DRAWING A LINE

Grades: 8-12th grade

Issue or Problem: Throughout Asia, Asian Elephants, an endangered species, is suffering habitat loss and fragmentation due to human population growth. In addition, thousands of elephants are now being exploited for profit. These elephants are often kept in cruel conditions and suffer abuse as they are used for the growing tourist industry.

Objectives: By the end of this lesson students will:

- Be able to empathize with animals
- Examine their own attitudes towards animals
- Examine their beliefs on what is an acceptable use of an animal and what is unacceptable
- Be able to explain what happens to elephants in the tourist industry
- Be able to explain what ethical elephant tourism is
- Actively engage in an action that helps Asian elephants

Materials:

- ✓ Blank paper
- ✓ Drawing a Line PPT downloadable from https://elephanatics.org/education/intermediate-lessons/
- ✓ Sticky notes (enough for each student to have 2)
- ✓ Envelopes (enough for each student to have 2)
- ✓ Copies of Activity 2 cards. One for each student, cut apart and put into envelopes (one envelop per student).
- ✓ Copies of Elephant use cards. Copy on different color paper. Each copy contains two sets, 8 cards each. You will need enough for each student to have one set of 8 cards.
- ✓ Video "How Captive Elephants are Trained in the Tourism Industry" http://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/how-captive-elephants-are-trained-in-the-tourism-industry/ (4:19 minutes)
- ✓ Copies of the student reading (attached at the end of the lesson): "The Truth About Elephant Tourism" for each student

Background Information for Teachers: Read the attached articles for the background needed to lead the activities: "The Burdens of a Beast", "Asian Elephants: Threats and Solutions", and "The Truth About Elephant Tourism". In this lesson, students examine their attitudes towards animals and their beliefs on acceptable and unacceptable uses of animals. *Note- Student attitudes and beliefs will vary greatly and can be emotional for some students. It is important to make sure your students know the activities give them a chance to explore their own attitudes and beliefs and they should treat each other and their respective opinions with respect.*

Activities:

Activity 1: *Animal Attitudes

1. Communicate to your students that during this activity they are going to compare their attitudes to four different animal species: a grasshopper, a mouse, a cow, and an elephant.
2. On a sheet of blank paper have your students create four columns. At the top of each column have them write the following animals. Grasshopper, mouse, cow, and elephant.
3. Underneath each animal, have your students write briefly how they feel about each of the animals on their list and why.
4. Break students up into pairs or small groups. Have them share with their partner or group, how they felt about the animals on their paper. *Were their feelings the same about each animal? Were their feelings dependent on how these animals were used or benefited humans? Did everyone share the same feelings? Do we tend to care about animals that are cute or more like humans? If so, is that a fair way to judge animals?*
5. Communicate with your students that they are now going to view a PowerPoint presentation that has a variety of quotes sharing views on animals throughout time.
6. View PPT slides 1 through 8 (remaining slides will be used for later activities). Read the quotes out loud (or have your students read each quote) then ask your students to share what they think the quote means.
7. Ask your students, *were there any quotes they were surprised by? Was there a quote that resonated with them*? *A quote they strongly disagreed with*? Why? *Did any of the quotes change their feelings about animals in general or the animals on their lists*?

Activity 2: *Acceptable or Unacceptable?

1. Communicate to your students that now that they have explored their attitudes towards animals they are going to explore what they feel are acceptable and unacceptable uses of animals. Pass out the sticky notes (2 for each student)
2. Give your students the following instructions. *On one of your sticky notes write "acceptable" on another write "unacceptable"*. Pass out the envelopes you prepared earlier (one to each student)
3. Show your students slides 9 through 11 and go through each "animal uses" to make sure that the students are clear on each use (their card versions are simplified versions).
4. After reviewing the uses, have your students, working individually, go through their "uses" cards and put each card either in a pile in front of the acceptable sticky or unacceptable sticky based on their personal beliefs if that use is an acceptable or unacceptable use to them.
5. Discuss as a group, *which uses students had in the acceptable pile and which ones they had in the unacceptable pile. Did they all agree on which were acceptable uses? Which uses were most difficult to decide on? Would the answer change depending on the animal that was being used? Why? Did students want additional information to help them make their decisions? Did hearing other students opinions change their own views?*
6. Now have your students put the acceptable use cards in a continuum going from what they feel are most acceptable to least acceptable.
7. Communicate to your students that they are now going to look specifically at how elephants are used in Asia. Pass out the elephants use card envelopes to each student.
8. Using slide 12 through 14 from the PPT go over the uses. Then have the students go through and decide as before which ones are acceptable and which ones aren't. Then have them place

