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Riding on Giants: Elephant Tourism in Chitwan National Park

Joshua Jacoves



Relevant Terms in Translation:

Howdah: A seat constructed out of mainly wood that is strapped onto an elephant to allow for people to ride on its back

Mahout: A person who works with, rides on, and trains elephants

Ankus: Metal tool with a sharp end and hook

Kuchi: Food for elephants made of small seeds and grain wrapped in dried cut grass

Abstract

For the nearly 100 Asian Elephants (*elephas maximus*) in and around Chitwan National Park, life revolves and often depends on their interactions with humans. Since the advent of elephant tourism for the masses in around the 1980s, the elephants in and around the park have had a dramatic shift in their ways of life. This shift has also affected those who work intimately with these animals, the mahouts, or elephant keepers / riders, have also seen a complete shift in their role and livelihood. For those involved with this industry elephants are seen through different lenses; as an investment, as a dangerous occupation, as a status activity, and as animals in need of help.

This Independent Study Project seeks to dive into these lenses, in explaining how and why these elephants are conceptualized in this fashion. Additionally, through this analysis, the human perspective will be brought in, to illustrate what one NGO worker described as “the cycle of violence” with those within the industry. Through a multispecies ethnographic approach, this study will examine each of the ‘actors’ within the system, and how in concert, they affect both the elephants and their keepers.

Acknowledgements

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The Three Elephants

Within the first hour of my arrival to Sauraha, the self-proclaimed “gateway to Chitwan National Park” I was immediately ‘greeted’ by three elephants. As I was driven through the town in an open backed jeep, I first saw the famous elephant statue that sits in the intersection of the main road. The statue, adorned in multicolored fresh flowers with a large heart next to it, clearly showing the affection those have towards the animal. Shortly after our jeep pulled over to the side of the road, to allow for one elephant to walk past with its two mahouts on its back, large stick in hand. As my jeep then neared the hotel, I was greeted by the third elephant, chained on all four legs in a small outdoor stable, with its mahout napping close by.

With these three depictions in mind, I knew trying to unravel the story of these animals would be a messy and complicated web, with intersecting stories, perspectives, and science. As my first hour shows, conditions and imagery vary greatly within the park. While Chitwan is now home to approximately 100 elephantsⁱ, a major distinction must be made. Conditions, treatment, and history between those that are governmentally owned and privately owned are completely different.

Methodologically I sought to give voice to those who are often underrepresented when looking at this industry. Chiefly the elephants themselves, and the mahouts who are wrongly often seen by western outsiders as “perpetrators of violence and the enemy of elephant rights”. In exploring the state and situation of the elephants and their mahouts I relied on deep participant observation, with my “field sites” being the elephant camps, the NGOs who support elephants, and the places where elephant tourism is facilitated: the park, the riding area, the government breeding center, and streets of Sauraha itself.

These observations, as well as interviews with mahouts, NGO workers, and tourists added color to the greater picture, with interviews with academics serving to contextually broaden my approach and detail my observations. Lastly, through spending extended time with six specific elephants, and through guided visual observation and photography I was able to in a sense gain their perspective, as shown through body language and their physical conditions, internally and in their shelters.

Situating The Elephants of Chitwan

Asian Elephants in Nepal contribute to a relatively small global population of the species as a whole. Other range countries such as India and Thailand have thousands of elephantsⁱⁱ, whereas Nepal has only around 120 at the last rough countⁱⁱⁱ. The vast majority of these elephants are found in Chitwan, which has approximately 100^{iv}. Out of this, there exist three distinct categories of elephants in the park: wild, captive-government, and captive-private.



There are three wild male elephants in Chitwan National park and no wild female or juvenile elephants^v. The three wild elephants, Dhurbe, Ronaldo, and Govinda, live relatively free lives, residing in the jungle, making frequent visits to mate at the government owned Elephant Breeding Center, and now increasingly entering buffer zone villages and contributing to the human-wildlife conflict in the region. These three elephants alone are responsible for approximately 10-15 deaths a year^{vi}. These deaths are almost all due to deforestation and inner park infrastructure projects which push these three closer and closer to buffer zone villages where they feast on the fruit that is grown by locals, who in turn try to attack and push the elephants off of their fields.

For the next two groups, a key distinction must first be made. The term “domesticated” or “domestic” elephant can be seen frequently on park signage, in advertisements, and spoken by elephant owners. Elephants are not domesticated. They, as a species, have not been selectively bred by humans, and as such have not become “domesticated”^{vii}. While they are captive, they are still very much wild animals that carry with all the hallmarks of “the wild” and are still dangerous to humans. Captive elephants in Nepal also have killed mahouts and others.

