



Picture: Hamish J. Appleby

Know your destination – know what you'll be seeing...

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Elephants in Asia

Golden sandy beaches shaded by coconut palms, pearly waves perfect for surfing, king coconut juice to sip in the moist late morning, spicy veggie curries along with steamed red rice.. The list goes on! This is Sri Lanka, the island country of Eden in South Asia, which is endowed with natural beauty ranging from the whale ocean to misty mountain tops.

A total of 855,975 tourists visited the country in 2011, of which 80% were recreational tourists. Interestingly, Germany is the third largest market for the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, while

India and the UK hit the top list. The 2012 trend is encouraging with 622,661 tourists having visited Sri Lanka between January and the end of August 2012. The geographical regions of major attractions have been the capital Colombo, the south coast, the east coast, the central highlands and the ruin cities (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2012). Whatever the attraction, there is one thing a tourist will never miss - the image of the Asian elephants, the symbolic creature of culture and nature of Sri Lanka.

The human-elephant relationship in Asia has deep roots. It is a part of generations of ancient Hindu mythology. The most honored elephant-headed God Ganesha – the God of wisdom – is believed to be created by the Goddess Parvathie. The historical scripts and Buddhist literature explains that elephants were part of the Royal Army of ancient Indian rulers. The use of elephants as war animals stretched from the Far East through ancient Rome and beyond. However, elephant culture illustrated in Sri Lanka's history and tradition has always meant strength, pride and prosperity.

Elephants are social animals



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The elephant is the biggest land mammal in Asia and is identified as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation (IUCN) in their updated Red List – IUCN list of globally endangered species. Elephants are social animals which live in close family groups called herds. Female elephants live in their natal herds for their entire lives; unless they leave it to form a separate family group. Male elephants, or bulls, stay with their mothers in the natal group until adolescence when they are practically chased from the group. Bulls then usually begin their lonely life, roaming in solitude, joining female herds only for breeding activities. There are occasions where male elephants get together to form 'bachelor herds', a temporary group

forming observed both in Africa and Asia. The function of such a group seems to be social as dominance is often tested among the group members with play-fights.

Elephants have very complex social lives and social behaviors. Being an evolutionarily high ranking species, their level of cognition and communication within the species is exceptionally evolved. For elephants, social interaction is vital for their survival in many ways. Scientists have proved that they can judge situations and react accordingly. There are reports claiming that elephant memory is extraordinarily long. Older females of different groups act as knowledge repositories of generations as they know the locations of the best resources in their habitat and the safest ways to reach them.

Due to their large body size, elephants need a continuous daily supply of food, about 250kg of fodder, and 120l drinking water. They walk long distances for their biological needs like food, water and social contacts. It is said an average female elephant would roam about 100 square kilometers a day. An adult male elephant's home range could be far bigger as it travels farther between habitats, especially when in musth. Musth is a physiological state of an adult male elephant characterized by high testosterone levels in blood. Such hormone-driven animals are in search of breeding opportunities and are aggressive towards their rivals.

Where you can see elephants in Sri Lanka

The island is a popular tourist destination for elephant lovers. A tourist in Sri Lanka may see an elephant from any one of the following 'populations':

1. Wild elephants
2. Pinnawala elephants
3. Captive elephants

1. Watching elephants in the wild



Picture: Hamish J. Appleby

Sri Lanka has a healthy population of wild elephants. The last census in August 2011 revealed nearly 6,000 elephants distributed throughout the country, frequenting in the dry zone. The dry zone of Sri Lanka contains a collection of national parks - some declared a century ago – sanctuaries, forest reserves, elephant (biodiversity) corridors and conservation buffer zones as protected land for wildlife along with mosaic, degraded forest patches in between protected areas. These are examples of the usual elephant habitats. Recent studies have shown that elephants prefer secondary vegetation in the farmlands, which are left behind by the rural farmers. Wild elephants don't restrict their home range to wilderness or protected lands. Human settlements and farmlands of nutrition-rich crop varieties like paddy, corn, beans, banana, and coconut attract elephants creating the interface for the serious environmental issue of human-elephant conflict. The biggest challenge for the elephants in Sri Lanka is habitat loss. Rising population and the subsequent demand for development cause an ever increasing land pressure in the island country of just about 65,000 sqkm of land area! It has been calculated that Sri Lanka has the highest density of elephant population in Asia.