the acceptable use elephant cards on the spectrum with the other acceptable use cards. Students will be learning more about the uses of elephants in the next activity and referring back to their "acceptable use continuum" so have them keep their cards as is.

Activity 3: Elephant Tourism in Asia

1. Communicate to your students that in Asia people have lived closely with elephants for thousands of years and elephants have been used by humans for a variety of purposes. Using the information from "The Burdens of a Beast" explain how elephants were used in the past and how they are being used today (many are the same but now they are also being used in the tourist industry).
2. Show your students the video "How Captive Elephants are Trained in the Tourism Industry" http://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/how-captive-elephants-are-trained-in-the-tourism-industry/ (4:19 minutes) and have them read "The Truth About Elephant Tourism in Asia" attached to this lesson.
3. After watching the video and reading the article. Ask your students to take another look at their "acceptable use continuum" from Activity 2. Give them a chance to make any changes to their continuum if they would like.
4. Discuss with your students *if their feelings about what are or aren't acceptable elephant uses changed after watching the video and reading the article. Do they think their feelings may change if they learned more about the other animal uses that were discussed in Activity 2?* Have your students discuss how they feel about the elephant tourism in Asia. Let students know that there is elephant tourism in many places around the world, including the US and Canada. The difference is we tend to have stricter laws protecting animals. *Does that make a difference? Why or why not?*

Activity 4: Raising Awareness of Elephant Tourism

1. Refer back to the "The Truth About Elephant Tourism in Asia" and discuss the section on ethical tourism and how to know if "what they are seeing" is ethical tourism.
2. Have students work in small groups to develop an Ethical Elephant Tourism Campaign to teach others. You may wish to have them focus on other students in the school, the local community or an online community through school/class social media accounts. Each campaign should include the use of infographics and the hashtag #BeElephantEthical (See the resources section of the lesson plan for some helpful websites).

Additional Activities:

- Have your students write a reflective paper. Ideas to focus on:
  - How reading and discussing the quotes in Activity 1 influenced how they look at the animals discussed or other animals.
  - Did their views change at all?
  - What is their personal philosophy on animals and how we use them?

- Have your students research more into the different uses of animals discussed in Activity 2 using pro and con animal organizations (some possible research websites below).
    - Animal Protection Organizations: www.ifaw.org, www.farmsanctuary.org, www.hsus.org, www.aspca.org, www.peta.org, www.aavs.org.
    - Pro-Use Organizations: www.aza.org, www.consumerfreedom.com, https://www.feldentertainment.com/PressRoom/CorporatePressKit, https://speakingofresearch.com/get-involved/ucla-pro-test/
- Have your students participate in fundraising for an organization that helps to protect Asian elephants and their habitat. They could choose to adopt an elephant through an organization such as The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust or donate their funds to a place like The Elephant Nature Park or Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary.

Resources: The following organizations are helping to protect elephants for future generations. You can learn more about the issues facing Asian elephants, and how you can help, by visiting their websites.