The first group of captive elephants are those owned and used by the Nepali government. Historically, these elephants are descendants of those belonging to the Nepali Kings who used them for mainly ritual and ceremonial purposes, or as a means of transportation in the thick jungle, when alternative transportation would not suffice^{viii}. These elephants live in a variety of conditions. The females and juveniles live at the Elephant Breeding Center in Sauraha. They live in roofed enclosures chained on one leg starting at the age of 1-2 years old. They serve as a tourist attraction, with visitors paying 100 Nepali Rupee to watch them^{ix}. The Elephant Breeding Center is set up in an “L” shape configuration, with visitors walking on the inside, blocked from direct contact by a wooden and an electric fence. The back of their separate enclosures, as seen in figure 1 are open to the jungle. The center is configured in this fashion so that the three wild male elephants can approach and mate with the females of the center. When a baby elephant is born, they are kept with their mother and unchained. Around the age of 1-2 they will be chained up, and until they reach maturity will be kept with their mother^x. Males born at the center will be eventually moved to separate camps.

Government owned male elephants are kept in a variety of places throughout the park. The government maintains a main camp in Sauraha, and a few elephants are kept inside the park in a variety of small army camps. The male elephants are mainly used as work animals, spending their days either as vehicles for inter-jungle transport to facilitate anti-poaching patrols, or are simply walked into the jungle with

their mahouts to gather food to feed them for the rest of the day. A fully-grown adult elephant consumes roughly 300 pounds of food a day and as such, dedicates roughly 14-16 hours a day in food related activities; gathering grass, breaking it up with their feet, and eating^{xi}. On rare occasions these elephants may bring army soldiers deep into the jungle, to areas where jeeps cannot access. At these camps, the elephants are constantly chained when not working, to protect the human's residents.

The second group of captive elephants in Chitwan are those owned by private businessmen or hotels. These elephants are all brought over illegally from India. Illegal due to Asian elephants being listed as an endangered species, and it is illegal to both transport and own an endangered species according to international law^{xii}. Additionally, there is a historic tradition for private elephant ownership in Nepal. As stated earlier, while there is a tradition of Nepali Kings utilizing elephants for ritual and ceremonial acts, there is none for private ownership. In speaking to a Tharu official in the area, "Historically Tharu people served the King as mahouts, no one else owned elephants".

Private elephant ownership for tourism in Nepal started roughly in the 1960s when one American and one Russian business owner convinced the current Nepali Prince to allow for their capture and use of an elephant for tourist backed safari purposes^{xiii}. This was one of the major factors that kicked off tourism to the Terai and specifically Chitwan and is where the association between the park and elephant back safaris began. In the next sixty years, the number of hotels and elephant-based infrastructure rapidly expanded to its peak of nearly 80 private elephants in 2020^{xiv}. Chitwan, like the rest of Nepal was heavily affected by the COVID lockdowns and about half of the privately-owned elephants were sold and transported back to India.

For the privately-owned captive elephants of Chitwan, living conditions vary across two standards. The first is the most common, making up nearly 3/4th of the elephants in private captivity. Their life consists solely of tourists. They are consistently chained up, oftentimes with both sets of legs. While chained they often have no access to drinking water. Instead, water is provided to them whenever their mahout feels it necessary. This results in the animals drinking as much as possible whenever possible, as opposed to simply drinking when thirsty if they were provided with a constant water source. When these elephants are not chained, they are working. Their first job is to cater to the whims of the tourist industry. A plethora of elephant-based tourist activities exist within the park and its buffer zone (See Chapter 2), and these elephants are often giving up to seven to nine tours a day^{xv}.

If they are not actively giving a tour, these elephants also work to feed themselves. As stated earlier Asian elephants in the wild spend a majority of their day in food related activities, and the same is with those in private captivity. Their mahouts will ride them into the jungle to cut the required amount of grass needed to feed them each day. Their diets are supplemented with seeds wrapped in hay called kuchi. Which are made daily by their mahouts. If an elephant is lucky then they will be given fruit by tourists, or by their mahout during special types of "Elephant Walks". But this is not common and not all elephants participate in this activity (See chapter 2).

The remaining roughly 1/4th of the private elephants in Chitwan live in varying degrees of 'higher care standards. These elephants are split across multiple NGOs^{xvi}, IGNOs^{xvii}, and one private "ethical elephant camp"^{xviii}. Broadly speaking these elephants live their lives mostly chain free, and when they are chained, only temporarily on one leg, for the safety of their mahouts (see Chapter 3). They reside in

large open pens fenced in by a combination of steel beams, wood poles, and wire, covered by either a hatch or tin roof.

