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 tourism 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 by isolation at 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 ‘training’ camps,” says McNair. “Horrible 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 bullied 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 million 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 as symbols of 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 working to support 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 poked British tourist Gareth Crowe to death. Witnesses allege that 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 next initiative is to engage with policymakers in the UK, EU and Asia to bring an end to this cruelty. The charity wants to see elephants engage with policymakers in the UK, EU and Asia to bring an end to this cruelty. The charity wants to see elephants 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 “training” camps, says McNair. “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 dabbling paint on a horrible, gnarly 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 with tears streaming down its face.”

A sharp cracking noise. It jumped back in fear, 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.

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