

I live in the beautiful city of Tucson, Arizona, where I am a volunteer at the Reid Park Zoo. As a teen volunteer, I am responsible for helping make the zoo an educational and fun place for its visitors. It was through the zoo and its series of conservation talks that I came to learn about a program in India called Wildlife SOS and its elephant rescue and rehabilitation program. I learned about Wildlife SOS before I became a volunteer, but I was still moved by the presentation, and it motivated me to want to contribute to the program. I am able to do that as a teen volunteer at the zoo.

I have always had a strong interest in learning about animals and the challenges that they face. When I was younger, I participated in many of the Reid Park Zoo's education programs for children. At the end of these programs, we would always do something fun or helpful, like clean the giraffe night house or listen to a rhinoceros's heartbeat. When I turned 13, I applied to the zoo's teen volunteer program. I submitted an application and was later given an interview. After being accepted into the program, I went through a training course and then began my work as a teen volunteer. As a volunteer, I am responsible for working at the zoo for at least six hours every month. I participate in a number of activities through my volunteer work at the zoo, including helping with the zoo's fundraisers for the various wildlife conservation groups that it supports. The teen volunteers play a major role in raising money for these conservation efforts. The two major fundraising events are Howl-o-ween and Zoo Lights.

I have been a teen volunteer for one year and have enjoyed being around the zoo and helping with the zoo's conservation efforts. I have attended several of the zoo's conservation talks. These talks are events where guest speakers come to the zoo to talk about one of the conservation projects that the zoo supports. Last year I attended a talk about a program in India called Wildlife SOS. Wildlife SOS's co-founder, Kartick Satyanarayan, came to the zoo to explain

what Wildlife SOS was all about and the various projects it is working on in India. He began the presentation by talking about its dancing bear rescue program, which was the catalyst that started the organization, and then went on to explain their other conservation projects, including its elephant rescue and rehabilitation project.

In India, Asian elephants are captured as young calves by poachers and sold to elephant owners under forged certification. These captured elephants are then trained in harsh conditions, to be used as anything from a temple elephant to an “entertaining” mode of transportation in the tourist industry. Temple elephants in India are often chained in one place with short chains so they cannot turn around, for hours at a time. The stronger elephants will be used to haul heavy tree trunks or large branches for the temple. Elephants will be dressed up and forced to stand in a line for temple festivities, which can last for hours. During all this time, the elephants’ chains are not removed and they will often receive chain wounds from the chain rubbing into their skin. Temple elephants usually suffer from foot diseases that wear away the bottom of the elephant’s foot. This is the result of standing on a concrete surface and being unable to move for hours or days at a time. The elephants will also suffer from heat exhaustion caused by India’s high temperatures during the days. Furthermore temple elephants do not have access to proper veterinary care and their wounds go untreated.

Working elephants in India often do not have a permanent resting place and are forced to work anywhere from 12 to 14 hours a day under the blistering sun. Their owners use these elephants for logging, begging on the streets, and entertainment. The *mahouts*, or handlers, that work with the elephants have learned their training methods from their family elders. As a result, these elephants are often severely mistreated and abused by their owners. Elephants are treated with much more care and respect in the Southern states, “where traditional and religious

obligations make it mandatory for better living and working conditions for captive elephants,”¹ where as elephants in the Northern states are often abused by their owners. Navigating and controlling an elephant through the crowded and busy streets of Delhi is not an easy task; it often leads to the elephant handlers using a sharp hook, called an *ankush*, to keep the handlers in control of the elephants. These elephants are forced to work long days walking on the scorching roads of India; in the summer, this can cause severe cracking and blistering on their sensitive footpads.

I was shocked when I found out just how bad these captive elephants of India are treated. Wildlife SOS is dedicated to helping and rescuing these elephants. Its Captive Elephant Welfare project focuses on reaching out to sick and abused elephants and providing them with proper veterinary care. Wildlife SOS encourages and helps *mahouts* adopt alternative forms of making a living. This is a great project, as it not only helps elephants that are suffering, but also reaches out to the community to help the people understand the situation through education and aid.

Wildlife SOS also works to help provide rest and rehabilitation to rescued elephants in its elephant rehabilitation center Elephant Haven. The goal of Elephant Haven is to let abused and sick elephants finally “spend their days happily, with frequent baths, a nutritious diet, and good veterinary care.”¹ At the moment, Wildlife SOS is working with the Haryana Forest Department to secure land for a new elephant rehabilitation and research center to “provide a much needed sanctuary for abused, exploited, sick and handicapped elephants requiring retirement, convalescence and medical care.”¹

I am very dedicated to Wildlife SOS’s mission and its efforts to help abused and sick elephants throughout India. As a teen volunteer at the Reid Park Zoo, I am able to help Wildlife SOS in these efforts. All of the money raised through the teen volunteers’ fundraising efforts

goes to conservation projects that the zoo supports. Every year the teen volunteers have a meeting to decide how much money each conservation group will be given from all of the funds that are raised. From the money that we raised this year, we gave Wildlife SOS two thousand dollars.

Wildlife SOS's elephant rescue program is important to me because it makes a positive change in the lives of captive Asian elephants throughout the country of India. I support this program because of its dedication and determination to bring about change. As stated on its website, "Wildlife SOS was established in 1995 by a small group of individuals inspired to start a movement and make lasting change to protect and conserve India's natural heritage, forests and wildlife wealth." I am able to support Wildlife SOS through fundraising as a teen volunteer at my local zoo. Other people can support Wildlife SOS by making a donation or by sponsoring an animal. Sponsoring an elephant is a great way to contribute to the well being of the elephant that you decide to sponsor and to the efforts of Wildlife SOS. A sponsorship is 2800 rupees (roughly 60 USD) a month. When you sponsor an elephant, you receive an e-package for sponsors, which includes a picture of the elephant that you choose to sponsor along with his or her biography. In addition to this, you will also be sent occasional updates on the well being of your elephant. Currently, there are seven elephants that are available for the public to sponsor; they are: Bhola, Chanchal, Laxmi, Phoolkali, Rajesh, Bijli, and Maya. Each of these elephants came from different backgrounds, and they were mistreated in different ways. Bhola, for example, was blind and abnormally thin, but his owners still made him walk on the hot tar roads in order to beg tourists for money or to attend wedding ceremonies. In a terrible accident in the middle of the night, he was hit by a truck and suffered a severe spine injury along with several other major injuries. Wildlife SOS worked with the police to use a crane to stand him up on his feet and

rescue him. Wildlife SOS is making a difference in the lives of these beautiful elephants that have been gravely mistreated throughout their lives, and I am proud that my efforts as a teen volunteer are helping this organization and its cause to provide elephants with the best life possible.

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¹ <http://www.wildlifesos.org/rescue/elephants/captive-elephant-welfare-project>