They also often have a better diet, with more fruit and some vegetable matter. These elephants often also have access to a semi-regular veterinarian or veterinarian technician, either from one of the local NGOs or from outside animal aid groups that frequently visit the park. This set of elephants don't often, if ever, give rides to tourists, and range in a spectrum from zero to semi participation in the other forms of elephant tourism (see Chapter 2). It is important to be noted here that even the elephants rescued by NGOs are still illegal. "In order to rescue an elephant from a businessman you have to buy it and participate in the system."^{xix}

Overall in Chitwan captive elephants live in precarity. These elephants are forced to solely rely on humans for food, shelter, care, and medical treatment, which greatly varies across the many camps and stables throughout Sauraha and the buffer zone villages. In order to fully understand this industry, and the lives of its inhabitants, one must pull back all of the individual components in the system, then explore how they work in concert with each other. The next chapter will focus on the present, and the potential future of Chitwan's elephant tourism industry, and the following on the specific conditions and stories of captivity, from both an elephant and human perspective.

Elephant Tourism at a Glance

Currently in Chitwan there are three main categories of elephant-based tourism: elephant rides, elephant walks, and elephant baths. Additionally, there are two centers where visitors can see government elephants – at the breeding center and at the government camp. Lastly there are a few NGOs and INGOs that offer specialty elephant experiences. This section will focus primarily on the main three categories of experiences and will only touch on the others. This is because the majority of the ‘elephant work’ in the park falls into the first three categories itself.



Upon entering the town of Sauraha you are immediately greeted with elephants walking down the streets, howdahs attached with their mahouts riding up near their necks. As you continue walking down the main road, tour guide offices with their brightly colored bifold signs show you pictures of all the activities they offer. Oftentimes, the biggest picture shown is that of an elephant with happy tourists waving from its back. In the past ten or so years though, spurred by an increase in western tourists’ awareness of animal rights issues, both in traditional media with films like *Blackfish* and through social media campaigns, elephant rides are starting to decrease in popularity with westerners.

This void though is quickly being filled with a new category of tourists. Due to increased economic reforms and activity, there exists a new rising middle class in India, China, and Nepal. These tourists, oftentimes associate elephants with royalty, as animals the “king would ride”^{xx}, or as sacred animals tying into Ganesh, the Hindu deity with an elephant head. Due to these factors, the drop in western elephant back tours has been quickly filled with these new populations, re-popularizing the activity.

Elephant backed tours are offered in two parks of the National park, located roughly 15 to 20 minutes apart by Jeep. These rides are facilitated through the United Elephant Cooperative which is a collection of all but one elephant owner in the Park. The United Elephant Cooperative works to facilitate which elephants are ridden when, how often, and where. Whenever a tourist books an elephant back safari through a hotel or guide service, they will be riding the Cooperative’s elephants. As of November 2022, it costs 3,500 Nepalese Rupee (~\$28.00 United States Dollar) per person for a 90-minute ride in the jungle. Additionally, there is a 2000 Nepalese Rupee (~\$12 United States Dollar) fee for a Chitwan park permit. By the numbers, this is the most expensive activity per minute in the park. There is one elephant owner who does not work with the cooperative and instead operates by himself, at the secondary site (See Map C, Appendix A) for elephant rides. Though he does not offer many rides, instead opting for elephant walks.

When one arrives at Elephant Ride Area A, their attention is immediately caught by a row of elephants, dressed in colorful paint, howdahs on back, and sat upon by their mahout, who is oftentimes on their phone lounging. The tourists then climb a set of stairs up to the height of the elephant and are packed four people, one mahout to an animal. The howdah itself is wrapped tightly around the animal. With long straps wrapping around the stomach and back, and a linked metal chain is wrapped around its neck. The mahout carries a braided metal ankus, used in this case to drive and direct the elephant if it misbehaves. The elephant is then led down a predetermined path through the jungle, being hit if it misbehaves. For an hour and a half at a time it serves as a non-metal jeep, carting tourists around. When the rides conclude, the elephant is then made to pose in a variety of positions, with and without tourists on its back, for a long photo shoot. From here the ride is officially over, and the elephant is given some time to rest, and maybe some food before its next ride of the day.

In talking to one NGO worker, they described these rides as, “not particularly bad on their own...if these elephants were treated properly, chained less, and didn’t give rides to more than 2 people than a trip and only 2 rides a day then I don’t think we would be needed or here... instead it’s the conditions and treatment of the elephants that allow for the rides to happen in this fashion that is the problem... rides on their own aren’t really a big problem.”^{xxi} He then went on to elaborate how the weight of the howdah and the five people on an elephant’s back is too much for them and causes back and foot problems later down the line.

Due to all of these factors and the push from the west to stop this kind of tourist activity, local guides have begun to discourage and outright stop offering elephant rides as a service they will book. As part of my fieldwork, I went to as many guide offices in Sauraha as I could find, and when asked if I could book an elephant back safari approximately 1/3 of the offices strongly discouraged the activity, stating it is bad for the animals. On top of that 5 agencies stated they have stopped offering elephant back safaris, but I could book an elephant walk or bath through them. This shift in what is advertised has pushed a large number of tourists now to elephant baths, which present problems of their own.