Elephanatics: https://elephanatics.org
Elemotion: http://www.elemotion.org/elephant-tourism/
Eleaid Asian Elephant Conservation Charity: http://www.eleaid.com/
Elephant Asia Rescue and Survival Foundation (EARS): www.earsasia.org
Elephant Voices: https://www.elephantvoices.org/
Save Elephant Foundation: http://www.saveelephant.org/
International Elephant Foundation: https://elephantconservation.org/

**Activities 1 and 2 were adapted from HEART's Humane Education Resource Guide which can be found at* https://teachheart.org/humane-resource-guide/

The Burdens of a Beast, Science Bulletin (July 2007), from the American Museum of Natural History. Retrieved August 18, 2017, from https://www.amnh.org/explore/science-bulletins/bio/documentaries/wild-at-heart-the-plight-of-elephants-in-thailand/the-burdens-of-a-beast

The Burdens of a Beast

Unlike people in Africa, who kept their distance from elephants except to hunt them, people in Asia have lived closely with elephants since at least 2000 B.C. All levels of society developed cultures of working with and caring for these creatures. Mahouts—the men who handle, train, and look after the elephants—have a long history in Asia. A mahout's skills came from an intimate bond with the elephant and were passed down from father to son over generations.

Domesticated—Yet Still Wild

Unlike horses, dogs, or cattle, domesticated Asian elephants have never been bred selectively by humans. All domesticated elephants—most of which have been either captured from forests or sired by wild parents—remain genetically and behaviorally wild. Nevertheless, many quickly form bonds of friendship, affection, and trust with their keepers. Richard Lair, Thai elephant expert and author of Gone Astray: The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity, says "I've seen elephants baby-sit one- and two-year-old children. The child tries to get away, and the old mother elephant reaches its trunk out and pulls the baby back under her feet, which is the safest place in the world. This is really quite unusual and quite astounding." A factor underlying this bond may well be elephants' well-documented curiosity of people.

Asian people, in turn, have long treasured and venerated elephants as noble champions, brave hunting companions, and loyal friends. From Mesopotamia through India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, and as far east as China, elephants have figured prominently in history, art, literature, and religion. Elephants appear at every level of the Hindu pantheon, where benevolent, elephant-headed Ganesh, the god of learning and success, is one of the most beloved Indian deities. The animal's size, wisdom, and value on tiger hunts earned it a prominent role in Buddhist belief and imagery. An elephant is said to have fathered Sakyamuni, the last known reincarnation of the Buddha, which entered his mother's lap in the form of a white elephant.

A Useful Beast

In the past century, about 100,000 elephants were captured in Asia. Perhaps a few million were captured since the species was first domesticated some 4,000 years ago. Over the millennia, these elephants have been put to many uses:

• **As weapons**: Elephants were one of the four ancient Indian army units (the others being cavalry, chariots, and infantry). War elephants were trained to respond to a variety of commands. They could charge in formation, cross fences and pits, knock down barricades, and trample men and horses. Young nobles were expected to master the art of combat mounted on an elephant. War elephants served under the command of Roman emperors, Mongol lords, and Indian rajas until the introduction of gunpowder put an end to their usefulness. Even then, the British used them in Burma through World War II to build bridges, launch ships, and haul munitions.
• **In royal duels**: Battles between princes and rajas often began with a duel between two armored elephants. The mahouts were usually at greater risk than the animals.

• **As executioners**: Sometimes an elephant—preferably a sacred white one—was trained to crush the head of a condemned man beneath its foot. This practice continued until the late 19th century.
• **As vehicles**: Elephants were the royal mount for Indian rajas from 400 B.C. until the mid-20th century. For many centuries, they carried important people on hunting expeditions in wooden enclosures called howdahs. Now they are increasingly used to carry tourists shooting cameras instead of guns. Elephants can penetrate deep in the jungle, and they remain the only reliable mode of transport in certain parts of India when the Ganges floods during the monsoon.
As loggers: Before chain saws and bulldozers, elephants were used to knock down trees. The economic potential of Asian elephants was fully exploited for the first time during colonial rule, when they were put to work in large-scale logging efforts. They helped fell and drag massive trees, some weighing up to four tons, to rivers and, later, to trucks and boats. Thousands of elephants are still used by illegal logging operations in Thailand and elsewhere, but these unfortunate animals are overworked and abused.
• **As pack animals**: Transporting goods over long distances and rough terrain has always employed far more animals than the logging industry. Although the advent of railways and motor vehicles took away much of their work, elephants remain irreplaceable in roadless regions, especially during the rainy season, in Myanmar, northeast India, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Probably the only draft animal equally at home on steep hillsides and in muddy swampland, elephants are astonishingly sure-footed.
• **As plows**: Elephants are used to plow rice paddies and coconut plantations, and to pull water carts.
• **In religious ceremonies**: Elephants play an important part in the countless religious processions and ceremonies that punctuate village life in Asia. The animal may stand while a mother holds her baby under its belly to endow the child with intelligence and strength. Or it may carry sacred relics in a stately march to the temple. Unruffled by frenzied crowds and loud music, elephants seem to understand, and perhaps even enjoy, their ceremonial roles.

