

THE TUSKS OF A DILEMMA

Asian Elephants are threatened with extinction within a generation and the tourism industry is fuelling their demise with heartbreaking cruelty, reports **Jameela Freitas**

Riding an elephant on holiday is on millions of people's bucket lists. But few are aware the elephants in the popular tourist hotspots of Asia are an endangered species that is dwindling fast – so fast they could be extinct within this current generation. Neither do people know about the brutal abuse that goes on behind the scenes of the elephant tourist trade.

Last month pictures went viral of an elephant called Sambo lying dead on a dusty street in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Sambo, estimated to be 40 years old, died from a sudden heart attack caused by exhaustion when giving tourists rides in the blistering heat. Sambo walked the same uphill routes carrying tourists for 15 years.

Sambo's tragic end scratches the surface of the epidemic of suffering, exploitation, premature deaths and declining numbers of Asian elephants.

20 May marks Endangered Species Day and, although the threat to African elephants is widely known, Asian elephants have been overlooked. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (ICUN) says the African elephant population has dwindled to around 470,000. In Asia, the estimate is 40,000. It's a huge decline from the one million Asian elephants that lived at the beginning of the 20th century. Their

numbers have decreased by 50 per cent in the last 60 years alone.

The majority of the Asian elephant population is in India and Sri Lanka, at around 30,000. Tourist hotspot Thailand has 2,500-3,200. In Cambodia, poor Sambo's home, only 250-600 are left, according to ICUN.

Duncan McNair, founder and CEO of the charity Save The Asian Elephants (STAE), explains how elephants are captured and put through a brutal process called "pajan" to break their spirits so they can be used in tourism, festivals and temples.

"Baby elephants are snatched from their mothers and thrown into isolation at 'training' camps,

which I call death camps," says McNair. "Horrific torture ensues to break their wild spirits by subduing them using pain and fear. These helpless little creatures are often beaten to death.

"Caged in a small wooden enclosure for months on end, an elephant will be tied with ropes and chains. It's beaten and stabbed with bull-hooks by elephant handlers called mahouts. A bull-hook is a wooden pole with an iron spike that rips and wounds the elephant's tough skin until it bleeds or chunks of flesh are ripped from its body."

The largest land animals alive today are also one of the world's most intelligent. Elephants have 300 billion neurons in their brains; as many as humans. Like us, elephants are capable of problem solving, co-operation, empathy and grief. They are the only species, other than humans,

known to perform a mourning ritual around death and to visit family "graves". Elephants also have a similar lifespan to us and should live 70 years.

Throughout history, monarchs across Asia have kept elephants, symbolising that they reign with power and justice. Elephants were used by the world's greatest warriors when marching into battle. In 218BC, Hannibal of Carthage, crossed the Alps to victory against Rome while riding his trusty elephant, leading an army of men and elephants. After thousands of years going to work and battle for humans, mankind has repaid elephants by driving them to near extinction.

STAE lists three factors causing the decline of Asian elephants: the destruction of forests and elephants' migratory routes for farming and development; ivory poaching; and the ill health, decline in breeding and growth in preventable deaths that comes from unnatural captivity and unfettered commercial exploitation, particularly for tourism.

Just like humans do, elephants can snap. In January in Koh Samui, Thailand, an elephant called Golf gored British tourist Gareth Crowe to death. Witnesses allege they heard Golf's harrowing screams as he was shackled and mercilessly beaten as punishment. Film footage emerged of Golf chained to a tree and repeatedly rocking his head back and forth. Golf has since been put back to work, a decision that disregards the elephant's welfare and tourists' safety.

STAE's conservationists and experts engage with policymakers in the UK, EU and Asia to bring an end to this cruelty. The charity wants to see elephants introduced back into the wild. While there is a market for keeping and riding elephants, they want to ensure the health and wellbeing of captive elephants are protected. The charity's new initiative is a UK veterinary student volunteering scheme to work with Indian vets at key captive elephant sites. McNair recently gave talks about the scheme to veterinary students at Liverpool University and Reaseheath College in Cheshire.

The vet placements include places where elephants are commonly used for tourist rides, such as Kerala and Rajasthan. At the Guruvayoor Temple in Kerala, India, elephants have been beaten to death.

McNair, who visited Guruvayoor in 2014 and 2015, views the abuse and neglect on the temple grounds as a



Top: tourists ride elephant in Thailand. Photo: Alamy. Bottom: the elephant Golf photographed in February – still working despite horrific abuse driving him to kill a British tourist. Photo: AP

repudiation of the values of Hinduism. Describing what he witnessed, he says:

"Elephants are shackled to trees and look weak, sick and showing the signs of mental disturbance. Some had one smashed up rear leg and were standing on three legs. Some were even blinded in one eye. I saw one mahout dabbing paint on a horrible great livid wound between the elephant's shoulder blades, probably caused by bullhook stabbing. A professor of animal welfare who took me round there broke down in the car

torn from its side and legs, screaming and screaming, its legs and trunk pointing upwards in agony. The mahouts were laughing and egging each other on.

"Several elephants were contained in crushing cages and were looking scared and lonely, knowing huge beatings will follow. I was told they are sometimes kept there several months, to psychologically wear them down. One curious baby elephant approached and greeted me with its trunk outstretched. A mahout took a rod and hit him hard on the head making

The largest land animals alive today are also one of the world's most intelligent

park afterwards. He said some of those elephants are in such a bad state they would be best euthanised."

In 2015, McNair also visited an elephant site used to prepare elephants for commercial use. The camp is in a forest near Mysore in Karnataka, India. McNair recalls: "I saw a gang of 10 mahouts gathered round a laptop watching a terrible video of pajan on an adult elephant that I was told had happened at that camp recently. The elephant was being smacked with huge timbers through the cage gaps as hard as they could drive them. The elephant finished up on its back in the cage with huge chunks of flesh about 18 inches long

a sharp cracking noise. It jumped back in pain; tears streaming down its face."

Determined to end this sort of abuse, STAE is desperately seeking funds and has created calls to action on its website. This includes signing its petition asking David Cameron to increase pressure on India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, to implement policies to protect elephants and designate India's reserve forest land as a sanctuary. STAE proposes a change to UK law too, so advertising of elephant tourism is banned until regulated standards are upheld. And the charity pleads for people to walk away from tourist attractions exploiting the endangered Asian elephants. ■