephants with the ancient use of war elephants and also examines two opposing opinions regarding elephant conservation. Beginning in ancient times, the now unheard of but once ubiquitous war elephants used by Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Hannibal and other Asian cultures is revisited and the abuse of war elephants is traced into modern warfare. Contemporary "elephant crushing" in Thailand and the use of elephants to execute human beings will be examined. The argument is posited that western acceptance of the use of performing elephants is equally as reprehensible as the ancient use of the war elephant. The ivory trade is also examined along with elephant cognition and social behaviors including death rituals. The paper suggests the alternative of elephant sanctuaries. Statistics are provided regarding the highly endangered Asian and African elephants' declining total populations. The paper: connects contemporary western elephant abuse with the use of elephants in war; urges the reader to never attend or promote elephant circuses, buy ivory, or support the exploitation of the elephant in any way; and argues intrinsic valuing of elephants in lieu of other conservation approaches such as Sustainable Use.

**Key Words:** *elephants, war elephants, nonhuman animal abuse, performing elephants, elephant sanctuaries, ivory trade, poaching, historical animal use, animal circuses, elephant exploitation, elephant conservation*

### **Humanity's History of Inhumanity Toward Elephants**

Since the dawn of human history, opposing forces have been engaged in warfare utilizing a variety of weaponry, gadgets and accoutrement. As the American cultural climate takes its contemporary turn toward matters long ignored by the masses, a new focus on animal rights (AR) and animal welfare has emerged. The elephant, now severely endangered, has

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of late been the focus of many animal rights and welfare groups' actions. Animal rights activists (ARAs) have been achieving progress in the areas of factory farming, the fur industry, companion animal breeding and other areas; however, the plight of the captive elephant receives little attention in comparison. With some current research turning its focus on zoos, circuses, magic shows, elephant rides and other aspects of performing elephants, it seems apropos to trace human use of elephants to its genesis and to briefly revisit its roots deep in the classical world and discuss how best to save elephants from extinction.

The war elephant used so profusely by ancient peoples is not familiar to many people, and few in the West seem to spend time researching this once brutal use of the elephant. In fact, for over three thousand years, elephants were used in warfare. Elephants were used as battering rams, tanks and cargo carriers long before machines were created. In illustration of the dearth of war elephant research, this paper often refers to the only book dedicated solely to war elephants written in the English language: *War Elephants* by John M. Kistler. The author writes that until gunpowder severely limited the effectiveness of the animal in the seventeenth century, the largest land mammals on earth performed amazing feats during wars including building roads and swinging swords as well as completely terrifying enemies (Kistler, 2007). While people may be aware of war elephants and circus elephants, obvious ethical connections between the two are rarely, if ever, made.

For both war and circus purposes, people captured elephants from the wild, deprived them of needed socialization, imposed crushing isolation on them, deprived them of their basic needs, failed to realize their rights as individuals, failed to value them intrinsically and damaged their complex and self-aware psyches. This paper examines the war elephants of antiquity and contemporary uses of the elephant and connects this past grievance with the patronizing of circuses by Americans. It would be helpful for ARAs to pay more attention to the elephant and to gain a brief grounding in the history of the war elephant because these elephants were forced into fierce wars to serve and die, and forgetting them dishonors their sacrifices.

### **The Ancient Plight of the War Elephant**

In 2008, both the African and the Asian elephant are dangerously near extinction. Between 1979 and 1989 the African elephant population was reduced from around 1.3 million to perhaps 600,000 due to ivory poaching; and only around 35-40,000 Asian elephants remain (Irwin, 2000). At the time of the ancient battles between Carthage and Rome, African forest elephants likely ranged as far as the Mediterranean, and the African elephant roamed the entire continent. Elephants were abundant, trainable, and commodified, used, but never domesticated. Being the only nonhuman animal ever used in large scale warfare, this non-domestication is notable. All war elephants were most likely captured in the wild in lieu of breeding. In contrast, the dog and the horse are the only other animals to be used in warfare, and they have been domesticated for four thousand years. However, the elephant is the only animal ever used as an active weapon; curiously they will stomp an enemy while the horse will always step over them (Kistler,

2007). When this fact was discovered regarding the elephant, it was soon pressed into service.

As late as the Vietnam War, elephants were used to transport items. Since they were big and visible, they were used as ground targets for U.S. air forces. In Asia, elephants were typically not used as active instruments of war but rather as beasts of incredible burden, pulling loads along the ground that could not be moved by many numbers of troops. In World War II, elephants were used to drag huge cannons to battle positions. And the service of elephants in modern warfare has caused them to be bombed from planes and suffer searing napalm and other injuries and death, far from their natural state of living (Kistler, 2007).

In the wild elephants are not always aggressive toward humans; they tend to be peaceful creatures living in large female herds while the adult males mostly wander alone. Elephants do occasionally attack cars and tourists in the wild, but their threat displays are usually empty. To many people, the human use of elephants seems to exemplify some of the worst human abuses toward all nonhuman animals. It is Matthew Scully, author of *Dominion: The Suffering of Animals, The Power of Man, and the Call to Mercy* who claims the fate of the elephant to be the greatest human onslaught ever visited upon any animal (Scully, 2002).