New Uses for Asian Elephants

Today, the Asian elephant is endangered, so domesticated populations can now serve an even more valuable purpose: aiding in the conservation of their own species. For wild elephants that have run out of natural habitat, domesticity may provide a last refuge. Domesticated elephants are valuable for research and public education, and they are essential in training their wild cousins for wildlife management purposes. Most importantly, because they remain genetically wild, they are excellent candidates for reintroduction.

A crowded, changing world has evicted the Asian elephant from most of its habitat and reduced its economic importance. Mahouts are no longer regarded with the respect they were accorded for centuries. As their status has declined, so has the care and treatment of their enormous charges. Yet the revered status of the elephant and the custom of coexistence remain deeply rooted in Asian culture. This tradition—along with the sense that the elephant has given much to man, and that it's time to give back—is fueling a multinational conservation movement.

Asian Elephants: Threats and Solutions, Science Bulletin (July 2007), from the American Museum of Natural History. Retrieved August 18, 2017, from https://www.amnh.org/explore/science-bulletins/bio/documentaries/wild-at-heart-the-plight-of-elephants-in-thailand/asian-elephants-threats-and-solutions/

Asian Elephants: Threats and Solutions

The Asian elephant once roamed from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in western Asia as far east as China's Yangtze River. No longer. Now a highly endangered species, it has been eliminated from western Asia completely, from substantial parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and almost entirely from China. Exceedingly adaptable in diet and behavior, elephants can survive anywhere from grasslands to rain forests, but they must migrate across large areas to find water and suitable food at different times of the year. Such vast ranges have become extremely rare in densely populated, rapidly developing Asia.

Though it's difficult to count elephants in the wild, it's estimated that the wild Asian population, which numbered in the hundreds of thousands at the turn of the 20th century, is now only 37,000 to 48,000 animals. Yet thanks to ancient cultural tradition, about 16,000 Asian elephants are kept in captivity in 11 Asian countries. This situation makes the Asian elephant unique among endangered large mammals. In Thailand there are nearly three times as many elephants in domesticity as in the wild.

Threats to Wild Elephants

• **No room to roam**: The greatest threat to wild Asian elephants is habitat loss and fragmentation. Throughout the tropics, humans have cleared large areas of forest and have rapidly populated river valleys and plains. Elephants have been pushed into hilly landscapes and less suitable remnants of forest, but even these less accessible habitats are being assaulted by poachers, loggers, and developers. Once-continuous habitat has become increasingly broken up by dams, tea and coffee plantations, roads, and railway lines. These developments obstruct the seasonal migrations of elephant clans. Habitat fragmentation also divides elephant populations into small, isolated groups, which are then at risk of inbreeding. Some biologists believe that there are no longer any wild Asian elephant populations large enough to avoid genetic deterioration over the long term.

• **Conflicts with humans**: When elephants stray out of the forest into settled areas, they sometimes destroy property, trample crops, and even kill people. Not infrequently, farmers respond with gunfire or poison.
• **Ivory poaching**: The international ivory trade has contributed far more to the decline of African elephants than Asian ones over the last few decades. Still, the people of Asia have a 500-year tradition of ivory carving and often hunt males for their tusks.
• **Capture of young elephants**: Many young elephants are removed from the wild to supply tourist and entertainment industries. In the process, mothers and other females attempting to protect the young are killed. Many calves captured for such purposes are prematurely weaned, socially isolated or otherwise cruelly treated, and die before they reach age five.