Elephant baths are an activity that has dramatically increased in popularity in the past ten years, with mainly western tourists turning away from elephant rides. On the surface, the idea seems to be harmless, and fun for both human and elephant participants. An elephant bath is typically a one-hour activity done in the middle of the day at the riverside during lunch. Elephants, after doing their morning rides, are brought to the riverside where tourists can pay around 500 to 1,000 Nepalese Rupee (\$4.00 - \$8.00 United States Dollar) to be in the water and splash around with the elephants. The mahout is always close by, with their ankus to make sure the elephant behaves and does not make and dramatic or fast movement. When talking to tourists the majority noted that elephant baths, if offered, would be their preferred and go to activity in the park. At the time of this study, elephant baths were postponed for two months, due to an increase in rides post COVID. But the cooperative said they will be coming back “very soon.”^{xxii}

When looking a bit deeper into the bath, the true conditions quickly come to light. From the elephant’s perspective they are forced to bathe and deal with humans splashing and climbing all over their backs. These elephants are also ones who have already given a series of morning rides. Prior to the baths activity they would have a short break, but now with the baths they are working constantly throughout the day. The elephants also have to be “well behaved” as any actions deemed inappropriate by the

mahout will often result in a strike from an ankus. Additionally, due to the more open format of the bath as compared to a ride, there is a higher risk of a human inappropriately acting and accidentally harming one of the elephants. While these revelations have yet to surface as they have with rides, some guides and NGOs are starting to now push what they deem as the best form of elephant-based tourism, the elephant walk.

Elephant walks are simultaneously seen as the most ethical form of tourism, and the least popular. One NGO that did daily elephant walks was able to do 250 a year for two years. While 250 may seem like a large amount, it is immediately dwarfed when put next to how many rides are given in a week, roughly 441^{xxiii}. While there is no standardized elephant walk, the five or so guide services that provide them follow a generally same format. Elephants are booked for an hour and a half, taking the place of one ride, and a small group goes out with the elephant and its mahouts to the secondary riding area (see Appendix B Map C). The elephant's howdah is taken off, and the mahouts get off them as well. The now unburdened^{xxiv} elephant is allowed to freely wander the jungle, with the tourists walking a safe distance behind. During multiple stops on the walk, which are dictated by the elephant, the tourists are given fresh fruit and vegetables to feed the elephant. These walks also end at a riverbank, where the elephant is free to drink as much or as little as possible. One NGO worker, when discussing the elephant walks, they facilitated said, "The elephant here has full control. If she wants to nap for the full hour and a half, awesome!"

Within Sauraha elephant walks are seen as the answer by some to the "riding problem," with its focus on the elephant's autonomy, and lack of it carrying heavy amounts for extended periods of time. This experience costs around 3000 Nepalese Rupee (\$24 United States Dollars) as of November 2022, which is cheaper than an elephant ride for the same amount of time.

With all of these it seems as though it could be an easy switch to this form of tourism. But, with most things' elephant related there are some major holdups. The largest of which being that only specific elephants can safely participate in walks. When riding an elephant, the mahout has more control and it is safer for the humans riding on its back, which means every elephant in Sauraha can fill this role. Walks, though, present a new set of challenges, as any elephant who is too aggressive or unpredictable can lead to extremely dangerous situations for its mahouts and the tourists walking steps away. One business owner who offers rides does so with only two of his eight elephants, as the risk of major injury and death is "too high with the others, even the ones people ride and have never had a problem with."^{xxv} This complication presents a high economic barrier to total acceptance and switchover to this form of tourism, as the vast majority of elephants in Chitwan would be unable to lead walks due to their nature, built up over years of human control.

With this being said, the practice still has many benefits for the elephants who can participate, and very much should be continued and expanded wherever possible. In talking to two French tourists who just came back from an elephant walk, they noted how they felt more connected to both the elephant and the earth, with them being able to take a "very passive approach to the elephant, following where it went and doing what it wanted to do." Through my fieldwork I was able to go on multiple elephant walks, and each and every time the elephants did extremely different things, due to them having such a large amount of autonomy. All in all, the present state of elephant tourism in Chitwan sits in precarity.

While private captive elephants by the numbers have decreased due to Covid, and a shift in tourists attitudes away from rides has started, there is still a large market and demand for rides.

The future of elephants in Sauraha depends on a few major factors. The first of which is simply the demand for elephant related activities. If the current trend is followed, western demand for rides will continue to drop, and potentially this will also shift their interest from baths away. But, as it currently stands as economic situations continue to boom in new global economies, this rising middle class will still go and take part in rides. Where there is some progress though is from the guides and tour agencies themselves, if the vast majority start to discourage and flat out refuse to book elephant rides this shift in perception could work to change how elephants are being used in the park. This coupled with increasing NGO and international pressure might also push more elephant owners to shift their models as well, pushing more elephant walks instead of rides, like how one owner currently operates.