Most likely the most famous war elephants are those used by the Carthaginian general Hannibal during his crossing of the Alps during the second Punic War against Rome in

218-201 BC. However, other cultures in Asia had long used elephants in military campaigns. The probable first use of an elephant by a human was over five thousand years ago in Asia when an orphaned calf wandered into a village. It was friendly, trainable, and proved most useful. It is believed that the first organized use of elephants was in India where the Elephant Corps made up one of the branches of the Indian military. By 1000 BC, riding elephants was very common in Western China; they were so numerous it is believed that almost everybody had one. As such, human use of the elephant began to spread substantially.

Humans became adroit at capturing wild elephants. It was even discovered that certain captured elephants could be trained to help capture wild ones and this happened in China so often that the southern region of Ho-Nan became known as the “Country of Docile Elephants” (Kistler, 2007: 3). Soon after learning to subdue these beasts for relatively peaceful tasks such as transportation and transport, humans soon pressed elephants into warfare. The aforementioned Hannibal is the most iconic user of war elephants, but Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Hannibal are only some of the leaders who utilized elephants in warfare. The first war elephant was probably utilized around 1100 BC, and the first contact Europeans had with war elephants is thought to have been the October 1<sup>st</sup>, 331 BC Battle of Gaugamela with Persia fighting against Alexander the Great. Mecca, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt, the Numidians, and Kushites, and Carthage all used war elephants. The Islamic founder Mohammad was born in the year 571 AD, and it is known as the Year of the Elephant.

As is well known, use of elephants is pervasive in many religious and artistic rituals and practices throughout the Eastern. The soldiers of Constantinople faced war elephants. Arab horses ceased their charges, terrified of Persia's war elephants until Arab troops learned how to defeat the elephants by gouging out their eyes and attacking their trunks. Additionally, the famous ancient Queen Semiramis supposedly faced attacking forces utilizing front lines of behemoth war elephants (Kistler, 2007).

While effective, war elephants were not invincible by any means. Romans discovered by slitting their horses' throats that the smell of blood would often cause elephants to rage and trample their own troops in confusion. Also, it was discovered that elephants were terrified of the squeal of pigs, so war pigs were also used. One would put tar on the backs of the pigs, set them aflame, and direct the terrified and squealing pigs at the elephants who would succumb to panic, thus rendering them ineffective. Pliny the Elder and Aelian in his *de Natura Animalium* both report the effectiveness of war pigs. And of course Hannibal and Carthage were ultimately unsuccessful. As any teacher who has taught Virgil's *Aeneid* knows, when Hannibal reached the Republic, only one of his thirty seven war elephants remained alive. Also, it is known the Chinese caused rival elephants to panic and crush their own troops by shooting crossbows into the elephants' sensitive skin that was incorrectly believed to be extremely tough and virtually impenetrable (Ebrey, Walthall, & Palais 90). Eventually—and thankfully—the use of elephants in warfare vanished.

## **Elephant Cognition and Social Behavior**

Since these barely remembered facets of animal history have faded from public consciousness, it is tempting to believe society has progressed beyond similar abuses of elephants. It is useful to understand a few key biological facts regarding elephant cognition and social structure to further understand the ancient phenomenon of war elephants and the contemporary phenomenon of the circus.

Elephants are very social animals who require tactile guidance. They are raised by an entire herd of caregivers. Asian and African elephants enjoy stability and active social interactions led by a matriarch. Young elephants will remain with their mothers, aunts and other females for several years before the males leave the herd after adolescence. These males then only come into contact with females in order to breed. Males sometimes form social friendships with other bulls, but they are much more solitary than their female counterparts. A 2005 research study reports that African savannah elephants spend up to 80 per cent of their time together, behave in coordinated manners, and display group behavior when caring for their young, gathering resources, and providing defenses. Family units, kinship groups, and larger clans can often consist of up to one hundred elephants and these closely interacting members help each other during dry seasons or in other times of distress (Vidya, T. & Sukumar, R., 2005). Elephants are also extremely loving, tactile and communicative. Vidya and Sukumar state, "Communication is central to social, long-lived, intelligent animals that can transmit information across generations" (1201). This generational transmission of information accounts for many elephant families' mistrust and wariness of humans. Using war elephants (and circus

elephants) in situations requiring isolation is especially stressful to elephants considering this heavily communicative aspect of their lives. The same researchers point out differing types of communications upon which elephants seem to thrive: they exhibit visual, tactile, olfactory and acoustic behaviors. Having a highly evolved and sensitive chemosensory system, undoubtedly they experienced war much differently from their human masters who urged them ever onward. Vidya and Sukumar argue that given elephants' extremely advanced and developed behavioral and intellectual capacity, special needs exist for conservation techniques with need for more scientific understanding than that from the past. One wonders if the Carthaginians, Romans, and other warring nations of the past had understood the complexity of elephants, would they have used them as blunt instruments of warfare?

Elephant intelligence is vast and ranks only behind primates and certain cetaceans. The great memory capacity of the elephant is no falsehood, and much of the aforementioned coordinated social herd behavior requires great intelligence. In 2006, an elephant successfully passed a mirror self-recognition test, long considered the hallmark for advanced human and nonhuman intelligence and self-awareness. Mirror self-recognition (MSR) is extremely rare in the animal kingdom and has not been observed outside of humans, apes, and one report on dolphins at the time of the paper referenced (Plotnick, de Waal, Reiss, 2006).