Threats to Domestic Elephants

For thousands of years the elephant was part of the fabric of daily life in Asia. They served primarily to transport goods and people. When the 20th century began, elephants were put to use by the timber industry, destroying their own habitat in the process. Except in less-developed Myanmar, the need for elephant labor has steadily declined since World War II, and so has the domesticated Asian elephant population.

With domestic elephants becoming obsolete, the occupation of mahout, or elephant handler, no longer commands the respect it once did. The profession, its specialized knowledge, and the time-honored relationship between man and animal are dying out. Children have little interest in learning the trade. "The skill level of elephant-keeping, the ability to control bulls, is going down very, very rapidly," says Thai elephant expert Richard Lair. "Ten, twenty, fifty years from now, what are we going to be doing with our bull elephants?"

The biggest problem facing domesticated elephants is unemployment. The situation is perhaps most dire in Thailand, where a complete ban on logging in 1989 put several thousand elephants and mahouts out of work. An elephant typically eats about 200 kilograms of food a day, "so unless you're a very wealthy person who likes to keep expensive pets, or unless your elephant is actually working for you and generating some income, it's not easy to keep an elephant in captivity," explains Robert Mather, the country representative for the World Wildlife Fund in Thailand.

And while one person can watch a whole herd of cattle or sheep, each elephant needs one person and sometimes two people to look after it. But with the decline in skilled mahouts, many elephants are now handled by inexperienced people. This leads to elephants that at best are poorly cared for and at worst severely abused. Human keepers are being harmed by elephants more often as well.

New Jobs for Beasts of Burden?

Although well protected from international trade, Asian elephants have little protection under domestic laws. Generally, national wildlife agencies in Asia consider the domesticated elephant to be just another domestic animal (and allow their tusks to be sold), while livestock departments consider it wild and not under their jurisdiction. "So it's in a very curious, halfway position that makes conservation very difficult," explains Lair. Caring for privately owned domesticated Asian elephants often turns out to be the job of an impoverished mahout—or nobody's job at all.

Elephants are now competing for fewer jobs at lower pay, which has forced mahouts to accept undesirable jobs or to overwork their animals. In Thailand, some owners have even started selling their elephants to be slaughtered for meat. Less than 10 years ago, such an act would still have been unthinkable. "Captive elephants in Thailand at the moment would seem to have rather limited options," says Mather bluntly. Possibilities include:

• **The tourist industry**: Ecotourism is a booming market in many developing countries, and often it's the only viable solution for elephants. In addition to offering protection to some wild herds so that tourists can observe them in their natural habitat, ecotourism has given many domesticated elephants better work opportunities. The elephants that carry tourists safely on treks through the jungle are usually well cared for. "It's not desirable; it's not traditional," Lair points out. "On the other hand, it's relatively harmless, and it's the only form of employment that will make sure that people continue to keep elephants." But not all elephants are temperamentally suited for toting tourists—especially not the large, aggressive male elephants once valued by loggers.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of elephants are also being used in less benign forms of tourism. Performing in shows or serving as special attractions in hotels and tourist centers, they often suffer from lack of social contact with fellow elephants or risk injury doing dangerous and unnatural tricks.

• **Logging**: Selective logging—in which only certain trees are cut, leaving the forest habitat as a whole intact—would be an optimal choice. Elephants could work in a traditional and legitimate manner, and their use would protect the forest by reducing the need for roads and heavy machinery. Selective logging is rarely employed, however. It is an option only in places where sufficient healthy forest remains, which is not the case in many parts of Asia. And in Thailand, the 1989 ban has made all forms of logging illegal.
The Thai ban sparked a jump in lumber prices, which led to a boom in illegal woodcutting. Elephant labor is essential to this illicit trade, which is thought to employ between 1,000 and 2,000 animals, in northern Thailand in particular. But these animals are poorly cared for.