This decrease in demand also needs to be coupled with a decrease in illegal elephant imports from India. This could be attained in a few ways. The Nepali government could force registration of all elephants in Chitwan which would then mean regular check-ins and better animal welfare overall. Additionally, the government and army could more strongly enforce the prohibition of selling or cross border transporting of these elephants. While in recent years some illegal cross border activity has been thwarted, this has mainly come from activists. If both these factors work together, the future of elephants in Chitwan could be drastically altered, hopefully for the better. Again, the probable major holdup is the work the current elephants perform. As stated earlier not every elephant can safely do an elephant walk, which means another activity will have to be created and popularized.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also jump-started a lot of these efforts. The pandemic resulted in half of Chitwan's elephants being sold back to India and saw a major decrease in interest in elephant tourism. Additionally, since the pandemic business owners have begun to shift their investments from elephants to jeeps, which are cheaper to own and maintain, and extremely less dangerous for all involved. So, while the road ahead may be long, the groundwork for major change has already started to be laid.

Chains, Cages, Captivity



Captivity presents a variety of challenges and problems for the elephants living in and around Chitwan National Park. For the 100 or so captive elephants, conditions do vary, but among the privately-owned elephants, the general set of informal 'guidelines' contribute to a variety of health and wellbeing problems for both the animals, and the humans who care for them. This chapter will dive into the intricacies of captivity and highlight how this system hurts both the animal and the mahout. Mahouts are often left out of the

picture entirely, or demonized in western media, but as this chapter will show, are simply another victim of the system as a whole.

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Chains are also heavily used by mahouts. Elephants are most frequently chained on two to all four of their legs. This is for the safety of the mahout as elephants are one of the smartest animals in nature and have the brain power to plan and lay multi day traps and then have the size, strength, and speed to flatten those who they chose to^{xxvi}. Another major implication of chaining is that it affects elephants' sleep. Elephants are heavy enough to crush themselves under their own weight if they lay down for long enough^{xxvii}. As a result, they sleep for a few hours at a time, and roll over halfway through^{xxviii}. Elephants will also lay down to relax and rest. But, due to these chains, the elephants are unable to lay down, which causes long standing problems due to pressure on its feet, legs, and joints.

This highly restrictive form of captivity can lead to elephants attempting to lash out and escape. One elephant rescued by an NGO came to them after having killed two mahouts. This elephant had lived in some of the worst conditions in Sauraha and because of its violence had been chained and hit more than average, which only exacerbated the problem. When she came to the NGO, she took nearly a full day to walk 5km from town to the NGO's camp due to a permanently injured front leg, and an infected foot. To adapt her to the better conditions of this camp, the NGO had to slowly acclimatize her, by removing chains and showing her that they could be trusted, and she would be safe. Through this form of positive reinforcement training, where good actions are rewarded and bad actions are ignored, she began to adapt. At one point early on though, she did try to charge a mahout, but was disciplined lightly and all were okay.

Now, a few years later, she has formed a strong bond with one of the workers in particular and has made a good companion in the NGO's other rescued elephant. She is also more trusting and allows the NGO's veterinarian to perform light medical procedures and cleanings on her daily. She also is able to go into the jungle with her mahouts and will return to them with the tone of a whistle. Her story here shows how even elephants with a deadly past, under the right conditions and care, can be rehabilitated and given chain free living conditions, while still listening to their mahouts.

As previously mentioned, some of the captive elephants live in much better conditions. Large pens, unchained for most of, if not the entirety of their days, allowing them the freedom and autonomy to do what they want. These elephants are also provided with ample fresh water and cut grass in stacks, which allows them to feed and drink whenever they feel. The one business owner who follows this model was spurred to do this and create the larger stables by his connection with one NGO who paid him to facilitate elephant walks. While this NGO currently has no plans to try and work with other owners, their hope is that through leading by example and showing how this form of tourism can work and be profitable, that others may soon follow.

The job of a mahout is by far not an easy or safe one. They live on site with the elephant in small shacks or shared rooms. For the majority of the mahouts they are employed by the elephant owner and tend to multiple elephants. This is a large break from tradition where an elephant and mahout were lifelong partners, and through that a strong relationship was built. This current system sees elephants and mahouts traded around as commodities, which works against building strong relationships.