In the MSR test, the animal is placed before a mirror and researchers set out to validate that the animal is seeing him/herself in the mirror. This is proven by placing a mark on

the animal's face or body and seeing if the animal will recognize that mark by touching it on his or her own body. This is a highly developed level of cognition and in 2006 one elephant displayed it. The authors report the elephant, named Happy, had a white X placed on her forehead while inside her stall. Caretakers did not observe her noticing the mark before entering the elephant yard. She went immediately to the mirror and looked at her reflection a few seconds. Then she walked away from the mirror and started touching the area of the mark with her trunk and then returned to the mirror. Next she looked at her reflection and explored the mark on her head. Happy touched her own head a total of forty-seven times thereby passing the MSR test and being the first nonhuman, non-ape, and non-dolphin to do so. The other two elephants in the control group did not seem to pass the MSR test; however, Happy's successful "passing" presented scientific evidence that she was self aware. The researchers stated:

The mark-touching by one elephant is compelling evidence that this species has the capacity to recognize itself in a mirror. Finding strong parallels among apes, dolphins, and elephants in both the progression of behavioral stages and actual responses to a mirror provides compelling evidence for convergent cognitive evolution (Plotnick, et al, 2006).

Nonhuman cognitive evolution should not be ignored or usurped for the purposes of pressing animals into various services for human use.

Most people, when asked, will report an affinity for elephants, thus one could easily assume most people would not support the widespread continued abuse of the elephant. However, logic fails in this case. In the same spirit Alex Hershaft reports that "93 percent of American consumers oppose farmed animal abuse and 97 percent continue eating

them” (Hershaft 16). People still attend circuses while claiming deep affinity and even affection for elephants. Elephants have long been commodified not for intrinsic value but for what they can provide humanity. Whether it is for their massive bulk and skills in warfare or their ivory or their performance for circusgoers, the elephant has a long history of abuse at the hands of humans. Contemporary abuse is no better.

### **Contemporary Abuse**

For thousands of years, an oft used method of execution in South and South East Asia was Death by Elephant or اف کندن پیل پی زی ر, which translates into “casting beneath an elephant’s feet.” The execution training was multifaceted. Elephants could either quickly kill a condemned prisoner by stepping on his head or could slowly torture the person in a slow and agonizing death. This was widely used in Sri Lanka, India, and South East Asia and is still common in some parts of Africa and Asia where humans and elephants coexist. Usually, in areas of cohabitation, it is the human element that turns the human/elephant coexistence toward danger. Human elephant conflicts claim around 150 human lives a year in Sri Lanka (Smithsonian National Zoo, 2008). In the past, deserters and prisoners of war were sometimes crushed to death by elephants. Also, Perdiccas, who succeeded Alexander the Great, had mutineers crushed to death by elephants in the city of Babylon (Fox, 2007). Other examples abound, but for brevity’s sake the focus will now turn to the subject of elephants and their possible awareness of death.

## **Elephant Death Rituals**

Death seems to have special relevance to elephants. Researchers and scientists have observed that elephants have elaborate death rituals. Among these, they often cover dead elephants with branches and other debris in an attempt to bury them. Furthermore, elephants have been seen returning annually to the death sites of companions and family members. While other animals, such as hippos, may tend to the dead and dying in certain ways, it is these yearly visitations to the death sites that set elephants apart. The fantastic memory capacity of the elephant is not a myth, and it seems elephants remember much about death. The aforementioned genetic memory that is present in elephants has been largely influenced by humans. Elephants are wary of humans in the wild and they have had ample cause to be so. The most successful herds in Africa and Asia are often led by the matriarchs who avoid humans the most zealously. In the wild, in times of drought, elephants will sometimes return to a water source they have not been to in over twenty years. They also do not forget traumas they have experienced.

As Scott Blais and Carol Buckley—cofounders of the Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary—reported on ABC's *20/20*, researchers have been conducting elephant psychological research. They feel elephants who are abused in zoos or circuses after witnessing their parents being killed can suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with symptoms similar to humans (Blais and Buckley, 2008). It is elephant researcher Gay Bradshaw and colleagues who first posited elephant PTSD in 2005. In the article published in *Nature*, Bradshaw and others claimed that orphaned elephant calves who had witnessed the culling of their herds and families internalized their traumatic experiences and displayed psychological problems akin to PTSD. PTSD could be the

underlying condition responsible for hyperaggression and abnormal musth cycles occurring too early. Being reared in extremely close social situations, the separation of the orphaned calf from the family unit and the subsequent life of near isolation can cause the elephant's psyche to become damaged. As seen in the media, elephants can eventually rampage, kill, and display hyperaggression, that is not seen in the wild. Dr. Bradshaw feels socio-ecologically induced psychobiological trauma in humans is most similar to such disruptions in elephants as well. Dr. Bradshaw and her colleagues state, "Wild elephants are displaying symptoms associated with human PTSD: abnormal startle response, depression, unpredictable asocial behavior and hyperaggression" (Bradshaw, et al. 807). Considering the recent revelation of Happy successfully passing the mirror self-recognition test, perhaps it is time for the public view of elephants to shift. It wasn't known in Hannibal's time, but elephants are self-aware highly intelligent and social creatures with differing and diverse psyches. It is this complexity that leads to the difficulties in using them in war or circuses or other arenas for which they have not evolved or voluntarily participated.

Elephants appear to contemplate death. Even though scientists are ignorant of the impetus behind such matters, elephants appear to have a conceptual understanding of death. This similarity to humans is relevant. Iain Douglas-Hamilton claims the extent to which elephants hold behavioral traits in common with human beings is relevant to the ethics of how humans should treat them. He has presented many examples of this death awareness of elephants over the years, yet the most iconic is from his 1975 book.

