



A Carol Buckley Project

**ELEPHANT AID INTERNATIONAL**  
One World...One Elephant at a Time

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**FROM:** Carol Buckley, Founder, Elephant Aid International, USA

**TO:** Elephant Nature Park, Chiang Mai, Thailand

**Elephant Foot Care and Mahout training provided by Elephant Aid International:  
Summary of Services Provided, Outcomes and Recommendations**

For a total of eight weeks between November 22, 2010, and April 18, 2011, [Elephant Aid International](#) (EAI) undertook an effort to improve elephant welfare by evaluating facilities, mahout management and elephant foot health, and providing elephant foot care and mahout training at the Elephant Nature Park in Thailand. More than thirty elephants received foot health evaluations and foot trimming. The majority of the 36 mahouts, supervisors, veterinarian and support staff were exposed to Compassionate Elephant Management. The bulk of the elephant/mahout training was focused on one-year-old Chang Yim and his mahout Karl Cullen.

This report addresses

- Current elephant foot health and remedies
- Current mahout elephant management and remedies

The recommendations provided are intended as a tool to improve elephant foot health, mahout management of resident elephants and to guide improvements in overall welfare.

## Services

### **Services and supplies provided by EAI included:**

- Evaluation of mahout management of resident elephants
- Evaluation of the overall condition of the elephant stables, including construction, drainage, substrate, shade, waste removal, sanitation and the location and condition of leg chains
- Evaluation of elephant foot health
- Instruction in Compassionate Elephant Management positive reinforcement target training
- Individualized training for two elephant calves residing with their birth mothers and aunts in a herd environment
- Tutoring for head mahout
- Elephant foot trimming manual
- Foot trimming tools
- Complete pad, nail and cuticle trimming
- Individualized tutoring for mahouts on the care of their elephants' feet
- Follow-up re-examinations of elephants experiencing serious foot health issues
- Written evaluation, photographic documentation and recommendations for improved foot care

The work was conducted under the direction of Sangduen Chailert and Darrick Thompson, with assistance from Kat, Karl Cullen, Jodi Thomas and support staff.

## Foot Health

### **Findings**

- The majority of the elephants had severely overgrown nails and pads. In some cases the pads were deeply decayed and nails had chronic splits. Most had deep decayed crevices between and under their toenails. The overgrowth is a result of lack of sufficient exercise to wear pads and nails.



- The elephants who spend their days on natural substrate with access to fresh water, live vegetation and shade during the hottest part of the day have healthier feet than their counterparts who spend more time immobile, standing on concrete floors and chained in place during the day and/or night.
- In the majority of cases, the nails and pads of the “family group” and two adolescent male elephants were healthier than that of the other elephants who spend less time engaged in the natural behaviors of grazing and moving throughout the habitat.
- Elephants who spend all day standing in one area with little activity except for short trips to the river for the visitor bath interaction, have seriously overgrown and decaying nails and pads.



- Those who spend overnight in stables on sand-covered concrete floors suffer further from dried pads and cracked nails and cuticles.

Due to a lack of basic foot care, the elephants share common conditions. With few exceptions, this group of elephants has serious foot health issues including:

- grossly overgrown and decayed nails and pads
- chronic nail splits
- severely overgrown, cracked and dry cuticles
- bacteria growth in the pads and nails and between the toes
- foot and nail abscesses
- deep pitted and rotting pad cracks
- stones, pieces of wood and metal objects embedded in the nails and pads

The advanced degree of the decay seen in the majority of feet trimmed is harmful to the elephants, causing pain and lameness. Left untreated, the foot infections can become systemic and even life threatening.

## **Recommendations**

- Establish a foot care program with regularly scheduled foot examinations and trimming to ensure that pads and nails remain healthy.
- Monitor adult males and geriatric cows to prevent their nails from becoming necrotic.
- Allow the elephants to spend more time off chains to allow for natural posturing and movement, which has a direct impact on the wear pattern on their pads and nails.
- Provide soft earthen floors in elephant stables.

## **Mahout Management**

### **Findings**

- The majority of the mahouts speak Burmese and do not understand Thai or English. The language barrier makes working with them difficult. It also creates a safety hazard for them when working elephants in close contact with the public because the mahouts are unable to communicate with the public.
- Each elephant is assigned one mahout, except in the case of the males, who are assigned two. Without exception, the mahouts cling to their traditional elephant training and use dominance as their form of management. They believe that an elephant must be afraid of the mahout in order to be controlled. The idea of positive reinforcement is foreign and was rejected by the majority of them. They do not use elephant hooks but employ other less obvious means to inflict pain to control the elephants.
- Mahout morale is low. They work long hours and long weeks, with little time off. The mahouts and support staff were not properly informed of the training and foot care programs in advance.
- Most staff expressed confusion and resistance when instructed to do anything outside of their normal routine.

### **Recommendations**

- Formalized guidelines should be created to address elephant care and management.
- Mahouts and the public should be taught a healthy respect for elephants and visitors should not have direct contact with the elephants. Visitors can view the elephants from a safe location enabling the elephant to behave in more natural ways. By removing the visitor from the elephants' space, the mahout no longer has to use abusive measures to control the elephant to protect the visitors.

- Use your facility to teach the public how close-up encounters have a negative impact on elephant welfare.
- Positive reinforcement training should be employed at the Park. A skilled trainer should be on staff to provide formal training for the mahouts and to train the elephants.
- Employ qualified personnel to supervise the mahouts.
- The use of nails, slingshots, sticks and other weapons should be banned.
- The elephants should be given the freedom to wander where they wish and when they wish, and not be forced to adhere to a show schedule to accommodate the public and volunteers. Mahouts should shadow the elephant but not dictate their movements.
- Separate fenced areas should be created for the elephants. This will serve multiple purposes:
  - It will be possible to remove elephants from others with whom they don't get along.
  - It will give the elephants more freedom to wander safely.
  - Mahouts will no longer have to frighten or hurt the elephants to drive them from vegetation or areas where they are not allowed.

## **Conclusion**

Comprehensive foot care and mahout management programs are vital components of an effective captive elephant management plan. Healthy feet and humane handling techniques are key to an elephant's physical and psychological health, and ultimately his/her longevity. Addressing diet, stable sanitation, substrate, mahout handling, foot care, exercise and stress level results in healthier, more contented elephants.

Carol Buckley  
Elephant Welfare Consultant  
Founder, Elephant Aid International  
[www.elephantaidinternational.org](http://www.elephantaidinternational.org)  
[elevisions@aol.com](mailto:elevisions@aol.com)  
P.O. Box 106  
Hohenwald, TN 38462 USA  
931-796-1466