• **Begging in the streets**: More and more elephants can be found with their destitute mahouts begging for money in the streets of large Asian cities like Bangkok. These elephants suffer respiratory infections, damage property, and get hit by cars.

Solving the Plight
Fortunately, the elephant has become a flagship species of wildlife conservation in all 13 countries of Asia where it is still found. Efforts are being made on many fronts:

• **Reducing the hunting and capture of** wild elephants for ivory and tourism.

• **Curbing habitat destruction**: One solution is to create vegetated corridors between separated habitats. This can be as simple as building a bridge across a canal, but the bridge must be wide, as only bulls are bold enough to cross a narrow bridge. Other ways to improve the quantity or quality of remaining habitat include maintaining a buffer zone of secondary-growth forest and creating waterholes.

• **Improving protection of wild herds**: This is complicated. Populations must be large enough offset inbreeding and environmental dangers such as droughts and floods. Yet herd size must be controlled to minimize encroachment on human habitats and to foster local support for elephant conservation. Trenches, electric fences, spotlights, and noisy rockets have all been used to deter elephants from straying onto planted fields, but with varying degrees of success. Other tactics include persuading farmers to grow crops that aren't attractive to elephants and removing troublesome bull elephants. However, the males disproportionately responsible for crop damage and attacks on humans tend to be the most successful breeders, so eliminating them from the population isn't a desirable solution. If existing habitat is inadequate, sometimes elephants are relocated to roomier ones.

• **Better care for captive elephants**: Another initiative is to establish centers to accommodate unwanted, abused, and confiscated elephants. For example, the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang provides a home, work, food, and veterinary care to more than 100 elephants. Dangerous animals are confined in a secure area; young working elephants are trained; and the rest roam free and breed, producing young elephants that will be reintroduced to the wild.

• **Reintroduction to the wild**: "If elephants can't find gainful employment, then instead of having them wandering the streets of Bangkok begging for money from tourists or Thais, let's just put them back in

the wild," says Mather. "Send them back into the forest. That's their home." Thailand's Elephant Reintroduction Foundation does such work, releasing domesticated elephants into the wild to generate wild herds.

The Truth About Elephant Tourism in Asia by Gaven Thomas (November 28, 2016, updated August 11, 2017). Retrieved August 15, 2017, from Rough Guides at https://www.roughguides.com/article/the-truth-about-elephant-tourism-in-asia/

The Truth About Elephant Tourism in Asia

Elephants are born free, but are everywhere in chains – and it's tourism which is increasingly to blame. Riding an elephant used to be on every visitor's list of must-do activities during a visit to Asia, although growing awareness of elephant rights – and, increasingly, wrongs – means that over the past five years almost all major tourist companies have stopped offering trips featuring elephant rides or other pachyderm-related attractions and activities deemed cruel. Here's why.

The crushing truth

We love elephants. Perhaps it's because they're a lot like us – intelligent, sociable and emotional, as anyone who has read about the way that herds protect their young and mourn their dead will recognize.

Paradoxically, it's the reverence and affection travelers feel for these majestic animals that leads to the enduring success of many elephant attractions, and the abuses they perpetuate.

The idea of "domesticated" elephants working in harmony with their human handlers (*mahouts*) may sound idyllic, but the reality is anything but. Young elephants, whether born wild or in captivity, have to be made fit for human use through a process sometimes describes as "elephant crushing", involving the systematic breaking of the elephant's mind, body and spirit.

Babies are taken from their mothers (traumatic enough in itself for both child and parent), after which their "training" may include being confined in tiny pens, systematically beaten with bullhooks or nail-studded sticks, starved, deprived of sleep. Once these hugely powerful animals have been terrified into doing their owner's bidding, they are considered safe to interact with tourists.

Taking them for a ride

The only way to travel on the back of an elephant humanely is to ride it bareback, sitting on its neck, as Asian *mahouts* traditionally do. Putting a heavy and unwieldy *howdah* (elephant seat) on an animal's back is uncomfortable in itself, even before you've loaded it up with tourists.