This in turn leads to the job becoming increasingly dangerous, as the elephants have no sense of security or trust. In addition, these mahouts are often recruited at a very young age, as this is a position that can carry lifelong employment, as well as housing and food, even though it is extremely low wage. This in turn means that there is no formalized training at all for mahouts, they are "taught" on the job by their seniors. As a result, any mistake, large or small, can be extremely dangerous to both the elephant and the mahout. This in turn means mahouts are more likely to be extremely restrictive and controlling, as to prevent their own harm. Which then agitates the elephants who then show more aggressive behavior. This cycle of violence is not purposeful, nor was it started by any mahout to intentionally harm the elephants, but instead is a byproduct of how the system was established and controlled through its history.

In speaking to five mahouts across three camps, they all shared similar experiences about most aspects of the job. Four of them entered the role due to an older family member introducing them to it. All five started for monetary reasons as they are all formally uneducated. By age, most started as a young teen, with their average start age being 15. They all came in scared of the elephants and most still have a healthy fear, especially of the males. Out of the five, one had been attacked before, and the rest had not. In their combined 68 years of working as mahouts, they had four friends die from elephants.

Socially though all reported that their closest friends had nothing to do with elephants and were simply those they grew up with. Conditions wise, they varied drastically, three of them lived in shared bunk rooms, with the other two in private bungalow style rooms. They all had one thing in common now though, they all reported to care for their elephants and said they would be very upset if they were moved away or reassigned to another elephant.

Additionally, mahouts as a position went through a radical shift in status, as well as a demographic shift in Nepal. When the position was first started, as elephants were being requested by Nepali kings, the Tharu people traditionally occupied this role^{xxix}. The Tharu people, having lived close to the jungle now known as Chitwan, had some levels of natural immunity to malaria, which the jungle had in abundance. As such, the Tharu people would be the ones to enter the malarial jungle and find elephants for the king. They then would serve as the king's mahouts, a position that was highly respected, and as such, they were treated with a good level of care. Over time though, as the private elephant industry emerged, mahouts saw a radical shift in the status of their position. The position lost a lot of respect as mahouts soon became employees of wealthy businessmen, and their living conditions changed as well. With this, and the clearing of malaria out of the jungle, other ethnic groups entered the world of the mahouts.

Today mahouts are not just Tharu men. Instead they are a multiethnic group that crosses many identities. Although the majority of elephants brought from India come without their mahouts, some decide to come along, seeking a new opportunity in Nepal. This though has created a rift between Indian and Nepali mahouts. When talking to one Nepali business owner he noted that, "when I first started, I only had Nepali mahouts, and when I hired two Indian mahouts everyone who was Nepali told me the Indian mahouts were abusive and no good. But then, when I talked to my Indian business partners, they told me the Nepali mahouts were thieves and mistreated elephants. Both were wrong."^{xxx} While in my observations I did not witness this firsthand, I did notice that all camps I visited had mahouts from both India and Nepal, who worked together as one.

Mahouts today are also not just male. According to one National Trust for Nature Conservation employee, there are five recently hired female Nepali mahouts. They all work directly for the government in the government stables. As such, I was unable to speak directly to them (See Limitations section) but this new gender inclusivity is something of importance. While there now are female mahouts working for the government, there still are no private mahouts. With this when speaking to a few business owners, about mahouts, they always gendered the language to be male, and were unaware about female mahouts in the government stables. Although they were also unaware of many facets of government elephant work and life. With this all it is evident that both the mahouts and the elephants of Chitwan's tourist industry face their own form of captivity.

What Now?

As one begins to dig deeper and deeper into the life of elephants and their workers at and around Chitwan National park, it becomes more and more apparent how complicated the web of everything is. When looking at each individual component, the tourists, the business owners, the mahouts, and the elephants, it is hard to place blame squarely on one party. It is also near impossible to call one party the agitator or “villain” of this story. Instead I propose that it is the system itself to be blamed. In that way the tourist industry developed around the practice of subjugating elephants and their mahouts to a harsh system and way of life. The business owners do not intentionally come to subjugate and harm elephants, instead they are just trying to make a profit off of tourism. The mahouts are not out to try and chain and hit elephants, they are just trying to stay safe. And the tourists are not out to overwork or harm the elephants, they are mostly ignorant to the situation and conditions of the elephants. With this being said there are certainly some bad actors in each of these categories, but they are few and do not define the category as a whole.



“What is the future of Sauraha’s elephants?” I often found myself wondering and asking all that I could. And while no one had an absolute answer, the common theme found was a hope for slow gradual improvement in living conditions and treatment on the side of the elephants and mahouts, and a hope for a decrease in tourist interest in elephant rides. With these factors, stakeholders in the park can see a future with better conditions, an end to illegal transportation and ownership of elephants, and a more ethical and sustainable system of ecotourism as a whole. Even going back ten years, there have been some major changes made, with new NGOs working with the community, some business owners switching their models of care and tourists’ offerings, and a substantial portion of guides and travel services discouraging or flat out not offering rides. The COVID-19 pandemic as stated earlier has sped up this process, and hopefully the momentum caused out of the lockdowns will continue to build and grow in the near future. As I left Chitwan, I felt hopeful, seeing that change was slowly happening as opinions change and as people started to dig deeper into the activities and systems they chose to support and participate in.