Nevertheless, the human-elephant conflict in the country does not interfere with tourists enjoying the wild elephants in any calendar month of the year. Udawalawa, Yala, Wasgamuwa, Minneriya-Kawudulla are a few national parks where tourists can closely encounter elephants. One should not forget to observe elephant bathing times, calf playing times and bull play-fighting times. An interested tourist can contact an elephant professional for an added-value elephant tourist experience!



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The following list of Dos and Don'ts of watching elephants in the wild is an important information provided for concerned tourists.

Dos

1. Learn and obey the rules and regulations of the national park
2. Make sure your safari vehicle is in good running condition
3. Always follow the instructions given by the accompanying wildlife guard / safari guide
4. Stay inside the vehicle throughout the safari
5. Leave enough space (20-25 meters minimum) between the vehicle and elephants before stopping
6. Learn something from the safari trip about elephant ecology and conservation
7. Appreciate the jeep driver and the accompanying staff if they completed the elephant watching safari responsibly :-)

Don'ts

1. Don't use alcohol and drugs in the national park and make sure your jeep driver and the accompanying staff are not on alcohol or drugs
2. Don't overload the jeep – 10 tourists is manageable
3. Don't encourage speeding – 25km/hr is the recommended speed inside the national parks
4. No off-road driving!
5. Don't drive into elephant herds and don't block their movements
6. Never raise the engine when the elephants are around
7. Don't shout or scream while watching elephants – silence is rewarding!
8. No tipping for close-up shots of elephants
9. Never encourage the jeep driver and the accompanying staff to rush between locations inside the park for elephant viewing opportunities



Pictures: Hamish J. Appleby

2. Pinnawala elephants



Pictures: EEG Archive

Pinnawala is a state-run elephant orphanage established in the mid-country Sri Lanka in 1972. It has a breeding population of about 90 non-wild, but semi-captive elephants. The facility has a considerable tourist influx annually. The tourists are allowed to observe the daily management routine of the herd while benefiting from good photo opportunities available. It is common to see tourists having exceedingly close interactions with elephants, which is potentially harmful and totally unnecessary. The tourists must keep in mind that these animals are neither tamed nor being drugged to modify their behavior. Wild elephant behavior can be expressed at any time by the elephants of Pinnawala, especially if disturbed by the tourists.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=7_yb_pdQOmM

There are concerns related to welfare of the orphanage's captive elephant herd. Provision of space, shade, food and clean drinking water is not adequate. Males are tethered at all times, if not sent to water. When in musth, the constant tethering worsens the elephant's condition. It is left to stand on its excreta and left over food for months until the musth period has ended. The animal is never once brought to the nearby river for the entire duration of its musth period. (Asian elephants need to have access to water at least once a day as bathing and splashing water help to reduce the core body temperature and it is a MUST for bulls in musth!)

Almost all the elephants have chain-cut wounds in their legs. In the recent past, local and international media reported several times about cruelty to elephants at Pinnawala in the recent past. <http://www.bornfree.org.uk/campaigns/elephants/campaign-action/sri-lanka-elephants/captive-elephant-welfare/mihiri-campaign/>

3. Captive elephant industry in Sri Lanka

A very easy-to-access captive elephant population (around 8 animals) can be seen at the Zoological Gardens, in Colombo. It is yet another example of a zoo, which is unable to maintain big mammals in captive conditions without compromising the animal's welfare and their biological demands, but at the same time, talks high about species conservation outside wild habitats. Colombo zoo is one of the least popular tourist destinations in the city.

