

Naomi Chongsiriwatana

When the Powerful Are Crushed

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Every year, over 20,000,000 tourists flock to Thailand, a small country located in Southeast Asia. A large majority of these tourists will take the time to go see one of the most popular tourist attractions in Northern Thailand: elephants. Thailand is home to about 7,000 Asian elephants, domesticated and wild. Elephants have been deeply rooted in Thai history for centuries as labor animals and even mounts during war. They are respected by Thais as powerful, majestic creatures. The increase in tourism and decrease in available land for wild elephants, though, has caused more and more elephants to be brought into captivity. Today, they are a means of making money. Captive elephants are typically brought into elephant camps that are focused on tourists and making money. In these camps, foreigners can see elephants play games, watch them paint masterpieces, and ride them. Underneath most of Thailand's elephant camps picture-perfect facades, though, lies a dark, heartbreaking truth.

Today, most of an elephant camp's elephants are born and raised on site. In order to domesticate these naturally wild animals, camps start the training process at 6 months old. The baby elephants go through a heartbreaking process called *phajaan*, or 'the crush'. Elephants are highly relational and there are immensely strong bonds between a calf and his mother. In *phajaan*, babies are taken away from their mothers, immediately breaking the bond between mother and child. The calf is then confined to a small, cramped space where they are then beaten into submission. Photographer Brent Lewin had a front row viewing of this horrific practice and said, "There was a point when the elephant just resigned to what was happening and stood still, the life in her eyes disappeared. It was a look that was haunting." This process lasts for about 3 days and also includes starvation and sleep deprivation. The faster the elephants are trained, the faster the camps can make money, so

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the most effective, and thus the most painful, methods are used in domestication. A calf can never recover from this inhumane practice and will forever live a life of submission and fear.

The technique of *phajaan* is highly efficient because its effects carry on for the rest of an elephant's life. The *mahout*, or trainer, has a bullhook that they introduce in *phajaan* and continue to implement in the elephant's day-to-day routines. Although the sharp hook isn't used as often after an elephant has been tamed, its presence is enough to trigger the traumatic memories connected with it and keeps the animals manageable throughout the long days. An elephant participates in 3-4 hour long shows and give rides to large groups of tourists under the sweltering Thai sun every day. In the wild, elephants naturally cover themselves with a cool layer of mud to protect their skin from the heat, but in the camps, they don't have this layer of 'sunscreen'. This causes painful sunburns on the animals who are working all day long without rest or time under the shade. Elephants are some of the most powerful yet gentlest animals in the world and deserve so much more than the awful treatment they receive from their trainers.

Despite the overwhelming amount of camps that mistreat their animals, there is still hope for these precious animals. Safe havens for elephants are scattered over the country of Thailand and provide a healthy environment for them to thrive in. Elephant Nature Park, Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary, and the Surin Project are just a few of the numerous parks that focus on the elephants rather than the tourists. These sanctuaries allow tourists to interact with elephants in their natural habitat and learn about the animals in safe conditions. Research is key in order to ensure that a visit to an elephant park is in a cruelty-free environment.

Living in Chiang Mai, the second largest city in Thailand, I'm in the heart of the elephant tourism industry. I've gone to and experienced multiple elephant camps with

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friends. Although I knew that there was some controversy over the treatment of elephants in these camps, I've never understood the full extent of the horrors. I've only seen the side that the camps want tourists to see: happy elephants and a once in a lifetime experience. Since I was a toddler, I've ridden elephants and my heart now breaks for these animals who have been demoted from one of the most respected positions an animal can have to a life in chains. I know as friends come to visit my family here in Thailand, we'll be making multiple trips to different elephant camps around us. The most effective way I can help the elephants in captivity is to ask my parents to take us to nature parks for elephants that ensure cruelty-free treatment. There are also many centers that offer volunteering opportunities so if finances allow it, I would eagerly participate in them. Although it's not much, just one less family going to elephant camps is one more family going to elephant sanctuaries and one more elephant getting the care and love it deserves.

Although slightly different from the mistreatment of elephants in elephant camps, the treatment of street elephants is also a troubling problem in the big cities of Thailand. Street elephants are usually baby elephants who've been taken from their mothers prematurely for the purpose of getting money from tourists. It's illegal for elephants to be on the streets of Bangkok, Thailand's capital, but over 100 animals are used for begging in the city. Similar to the elephant camps, the elephants can get seriously burned and get sunstroke from walking for hours under the hot sun. Since the elephants are so young, they haven't fully developed and have soft, tender feet that aren't made for the amount of walking that the mahouts require of them in a day. They'll endure an immense amount of pain and when they're fully grown, will have deformed feet leading to crooked posture and strange ways of walking. Other physical afflictions include malnutrition, lung damage from fumes and exhaust, and deafness. Life as a street elephant also leads to mental issues like depression. Having strong relations

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with fellow elephants is crucial for a healthy elephant and an elephant used for begging is deprived of these relationships. While some elephants react to this isolation by retreating into themselves emotionally, some will become enraged and can be a threat to the people around them. Mahouts will resort to vicious beatings and drugging their animals to keep them under control. Wild baby elephants are fun-loving, gentle creatures, but when placed in an environment like the busy streets of Bangkok, they become a broken representation of their noble species.

The mistreatment of street elephants is a much more well-known problem than the mysteries hidden in an elephant camp. I've been in public bathrooms or airports that have notices posted, warning tourists about street elephants. They reveal the truths behind the cute animals and tell tourists not to give money or food to the elephants no matter how sad it may look because it only motivates the *mahouts* to keep bringing back their elephants to the streets. When I see street elephants in the city, it's a truly sad sight, but the best way to help them is to not give anything. It's so hard to turn your back on an animal who's trying to survive in the harshest of conditions, but it must be done. Instead of giving money to the *mahouts* or buying overpriced snacks for the elephants, tourists can donate to organizations like EleAid and Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary. If I'm ever in the city with a group of friends and see an elephant, my friends will most likely want to feed it and take pictures with it. My role in standing up for elephants would be to make my friends aware of the problems surrounding street elephants and ensure we walk away without giving anything to the *mahout*.

The elephant industry in Thailand hosts a myriad of secrets that need to be revealed. Although there is no easy solution to these problems, the best thing we can do is donate to organizations that have the resources available to help elephants. Along with this, we can

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make people aware of the treatment of elephants in camps and on the streets. Tourists can avoid going to elephant camps that abuse their animals and instead visit sanctuaries that love and care for the elephants. Tourists flock to wherever the elephants are. We need to change things so that the epicenters of elephant homes aren't camps but safe havens, attracting people to interact with the animals in cruelty free zone. Again, the most effective method to help domesticated elephants is to raise awareness of their plight. The mistreatment of elephants in Thailand for the purpose of making money is a tragic reality that has to be revealed in order to fight it.

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