He witnessed several adult elephants trying to help sick, dying, and even dead elephants to their feet. Other elephants refused to abandon the decomposing corpses of their calves, and one even carried her dead calf around on her tusks for days. Douglas-Hamilton says what was harder to describe with reason was how elephants reacted to elephant corpses they encountered. When wild elephants came across the bones of a dead elephant, they became silent and slowly touched and fondled the bones for a while. They passed the bones around among their young and spent time touching and feeling them, often showing special attention to the tusks which they may carry away from the skeleton and then return later (Douglas-Hamilton, 1975). The boisterous head shaking and trumpeting ceased and the elephants appeared concentrated, pensive, and attentive. Afterwards, they quietly walked away from the elephant bones and resumed their normal behavior.

Elephants did not treat the bones of any other animal this way. Bolder researchers and observers have even posited that elephants may very well be the only nonhuman life form on the planet with an actual conscious understanding and conceptual perception of death (Kistler xii). Elephant families even seem to visit the “burial sites” of fallen comrades, often coming back to the bones for years to come. McComb, Baker, and Moss posit that African elephants do in fact show a great interest in the bones of dead elephants, particularly the skulls and ivory. However, they are doubtful elephants actually visit the “graves” of specific family members. They believe it is more a general interest in elephant remains. However, they feel this awareness of death remains significant. Humans were long thought to be unique among the animal world in that they grant

importance to the dead bodies of their own species. Most animals only display a limited interest; however, elephants—as discussed—are very different (McComb, Baker, Moss, 2006).

With this reverence and possible awareness of death, it becomes more poignant to examine the use of elephants as instruments of death and destruction. An elephant surely endures psychological damage when he or she is forced to torture another being. Elephants do not kill for food in the wild, being one of the very few truly vegetarian animals; it is human training that has allowed elephants to be instruments of warfare, torture, and death. This should at least inspire rigorous ethical theorizing regarding the use of such complex and self-aware individuals.

### **The Ivory Trade**

Westerners should not behave haughtily regarding these abuses heaped upon elephants by people on the other side of the world or people in the past. Contemporary times are no better for the elephants. It is true war elephants are a thing of the past and awareness is spreading, but elephants are still valued not for their intrinsic value but for their economic potential. And a staggering majority of Americans are partially to blame for this. The ivory trade is destroying the elephant and the United States is one of the largest consumers of ivory products. Sites such as EBAY are rife with “cultural” items carefully listed under the euphemism of “African bone carving” which are actually ivory. These items remain in high demand regardless of the manner of death inflicted on elephants.

A certain percentage of elephants have always been born without tusks, but recently a vast increase in the amount of tuskless elephants has been noted. Tusks evolved to protect them from other elephants and possible predators. Currently, an evolution appears to be underway and tusks are not developing for protection. Scully says, "Now, as if evolution itself were trying to spare these creatures from human avarice, that [tuskless] gene is spreading because the tuskless ones are often the only ones left to breed" (Scully,pg.123). Douglas-Hamilton has some keen insight on ivory harvesting. A longtime advocate of elephants, he says it has often been suggested to him that the elephant is not being overexploited by the ivory and hunting trades and that his efforts may be excessive. He claims this kind of statement results from not knowing the facts. He says, "There is no doubt whatsoever...the elephant is being exploited faster than it can reproduce...and the ivory trade is the cause" (Douglas-Hamilton 30). As for people who fear attacking the cultures of those in Africa who are indigenous ivory hunters, he says Africa has become little more than a dumping ground for weapons which are actively traded for ivory and this is how "crooks" are financially exploiting elephants. Indeed he says, "the only hope for the elephants [is] a moratorium on the international trade in ivory. Only if people stopped buying, wearing, or selling the stuff would the herds have a chance to recover" (Douglas-Hamilton 30-31).

### **Animal Circuses and the Connection to Ancient War Elephants**

The ivory trade may be closer to home than war elephants for most Americans, but there are yet other problems more relatable to the average citizen. Truthfully, the existence of circus elephants is not much better than the lives of the Carthaginian war elephants of

long ago. The average American is quick to shun ivory poaching and elephants being used as war machines or executioners while continuing to attend the circus due to a longstanding outdated American iconic event. Ironically, it is the ivory trade that supplies many orphaned calves who are shipped to zoos and circuses around the world. A multitude of research regarding what circus, zoo, and other performing elephants undergo is available, and it is valid to link the life of a contemporary performing elephant in a traveling circus to that of the war elephant in the military campaigns of antiquity.

Though some people are attempting to train with positive reinforcement, it is widely understood that circus elephants are usually trained with the application of pain and fear (circuses.com, 2008). Many trainers feel this is the only reliable way to make a six-ton animal perform on cue while providing any degree of safety to circusgoers and elephant handlers. Elephants are routinely whipped with ankuses, bull hooks and cattle prods. They are poked and stabbed in sensitive areas. The tricks they are trained to perform are not natural extensions of their behaviors and often result in dire and sometimes fatal injuries. This has led some animal rights and animal welfare groups to adamantly protest circus that use elephants.