Limitations

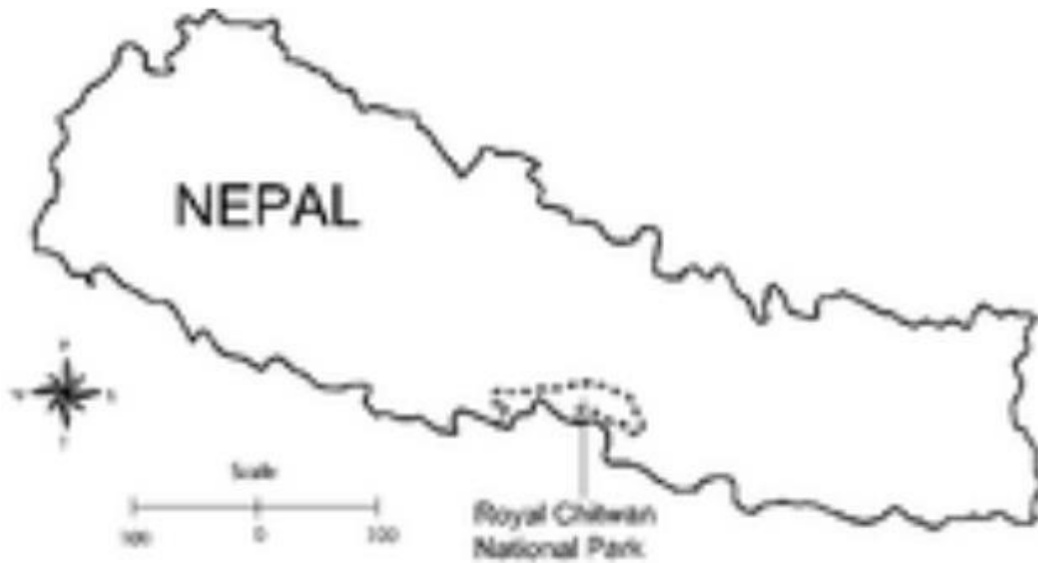
While I spent a full 22 days in Sauraha, I was limited by my time. The majority of Elephant NGO owners were not in Sauraha during my stay and did not respond to my attempts to set up an interview. As a result, all of my NGO field work was done through one NGO. In addition, I was unable to speak to as many mahouts as I had hoped. While I spoke to four, I hoped for a larger sample size. While the mahout job is nearly 100% male dominated, there do exist 5 female mahouts in Chitwan, all working for the government. I tried to reach out through an intermediary contact, but I was unable to speak to any of the female mahouts in the park, whose perspectives would have enriched my study. Lastly, the elephant bath activity was not running while I was in Sauraha so I had to rely on secondary sources to provide insight on the matter.

Suggestions for Future Study

The situation of Elephants and their mahouts in Chitwan is extremely multifaceted. While I spent my ISP looking at the overall system that allows for the tourism industry to exist and operate, there is also significant work that could be done in studying the purely mahout perspective. In their lives, day to day, and how they see everything. Additionally, the three wild male elephants of Chitwan kill approximately 10 Nepalis every year and destroy an indeterminate number of fields a year. According to the director of the Tharu Museum, there are no researchers looking into human-wildlife conflict or elephant-wildlife conflict in the park and its buffer zone communities.