Keeping elephants in captivity and using them for domestic needs in Sri Lanka date back to 600 BC, the history says. Today's domestic elephants (or wild elephants kept in captivity in practical terms) in the country are associated with Buddhist temples and private ownership where the current population numbers about 120. The origin of these elephants varies. The majority of the animals are wild-caught specimens. They were captured from the wild before the practice was banned in late 70's. This legitimate, wild caught generation of elephants is now aging. To supplement this domestic elephant population, the state frequently donates calves and young adult elephants from the Pinnawala elephant orphanage to the private owners and Buddhist temples. A few elephants have been diplomatic gifts to Sri Lankan Buddhist temples from the other elephant range countries in Asia. Finally, the well-organized, politically backed racket of smuggling baby elephants from the wild currently adds more animals to the population. A recent newspaper said there are about 20 such abducted animals are secretly kept in and around Colombo. This fact itself explains that captive elephant industry in Sri Lanka, thus tourism related to it, is unfortunately blood-stained!

Captive elephants are part of the 'labor market' of Sri Lanka as they are worked restlessly at temples and parades, elephant-back safari and timber hauling. The keeping of an elephant in private ownership is unarguably for social status. With the colossal body of the animal comes colossal needs of maintenance and the veterinary bills inclusive; therefore, the owner needs huge sums of money to sustain the elephant. The simple solution to supply the needed funds for the animal is to be worked. The monthly wage for an average working elephant is about LKR 100,000 (578 Euro). Is the captive management of elephants in Sri Lanka sustainable in this manner? Then comes a natural question...



Pictures: EEG Archive

There is an infamous argument in the country saying that keeping elephants at Buddhist temples and sending them in parades to honor Buddha is an acceptable practice. But, the argument is challenged when such an animal:

- has been illegally removed from the wild despite the fact the species being globally endangered
- is kept with provision of inadequate space, shade, food, water, exercise, social contacts and veterinary care
- has to work tirelessly to earn money not only for itself and for its mahout and the owner (or temple)
- shows festering chain-cut wounds and jab wounds by the ankus*, as a sign of intense restraining used on the animal by the owners
- is continuously harassed by its mahouts and, if around, by the tourists
- goes out of control after series of sleepless nights of taking part in Buddhist temple parades while a parade itself is a money making machine
- is being used to run an unsustainable tourism industry in the name of a religion, especially when Buddhism is clearly based on compassion!

*Ankus – an elephant goad with a sharp metal spike and/or a hook. Used in controlling elephants. It can cause serious jab wounds.

Be a responsible tourist!

Please note Kadira's story i.e. findings on one adult bull used in elephant back safari tourism around Habarana – a tourist destination - in this page. No tourist should take part in making an elephant suffer for just a few minutes of pleasure. If you decide to partake in safari back riding, your decision brings blood money to the elephant owner or to the temple it belongs to. I have brought to you the inside of *elephant tourism in Sri Lanka*. A responsible tourist is an honorable tourist – enjoy wilderness of Sri Lanka; respect the wild elephants; give them their space and don't take part in blood-stained captive elephant industry.

Kadira
the safari elephant

Kadira's sad story:

- 2-4 adults & iron cage on back
- Wounded mouth and lips
- Spike chains & chain cut wounds
- Infected ankus jabs
- Injured & deformed hind limb
- Walking on hot tarmac road
- Inadequate food, water & rest

Kadira suffers to make you happy.
Would you ride him in Sri Lanka?

He would have been much happier in the wild
with his companions...

Mathaga is the unheard voice of captive elephants in Sri Lanka.
Contact us at mathaga_ele@gmail.com
ELEPHANTS BELONG IN THE WILD. SAY NO TO CAPTIVE ELEPHANT INDUSTRY.

Mathaga

Picture: Mathaga