In the wild, elephants often walk up to sixty miles a day, and in traveling circuses they are often chained in spaces the size of an automobile for up to twenty hours a day. Elephants often display disturbing stereotypic behavior such as head swaying and shifting from foot to foot (Epstein, 1993). It is believed by many that the crushing boredom, fear, and lack of exercise damage their complex psyches and leads some of them to become

violent and rampage, often killing children, adults and trainers. Then, they suffer a further misfortune when they are labeled as violent or dangerous and isolated even further or gunned down or otherwise euthanized. Conversely, zoo and circus advocates offer contradictory evidence stating their animal are very well cared for and cite their compliance with the Animal Welfare Act's (AWA) minimum standards. Activists claim the AWA is so extremely limited in its protection that the fulfilment of its minimum requirements in order to keep licensure does very little to actually protect the mental and physical well being of the animals. As a result, many have called for the retiring of all performing and captive elephants to the two large elephant sanctuaries in Tennessee and California as solutions to circus and zoo elephant issues. It appears the circus elephant has direct links with the war elephant in complex psychological ways. Both were captured from the wild, deprived of needed socialization, had crushing isolation imposed on them, never had their needs met, failed to have their rights as individuals realized, failed to be intrinsically valued and had their Daedalian psyches damaged.

### **Contemporary Protests and Progress**

Elephant and other performing animals are quickly becoming ubiquitous installations in circuses. With the increase in public awareness—largely due to campaigns and undercover investigations by groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Born Free Foundation—more people are actively protesting the cruel use of elephants and other animals in circuses. In fact, Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth is currently on trial for violations of the Endangered Species Act

in Washington D.C. After years of dilatory tactics, a federal judge has finally ordered that the case proceed to trial. It began in February 2009.

The United States Department of Agriculture recently confiscated an adult male Asian elephant named Ned after video taken by protestors was brought to the officials' attention. The government agency had only confiscated one other elephant in its history. Ned's former owner, Lance Ramos, has been accused of failure to comply with the Animal Welfare Act and to properly care for Ned. After Ned was taken from Mr. Ramos, he was delivered to The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee where he will be cared for while his permanent home is prepared in California at the Performing Animal Welfare Society's Elephant Sanctuary habitat. Upon initial veterinary examination, Ned was found to have been a full ton underweight. Veterinary professionals believe Ned was essentially starving to death ([http://www.elephants.com/Ned/ned\\_bio.htm](http://www.elephants.com/Ned/ned_bio.htm)).

Animal activists have been asking the USDA to be more active in the utilization of its right to remove elephants from owners who are in violation of the Animal Welfare Act's basic guidelines. Through close public observation and elephant activism, Ned is now being properly cared for in a facility that is equipped to provide for the complex needs of elephants.

Also, circus attendance has been on the decline in the past years due to animal activism. Recently, a circus performance was cancelled in Kentucky due to the fact that less than one hundred tickets were sold. Performance cancelations have become more frequent since 1999. Peacefully assembling activists engage circusgoers and educate them about the abuses elephants suffer at the hands of the circus. As more people research these

allegations and discover they are not merely the exaggerated claims of animal advocates—as circuses maintain—circus sales will continue to decline.

Negative publicity following animal deaths, former employees' animal abuse charges, ever waning attendance figures, and numerous USDA violations have worked in concert with local grassroots animal activism to cause Ringling to lose major corporate sponsors and millions of dollars worth of advertising. In 2004, MasterCard, after extensive pressure from a PETA campaign, officially ended its sponsorship of the Circus. Circuses.com's press release states:

“The decision (to end the sponsorship) was made after PETA sent MasterCard's president and board of directors undercover videotape of standard circus-industry-training practices showing screaming, terrified elephants being viciously attacked with sharp metal bullhooks and electric prods during behind-the-scenes circus training sessions. MasterCard joins Visa and Sears, Roebuck & Co. to become the third national sponsor to end Ringling promotions amid a flood of complaints (PETA, 2004)

With continuing pressure from concerned citizens and animal advocates, the popularity of animal circuses will continue its downward spiral. After the 600 or so captive and performing elephants are retired to elephant sanctuaries, the public and the small group of global elephant professionals can truly begin to formulate approaches to save the elephant.

### **How to Save the Elephant: Nonconsumptive Use Versus Lethal Sustainable Use**

Now that the ancient use of the war elephant has been related to contemporary circus and other performing uses of the elephant, it is useful to examine two leading theories of how best to conserve the rapidly declining populations of elephants. Two opposing viewpoints,

“Sustainable Use” and “Non-Consumptive Utilization,” have intriguing points of contention.

Sustainable Use (SU) maintains that if an animal—especially an animal that is harmful and dangerous to indigenous human societies—can provide economic benefits and financial reward to the country in which it lives, the people of that country will have a greater interest in conserving the animal, thereby assuring the animal will be protected. SU theorists claim that the lethal use of elephants provides money for humans, cuts down on environmental impact (African elephants have long been criticized for destroying huge numbers of certain trees in Africa), provides more range for the surviving elephants who will live easier lives as a result of the culling/killing of the elephants. At the center of this argument is economic incentive, and as a result big game hunting of the African elephant is one of the most supported methods of SU, since a wealthy western hunter might spend up to \$100,000 on a hunt, killing around ten elephants (Mundy, 2006).

