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A “halfway house” for improving captive welfare

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: It is certainly time to aim for higher quality management strategies for Thailand’s captive elephants, and to engage with sustainable livelihoods for traditional mahouts. Baker & Winkler’s proposal to rewild Thai elephants by placing them under the guardianship of Karen mahouts is recognized as not “wild” since it remains a form of management requiring elephants to live under the control of human caregivers. We applaud the positive welfare aims of this proposal; however, we caution that few of the long-term consequences for elephants or habitats can be known, and further considerations of elephant population dynamics and forest ecosystems are required if these proposals are to be successful for conservation and elephant welfare.

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Baker & Winkler’s (2020) (B&W) proposal for “rewilding” Thailand’s captive elephants approaches the issues of captive elephant management sensitively, especially in two key contexts: the appalling ongoing welfare experienced by many captive elephants in Thailand and the need for sustainable livelihoods among the Karen Hill peoples as an alternative to deforestation through farming. A transition to an extensive management system, where the elephants are permitted to roam in forests, and contact with tourists and other forest dwellers

are managed by keepers (mahouts), provides choices for elephants and people that must be an improvement – a halfway house “to the wild” – compared to most existing captive elephant facilities in Southeast Asia. Current uses of Thailand’s elephant population (the vast majority of which is “owned” and entirely human-managed, as B&W show) are untenable and inhumane, so a transition to a better managed extensive captive context would be a vast improvement.

However, this is not elephants “in the wild”, as B&W clearly note. Wilding (and rewilding) is a controversial topic, based on assumptions that often violate principles of environmental justice. Given the long and complex indigenous and colonial history of much of Southeast Asia, it is unlikely that any forests, rivers, or lands are wild in the sense of being unaltered by human activities. These areas have been occupied by a variety of peoples, with many different cultures and relationships to forests and wildlife. As other commentators have noted (Kopnina, 2020; Paukatet, 2020; Suter, 2020), using elephants to help restore the ecosystem suggests we already know what processes they will affect. Wild Asian elephants typically live in forest fragments, possibly preferring the more productive secondary vegetation (Sukumar, 2003). Many current wild Asian elephants live at the human-forest interface, where we see changes in patterns of elephant aggregation (Srinivasaiah et al., 2019), aggression and retaliation between humans and elephants, and low human tolerance of crop losses or risks to life and livelihoods (see Gubbi et al., 2014).

If they are not constantly managed and moved, will the rewilded elephants have ecological impacts on the small residual forests of Thailand or on the livelihoods of local human residents? It is this perceived need for active management, both of elephants and people, that is proposed to provide livelihoods for traditional mahout families. Generations of elephants living in forest fragments – if a self-sustaining wild population is effectively created – will have nowhere to go given the rapid deforestation occurring throughout Asian elephant range countries (Leimgruber et al., 2003). Is this fair for either elephants or humans? It is critical to ensure that people living alongside elephants have sufficient knowledge of elephants to promote coexistence; the people need sensitisation to living with elephants if both are to remain safe. Systems of elephant ambassadors, where local people are trained and paid to facilitate human-elephant coexistence, could provide further livelihood support as well as tolerance of elephants roaming in human-dominated ecosystems.

A number of challenges associated with the concept of elephant rewilding remain to be addressed. Among the managed timber elephants of Myanmar, populations are not self-sustaining and rely on wild capture, which has profound implications for survival and fertility over the long-term (Lahdenperä et al., 2019). The population management of the Thai elephants rewilded under B&W’s proposal needs careful consideration; is it the intention that elephant numbers be self-sustaining with natural reproductive processes? If successful, the populations could actually grow, which is great for Asian elephants on the IUCN critically endangered Red List but perhaps less great for the forests or people farming nearby, as noted above. In the African context, the mantra of “Too many elephants, too few trees” has led to managed decimations of populations in Uganda (Laws, Parker, & Johnstone, 1975) and southern Africa (see van Aarde et al., 1999), and debate continues today (Henley & Cook, 2019). Resilience to growing elephant numbers needs to be built into these proposals.

Can elephants be “rewilded”? Can individuals bereft of families, of the social context for their development and responses to the world, lacking generational knowledge and memory of

safe spaces, of resources, of routes between forests, actually thrive in a wild context? The small number (104 according to B&W) released into forests have not been monitored for reproductive or social health over the long term. The number of “orphans” released from the Elephant Transit Home in Sri Lanka is tiny, and again their long-term survival and success is unknown. Orphaned wild African elephants can form what appear to be functional families (Goldenberg & Wittemyer, 2017), and the David Sheldrick’s Wildlife Trust orphans have notably been successfully released, but again long-term monitoring of their futures is only beginning. To their credit, B&W call for more research into the effects of their and other interventions.

It is indeed timely to focus on how to achieve higher quality management strategies for Thailand’s captive elephants. The use of the emotive conservation term “rewilding” attracts our attention, but how many of Thailand’s captive elephants will benefit from this programme? Attention is still required about where and how to create safe extensive management facilities for the captive elephants not included in this proposal, as their welfare and wellbeing remain compromised.

B&W recognise the importance of good practices in captive management, and this context informs their admirable aims to improve captive elephant welfare. As they also document, better management requires legislation across the board: on ownership, on appropriate captive conditions, on breeding, on trade and on human-elephant interactions. Any legislation also requires a good, well-funded, regulatory regime. Such changes need to come from state actors, in combination with local keepers of elephants. No amount of support for indigenous cultural practices with elephants can fully succeed without a strong regulatory regime. Change happens when it is driven by those at the base – at the “elephant end”, from visitors and mahouts – but will only be effective when the state supports best practice in welfare and management regimes. Establishing what is best practice for captive Asian elephants is still a work in progress, and B&W’s target article contributes to that work. It is perhaps worth noting that placing elephants in the guardianship of Karen mahouts remains a form of management; it requires elephants to live under the control of human caregivers, and it could remove some of elephants’ autonomous choices about where to roam to ensure that elephants remain tolerant of ecotourists and mahouts. These conditions are, however, far better than many existing systems, if still not ideal for truly wild elephants.

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