THE DIRECTORS: BEHIND THE SCENES OF TRAVELLING, SLEEPING & FLYING

GILI BACK
Sustainability Manager, Khiri Travels
GLOBAL PEACE YOUTH EXCHANGE

Global Peace Foundation

Sharing our Passion for Discovery

Khiri Travel

United Nations

PATA

Pacific Asia Travel Association
Sustainability & Social Responsibility
Sharing our Passion for Discovery

GLOBAL PEACE YOUTH EXCHANGE
thailand 2018

1. No Poverty
2. Zero Hunger
3. Good Health
4. Quality Education
5. Gender Equality
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable and Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Responsible Consumption
10. Climate Action
11. Life Below Water
12. Life on Land
Khiri Travel Thailand has proudly been leading the way in sustainable and responsible travel for 25 years. As the Sustainability Manager for Khiri, I work closely with Travelife, PATA, WAP, Global Spirit and other tour operators to develop and implement various initiatives and better practices.

Khiri Reach, the company’s charitable foundation, was established to help disadvantaged people through community development, conservation, environment and empowerment projects. We establish people and planet programs in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia with more coming in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, focusing on educating and working directly with people in rural areas and city zones.

Today I would like to share with you all the work we have been doing regarding the welfare of captive elephants following concerns from lobbyists and visitors. Khiri Travel have been part of the working group set up to create the previously non-existent guidelines and criteria for captive elephants in Thailand, setting the standards to ensure proper elephant welfare based on scientific facts, new techniques and best practices.
The History of Elephants in Thailand

Thailand has a 3000 year old history of the domestication and use of elephants. It is said that one of the first ever depictions of the Siamese people occurs on a panel at Angkor Wat showing a military unit complete with war elephants.
Historically, elephants were used for transportation and war while reigning monarchs maintained a large elephant corps. In more recent history, elephants were employed in the timber industry in the same way that they continue to be used in Myanmar. This employment allowed the maintenance of significant numbers of elephants. However, that changed in 1989 when the Thai government banned the logging industry. Thousands of elephants were abruptly thrown out of work. Captive elephants come under the ‘beast of burden’ law like a buffalo or horse.
Some of these animals and their mahouts escaped over the border to continue plying their trade in Myanmar but many others were thrown into crisis.

Overnight, the elephant went from being the main bread winner in the comparatively poor family of the mahout or village, to an unaffordable outgoing; the cost of food and care being beyond the owners’ means.

Due to popular demand, some of the elephants found gainful employment in the tourist industry but many others are forced to seek out whatever existence they can., including begging in cities and on beaches. Which is now illegal.
Public Conceptions and Misconceptions

There has been a lot of press over recent years showing elephant abuse, crushing of baby elephants, elephants being tied up and pacing repetitively, mahouts using planks of wood with nails or knives to control the elephant and the list goes on.

There are many elephant camps and farms that say they don’t ride elephants anymore and offer other activities like bathing or elephant painting etc. Yet what you do not see behind the scenes is how they are actually training the elephants and treating both the elephants and the Mahouts when not in the public eye.
Not everything you see and hear on the internet it true! Please remember that in order for many charities and foundations to keep making money, they must continue to create a ‘need’, to pull on your heart strings to get you to open your wallet and give generously. They do not always tell the whole truth or use scientific facts. They have to show the extremes and the bad practices to keep the funds and the hype alive.

For example; elephant bathing;
How can having 2 – 8 people climb on an elephant’s back to ‘bathe’ it be safe? It is wet, slippery, there is no protection and multiple people of different sizes are all grabbing hold of the elephants ears and skin. Yet this is considered OK!
The majority of the captive elephant camps and farms do not have any elephants from the wild. Most are born in captivity and have been for generations. Sadly there are some they do buy or accept ‘rescue’ elephants that have been taken from the wild but this is easy to prove scientifically and is actually illegal. How? Now its simple – no need for blood and genetic testing. There is a stress hormone found in the dung of elephants. Wild elephants even after 20 years in captivity will still have high levels of this stress hormone VS virtually none in captive bred elephants will be found.
Khiri Travel was one of the driving members of the Elephant Camp Welfare and Sustainability Standard and Assessment Initiative together with PATA tour operator sustainability working group and Travelife for Tour operators (legally represented by ECEAT). The aim of the group was among others, to develop common standards and tools in order to jointly evaluate suppliers.

The Elephant camp standard and assessment was the answer to the growing concern of people as well as clients world wide. To share the facts and find a solution to address the critical issue of elephant welfare.
Let's start with the Five Freedoms from OIE which only as recently as 2016 were accepted by the UN as official policy recommendations.

Based on these and other guidelines from around the world, The Elephant Camp Welfare and Sustainability Standard and Assessment Initiative group was started in early 2017.

At the time no widely accepted set of criteria or evaluation system was present for Elephant camps in Asia.

Elephant camps in Asia lacked set standards and an accompanying evaluation systems. Some tour operators evaluate camps based on self-developed checklists, an inefficient use of resources and a source of confusion on acceptable and responsible management practices amongst camps.
The criteria and standards were created using scientific evidence, tons of research, using specialist knowledge and local mahout experience, amongst them were World Animal Protection (WAP), ABTA and the Asian Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG), a network of elephant welfare specialists, veterinarians and experts like John Roberts, Andrew Mclean, Dr. Khajohnpat Boonprasert and other specialists from Chiang Mai University.

They created the standards which includes in total, 177 criteria divided over 7 themes and 24 subthemes. These focus on Elephant Welfare and the welfare of the mahouts and their families too.
As we don’t have time to talk about ALL the 177 criteria, here are some points of Interest;

• How the animals are kept at night / chained
• Load on the back of the elephant is no more than 10% of elephant’s weight. During the ride, the elephant has access to food and water. No human feeding.
• Distance of rides do not exceed four kilometers per ride. Trekking surface should be safe and natural, not more than 30% concrete or asphalt.
• There is a balance between working and resting time. Elephant daily working time should not exceed five hours in total including the breaks between activities.
What Does The Future Hold For Elephants?

Elephants are not cheap – not to keep, feed or purchase. Captive elephants cannot just be released into the wild for many reasons; Not enough space, lack of ability to care for self, human imprinting, a difference between wild and captive elephants and more. But perhaps through new techniques, training, better understanding evolvement and hard work, the ‘owners’ of the future can choose to stop breeding them in captivity and focus on healthy populations in the wild. But until then……we must set the right foundations.
Positive Change For Elephants?

Andrew Mclean from H-ELP is a leader in the development and implementation of Positive Reinforcement and Negative (as in minus the pressure) Reinforcement training techniques. Patara Elephant Farm is a great example of how a safe and profitable business can be run without the use of fear, punishment or cruelty taking into consideration the welfare of the animals as well as the mahouts. Mixing these new ways with local wisdom the mahout’s have quickly picked up on the effectiveness – and are teaching both young elephants as well as old ones from different backgrounds using voice commands and touch – no bull-hooks or pain! And the results are astounding!
Leading Change – Starts With YOU!

From elephant “kindergarten” to infrared cameras that detect immediate stress in the eyes, the welfare of captive elephants has never been brighter!

This is proof how people who travel and care can really have an impact in bringing about positive changes for people and planet.

Reward those who work hard to be better and create change – even when told ‘it is not possible’!

Your choices and how you spend your money effect the places we visit. So make sure your demands and decisions are based on facts and consider the whole picture.
Thank You!
For more info please contact

gili@khirireach.org