While it may seem these points have merit, Non-Consumptive Utilization (NCU) claims elephants—and other animals—should be valued intrinsically and not killed for profit. NCU proponents also claim ecotourism, such as photographic safaris and elephant watching treks, have the potential to bring in far more currency while not harming the elephants. A leading advocate of NCU, Paul G. Irwin, offers that over an elephant’s lifetime it can bring in over a million dollars in NCU revenue (Irwin 131). Undoubtedly both sides of the Sustainable Use debate have many members who are passionately committed to the conservation of the elephant. Nonetheless, this researcher believes methods of financial gain from the elephant which focus on its intrinsic value should be explored in lieu of practicing Sustainable Use.

To argue the case of Sustainable Use, P.J. Mundy's article "The African Elephant—Something to Use and Cherish" published in the *International Journal of Environmental Studies* in 2006 is useful to examine. Mundy, who developed his views during his time as an ecologist in the Zimbabwe Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, is well versed on the plight and situation of the African elephant. Mundy states that the population of the African continent is increasing at the world's fastest rate, 2.2 per cent per year, while only six of the 42 African countries do not exist as low-level economies. In 2006, Zimbabwe's human life expectancy was only 33 years and Mundy expressed a strong and urgent interest in how Africans can turn their natural resources into profit in order to improve the admittedly negative quality of living for the continent's humans.

The elephant is presented as one of Africa's natural resources, and Mundy cites the many aspects which provide value. Mundy mentions the very valuable ivory of the elephant. He argues the elephant is indeed very photogenic, but NCU will not bring the financial incentives needed. Mundy reports that in Zimbabwe the government fee for trophy hunting of elephants is around \$12,000 (Mundy 589). Taxidermy and shipping fees also bring in revenue. Often spending \$100,000 on a three-week hunt, he argues, "one hunter is therefore worth a lot of money to the host country...even though he/she has perhaps collected only ten 'heads' in the process"(Mundy 590). Mundy continues: "...one trophy hunter is worth many tourists, and it is easier to see how value from a dead elephant goes into the local community, such as the meat. Clearly one trophy bull (dead) is worth many family groups (alive)" (595). The elephant's value, in this case, is clearly not intrinsic but derived from the profit and value it provides humans. The ecologist also says, "One has only to watch local people cutting up a shot elephant to appreciate the animal's

importance; its actual value to the consumer and co-use of the same environment” (Mundy 595). Hunting of the African elephant has long been the main focus of the very profitable safari and sport hunting business in Africa, but hunting and tusks are not the only valuable items that may be used to generate economic incentives.

At the time of Mundy’s article, the inflation rate in Zimbabwe was hovering around 1000%, no doubt a dire situation. The author mentions the usefulness of many parts of the elephant: “The leather makes wonderful boots (I personally have a pair) and briefcases, etc.” (Mundy 590). Bracelets can be made from the hairs at the tip of the elephant’s tail and small tables and lamp stands are frequently made from their feet, as well as the infamous wastebaskets which used to be a mark of the upwardly mobile in Britain. Umbrella stands are also made of their feet. Another valuable item each elephant has to offer is meat, which can feed many people. Also its own reproduction is a renewable resource that can be harvested as well. The live export of calves orphaned due to their parents being killed to zoos and circuses around the world can indeed produce tremendous revenue. The dung of the elephant is even offered as an economic commodity since it can be used as compost or turned into a type of paper.

Sustainable Use, for all the negative appearance on its surface, is said to have elephant conservation at its core. Mundy says, “...it is clear that the African elephant is a very valuable animal, whether alive or dead...however...to get value from a dead elephant, one has to have enough live elephants in the first place....” (590). And to manage these elephants, SU believes culling to often be a very effective method. Culling keeps the population to a manageable size and the heavily useable products of the elephants are auspicious by-products of the cull.

SU also maintains culling is good for the environment. For a long time, elephants have been destroying certain types of acacia trees in Africa, and this has been considered a problem. Culling and trophy hunting provide economic incentives as well as reduce the number of elephants destroying the trees and environments. It is true elephants are one of the few land mammals who customize their landscape, often tearing down many trees and stripping the bark with lethal consequences. Elephant density reduction has been suggested as a method of reducing the damage to these trees. Mundy says, “The elephant debate has been dominated by animal lovers and not at all by tree lovers. Why should trees be killed by elephants? Are elephants in that sense predators?” (591).

P.J. Mundy and other SU supporters clearly put human concerns before animal concerns. He says, “increased numbers of elephants must also cause increased destruction of crops, and worse still increased death of humans” (592). Mundy says as the African human population continues to increase drastically and encroach upon lands previous roamed freely by elephants, human-elephant conflicts will only increase and that, “human-elephant conflicts cannot be tolerated; the humans must be protected against marauding wildlife...a human death cannot be valued against an elephant death” (592).

However, for all his illogical sophistry, Mundy does at least condemn illegal poaching. His solution to quelling ivory poaching is not stricter law enforcement or game patrol, but providing enough incentives to discourage and stop the activity, e.g. assigning the elephant even higher economic value. SU proponents reject NCU as a viable possibility. Mundy says, “Endless photographic (non-consumptive) safaris in themselves will not produce a thriving elephant population. An income of foreign currency from a burgeoning ecotourism industry will not give results to elephants if it buys Mercedes-

Benz cars instead” (594). Mundy concludes by saying elephant poaching and Sustainable Use are undesirable to sensible and vociferous groups of westerners and that SU remains the only truly scientific method with which to save the African elephant. NCU, it is gleaned, is a foolhardy alternative based in emotionalism and anthropomorphism.