Appendix A: Relevant Regional Maps

Map A: Map of Nepal Showing Chitwan National Park's Area

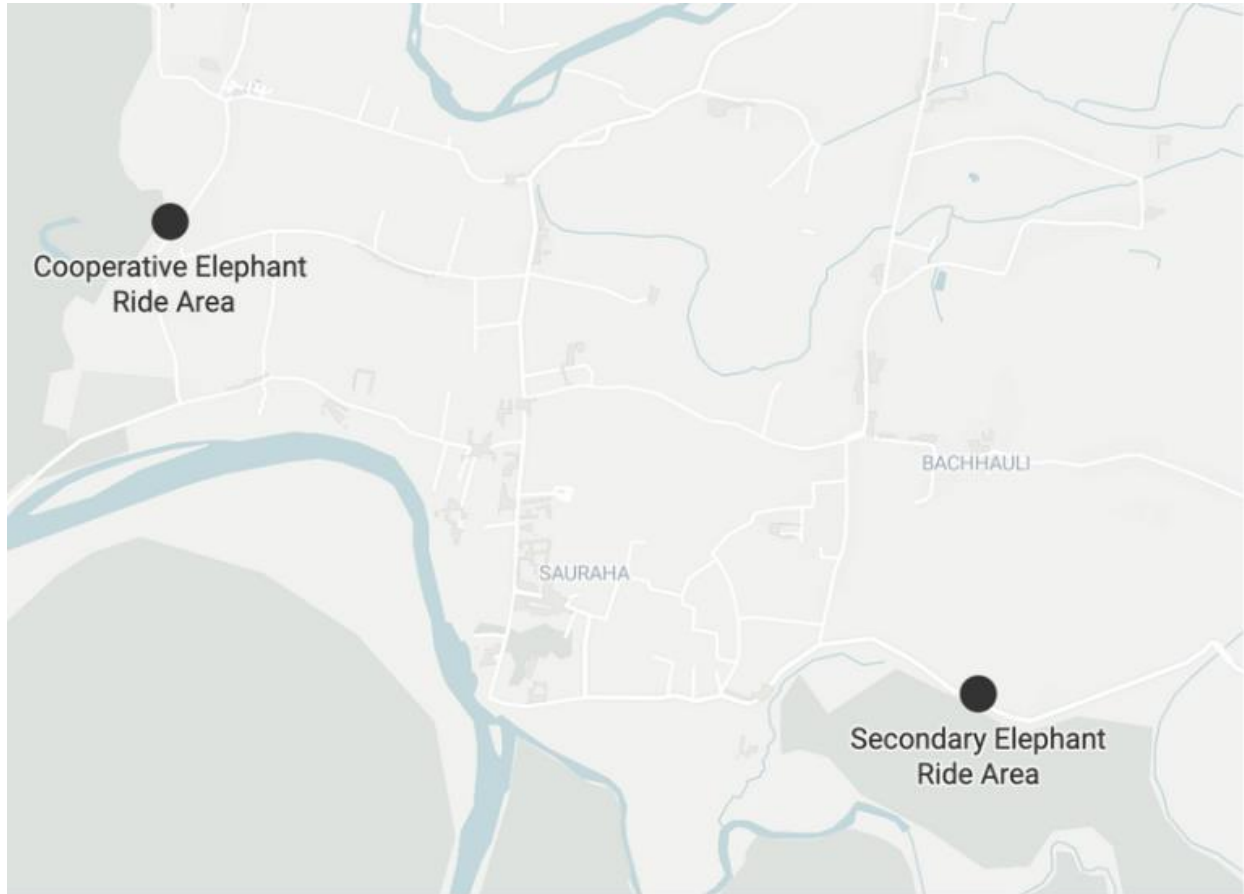


Map B: Map of Chitwan National Park, the Surrounding Villages and the Buffer Zone



Appendix B: Map of Sauraha

Map C: Map of Sauraha Showing Elephant Ride Areas



Appendix C: Elephant Feet

Photo of Healthy Elephant Foot



Photo of Unhealthy Elephant Foot



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ⁱ While no exact count is known or published, this approximation was relayed to me separately by four different participants.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.elephantnaturepark.org/about/facts-about-elephants/>

ⁱⁱⁱ AERSM, 2017; CEWR/UWN, nd; Elephant Task Force, 2010; Menon and Tawari, 2019; Sarma, et al., 2012)

^{iv} Rough approximation from one business owner and one NGO worker

^v Personal Interview with Guide 1

^{vi} Person Interview with NGO Worker 1 / Personal Interview with Tharu Stakeholder

^{vii} Szydlowski, Michelle. "Elephants in Nepal: Correlating disease, tourism, and welfare."

^{viii} Personal Interview with Tharu Stakeholder / Mahout 2

^{ix} Cost as of November 2022

^x Around 18-20 Years old: Personal Interview with Elephant Veterinarian

^{xi} Personal Interview with Veterinarian / Mahout 2 / Mahout 4

^{xii} Nepal Law Commission

^{xiii} Mishra 2008: 83 via Szydlowski

^{xiv} Personal Interview with NGO Worker 1

^{xv} Personal Interview with NGO Worker 1 / 2

^{xvi} Non-Governmental Organization

^{xvii} International Non-Governmental Organization

^{xviii} Self-described title of the camp by owner

^{xix} 4 Personal Interview with NGO Worker 1

^{xx} 1 Personal Interview with Tourist 1

^{xxi} 1 Personal Interview with NGO Worker 1

^{xxii} 1 Personal Interview with Business Owner 1

^{xxiii} Estimate provided by one Elephant owner

^{xxiv} The elephants have movement autonomy unless they attempt to cross the major river, which then they are turned around

^{xxv} Personal Interview with Business Owner 1

^{xxvi} Personal Interview With Elephant Veterinarian

^{xxvii} Personal Interview With Elephant Veterinarian

^{xxviii} Personal Interview With Elephant Veterinarian

^{xxix} Personal Interview with Tharu Stakeholder

^{xxx} Personal Interview with Business Owner 1