P.J. Mundy makes some seemingly logical claims regarding Sustainable Use that are highly centered on human benefits derived from the elephant. To some, his argument seems based on an unpleasant supposition that elephants must in some manner pay their way and contribute to failing human economies in order to justifiably be conserved. In this vein, SU could be considered an evolutionary offshoot of elephant exploitation for human benefit akin to the use of elephants for war or performing.

Paul G. Irwin, president and chief executive officer of the animal welfare group the Humane Society of the United States, could not disagree with P.J. Mundy and Sustainable Use more. In his 2000 book *Losing Paradise: the Growing Threat to Our Animals, Our Environment, and Ourselves* he examines the question of killing rare animals with the hope of saving them. Irwin says the problem with SU is that the methods of culling and hunting it supports will only work if “the animals are killed or captured at a *sustainable* rate that does not wipe out the species” (125). He argues that economic valuing of the elephant and its products is not encouraging use of them that is in any way sustainable. Calling Sustainable Use “the rallying cry of a new generation of big-game hunters and traffickers in wildlife” (Irwin127), he claims it is the same theory that was once called “consumptive wildlife management” and with it the destroyers of wildlife are attempting to present themselves as the saviors of the wildlife they pay significant amounts of money to kill.

Sustainable Use, by providing increased economic value to animals, actually promotes unchecked killing of wildlife at an unsustainable rate. Irwin cites that in the single decade between 1979 and 1989 the population of the African elephant was reduced from around 1.4 million to only 600,000 due to the ivory trade and big-game hunting. Problematically, the price of ivory increased along with the number of elephants being killed, thusly negating any practical feasibility of Sustainable Use. Only with the elimination of the ivory trade in 1989 did this “poaching orgy” finally settle down (Irwin 129). SU theoretically attempts to conserve wildlife through unfortunate but necessary lethal techniques of population control and financial gain. However, Irwin argues practically it only creates an inflated and thriving commercial market for endangered wildlife. He also states, “Case after case in which sustainable use has been tried, it has created a commercial market for wildlife that has stimulated uncontrolled, unsustainable killing of the animals involved” (128). This is most urgent as bans on culling and one-off ivory sales are becoming more common throughout Africa.

Irwin closes his chapter with some observations on big-game hunting and the extinction of certain species, something SU drastically opposes, mainly for financial reasons. In Africa, the big-game animals are being eliminated to the point of extinction primarily by ivory poachers and big-game hunters. Irwin says, “A ‘sportsman’ using searchlights at night shot the last three cheetahs ever seen in India. The last Barbary lion in the wild was shot in Morocco in 1921” (133). It appears the main focus of sustainability in SU is the sustainability of human life. Any concern for the animals appears either weak or thinly veneered. Given P.J. Mundy’s anthropocentric remarks regarding his perceived hierarchy topped by humanity, one wonders his thoughts and feelings on Irwin’s observations

regarding the last three cheetahs in India. No doubt the hunter paid the proper hunting fees and had filed the proper paperwork. Most likely, some indigenous community in India profited from this. Admittedly, this is conjecture, but the question of who earns more importance—animals or humans—has not been answered by science and should not be closed for discussion in anyone’s mind, on either side of the debate.

Irwin and NCU argue for intrinsic valuing of elephants who have rights to exist and to be left alone by the ever-encroaching onslaught of human population. Sustainable Use appears to be simply commercial commoditization and exploitation of animals and the outcome rarely varies, Irwin tells the reader. He also further illustrates the danger of this commercial exploitation by mentioning another huge creature, the hugest on Earth in fact: “Consider the blue whale, the largest creature ever to live on earth. Between 1900 and 1965, over 325,000 blue whales were reportedly taken. The season was finally closed when only a mere 20 blue whales could be found and killed in the Antarctic” (139). Did the whales get more adept at avoiding whalers, or is there little sustainability in Sustainable Use? Given there are now possibly as few as 3,000 blue whales left on Earth, it appears the latter. SU appears to have the nonhuman animals’ utilitarian survival at heart; however, closer examination seems to offer some stark contradictions. At the very least, the theory of Sustainable Use should be scrutinized and considered as only one possibility among many other, non-lethal, possibilities.

## **The Quickly Vanishing Elephant**

Whether being crushed by the oncoming stones of the opposing sides' catapults, the bombs of the American planes in Vietnam, the isolation of the American zoo, the effects of PTSD, the bullets of the big-game hunter, the killings for 'sustainable use', or the endless beatings and chaining and neglect of the circus, it is not maudlin to say the captive elephant is unjustly enslaved. As stated above, both wars and circuses captured elephants from the wild, deprived them of needed socialization, imposed crushing isolation on them, inadequately met their needs, failed to realize their rights as individuals, failed to value them intrinsically, and damaged their intricate psyche. Does humanity finally show signs of understanding this, perhaps in the eleventh hour? Presently, the elephant is quickly heading toward extinction at an ever-increasing pace. Continued circus attendance is a primary reason the live export elephant trade still flourishes in Africa and Asia. Scully quotes the French naturalist Bernard-Germain de la Cèpe, and what he says of whales seems fitting to elephants as well: "In vain do they flee before him [Man]; his art will transport him to the ends of the earth; they will find no sanctuary except in nothingness" (Scully161). This writer fears the elephant, revered by so many who remain inactive and refuse to help it, will continue vanishing under the influence of humanity until its inevitable extinction.

Starting with the warlords of antiquity and continuing through the contemporary animal circus, elephants have forcibly bent to humanity's wishes. The debate continues on how best to save the elephant by elephant lovers and misguided persons on both sides. However, science suggests that if the hunting and exploitation of the elephant continues along with ever-increasing human encroachment on elephant habitat, the

elephant- admired by so many- may possibly only be around only a short time longer. What Douglas-Hamilton said over thirty years ago remains apropos:

This co-ordinated group defense [the gathered protection of the herd] has been one of the elephant's keys to survival, effective for hundreds of thousands of years against a multitude of predators, but it is now obsolete. Conditions have changed. Man with a gun is a predator that can easily wipe them out, and the keys to the elephant's survival are now in the hands of man (259).

### **Final Thought: Future Strategies for Change**

It is clear that the elephant is quickly vanishing. Extended critical discussion on elephant conservation should contain clear and logical suggestions on how the average citizen can help elephants. There is not a great preponderance of researchers writing exclusively on elephants, and as the canonical literature grows it is apropos to present actual methods by which one can help the elephant. Many of the methods require no activity at all, save restraint from certain goods and activities which are clearly leading to the possible extinction of the three remaining species of elephants.

One does not have to go to Kenya, South Africa or India to truly help elephants. In fact, some of the most helpful methods can be done from the comfort of home. Primarily, avoiding all animal circuses is one of the easiest and most effective means. Due to the previously discussed intertwined problems of poaching, trapping, the ivory trade, and supplying young elephants to circuses, non-attendance is among the most active ways one can help. If circus attendance continues to wane, eventually running an animal circus

will not be financially viable. Ken Feld has famously said he will only stop using animals in Ringling's Greatest Show on Earth when people no longer show up. Since they do, he feels there is a public interest in his circus. People need to tell friends and family why the circus is ethically problematic concerning wild animals.

Also, never buy or own any product made from ivory. Poachers know the global demand for ivory is very profitable.. Despite the many years of the ivory ban, ivory poaching did not completely vanish. In many parts of Africa, rangers shoot poachers dead on sight. Being well known to poachers, this serves as an illustration of the significant profits that can be made from killing elephants and selling them piecemeal. Now, if the poaching ban is lifted or more one-off ivory sales are authorized, the ivory trade could once again begin decimating elephants.

Concerned persons can also donate to one of the two elephant sanctuaries in the United States. Both of them require huge amounts of hay, fencing, fruit, vegetables, exotic veterinary care, tools, vehicles, and other needs as well as formidable monthly payments on thousands of acres of land. The Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary has numerous ways in which citizens can help their ever-expanding herd. Donations are always accepted, and they offer memberships. More financially capable donors can engender an elephant endowment, and their "feed an elephant for a day" program is very popular, as is having produce delivered. Elephants love all manner of produce and they need, literally, tons of it. All non-captive conservative elephant facilities have numerous easy ways one can help. Also, one of the most rewarding ways in which one can help is to go to the facility and volunteer if one's proximity permits. Volunteers perform all manner of activities for elephants and elephant facilities.

If one has the means to travel overseas, elephant voluntourism is a very exciting and viable option. In Thailand, the Elephant Nature Park ran by Lek offers rare opportunities to live and coexist near its herd of Asian elephants for very reasonable rates. Some of the Asian elephant parks offer elephant rides and are not as ethically consistent as they should be; however, Lek's Elephant Nature Park is among the best and most ethical in the world. As for the African elephant, there are several protected areas in malaria-free zones voluntourists can travel and see elephants, sometimes very inexpensively. This eco-tourism money goes a long way for the African and Asian parks. For one example, Kenya collects around \$50 million a year from elephant viewing tourists. Bringing in much needed income to these national parks, eco-tourism, voluntourism, and tourism are sustainable because they do not deplete elephant and animal populations.

Elsewhere, the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (DSWT) and other organizations have adoption programs. The DSWT, headed by Dr. Daphne Sheldrick, takes in rescued orphaned elephants and cares for them until they are released into the wild. Concerned elephant lovers can adopt one of these orphans by donating reasonable amounts of money and in turn the foundations will use the money to care for one specific elephant whose information and pictures will be provided to the benefactor.

Ultimately, however, it is paramount that the public gets educated on the plight of performing elephants and other performing animals. Children often love to see elephants at circuses and zoos. It is the difficult responsibility of the parent to realize that their child seeing a thoroughly depressed and restrained animal forced to do unnatural tricks for human profit does not foster true education and compassion for these animals. Some people feel anti-animal circus activists are trying to take away humans' rights to see

elephants. After all, the vast majority of humans will never see an elephant in person unless it is in captivity. Perhaps humanity has no intrinsic right to see elephants in person at all. Consider the ancient plight of war elephants and the long service of Man into which they were pressed. Still other uses of elephants as logging elephants in Thailand or temple elephants in India have not been discussed in this piece and also merit close examination. Nonetheless, consider what has been presented and consider the probably five thousand years in which humans have taken elephants from their natural habitat and forced them into service. If the only way to save the elephant is to keep them from most humans, then so be it. They deserve sanctuary. Once, millions of elephants roamed the entire continent of Africa. Now only a little over half a million are scattered in Sub-Saharan regions. They once spread vastly throughout Asia and are now only found in India, Thailand, Sri Lanka and China. It is time the world at large and the global scientific community took a close look at how to conserve and save the elephant and how to no longer profit from their might, power, body or for entertainment. It is time to save the elephant.

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