Howdahs also need to be secured using ropes around the elephant's stomach and tail, which can cause open sores, abscesses and other lasting physical damage including spinal injuries and deformities.

Elephants are supremely strong creatures, but they are not indestructible. An adult elephant can carry around 150kg for a limited period, although many elephants carry far heavier loads including *mahout*, *howdah* and as many as four adults for rides lasting an hour or longer.

Long treks in extreme heat can also lead to dehydration and exhaustion, while many elephants used for riding also wear chains around their feet, which further adds to their discomfort.

The stress is bad enough for a fully-grown elephant – adults have been known to simply collapse and die beneath their burdens – but baby elephants as young as four have been seen carrying tourists.

Tricks of the trade

Elephants are amongst the most intelligent creatures on the planet and can be taught to do all sorts of things – to play football, spin hoops, ride tricycles, stand on their heads or even paint pictures.

Don't be misled into thinking this is a natural expression of their playfulness or creativity when in fact they're simply party tricks they have been forced to learn at the end of a bullhook, or suffer the consequences. Do elephants paint or perform headstands in the wild? Exactly.

Elephants (particularly baby elephants) are also often used as cute begging props in tourist towns and on beaches, although they're no better off. Being fed pieces of sugarcane and pineapple by foreign visitors doesn't replace a natural diet of grass and leaves and ready access to fresh water.

Exhaust fumes, hot concrete, collisions with traffic and the constant stress of being in an unfamiliar environment surrounded by crowds of people and loud music (not to mention the sedatives they may have been dosed with) leads to a fifty percent reduction in life expectancy. Baby elephants used for begging are often dead by the age of five.

Human and economic realities

In an ideal world, all captive elephants would be released back into the wild and no one would ever ride one again. Sadly, this is never going to happen. In many countries there's simply nowhere to release them to, while some captive elephants would not be equipped to survive in the wild.

The alternatives to elephant tourism are often worse than the cure. Elephants not used in tourism might end up being used for illegal logging – a fate far worse, away from the public eye or any kind of veterinary help (as well as being regularly dosed with amphetamines in order to make them work harder).

Returning elephants to the wild would also put many at serious risk of poaching.

Does ethical elephant tourism exist?

The bottom line is that using elephants for tourism is often the best option currently available – which is why it's vitally important that it is done in the best way possible.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new, and far more rewarding, sort of elephant tourism. "Walking with elephants", as it's often described, involves simply seeing elephants in their natural environment, tracking them as they wander through the forest feeding and observing them from a close but respectable distance.

Some places also offer the chance to feed and bathe with the elephants (although it's sometimes claimed that this too is constricting and insensitive) or to ride them bareback, in traditional *mahout* fashion.

Not surprisingly, a fair few places are now jumping on the ethical bandwagon without necessarily practicing what they preach. The websites of the Elephant Asia Rescue and Survival Foundation (EARS) and Save Elephant Foundation have lists of ethical elephant sanctuaries in Southeast Asia, while the Elemotion and EleAid websites also have lots of useful background information.

Where can I see elephants responsibly?

Thailand has emerged at the forefront of ethical elephant tourism, with reputable sanctuaries including the pioneering Elephant Nature Park and Burm and Emily's Elephant Sanctuary (both near Chiang Mai), the Surin Project in the northeast of the country, and Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary (near Sukhothai).

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia there is the Elephant Valley Project at Sen Monorom in northeastern Cambodia, and the Elephant Conservation Center in Sayaboury Province in Laos.

Ethical elephant tourism in South Asia is considerably less well developed. In Sri Lanka, the fledgling Elephant Freedom Project near Kandy and the Elephant Conservation and Care Cente in Mathura are currently leading the way.

How do I know if what I'm seeing really is ethical?

Elephants, like humans, need stimulation, social interaction (with other elephants rather than tourists, that is) and time to themselves to behave naturally. Like humans, they should be protected from overwork and not be forced to march around for more than four hours a day.

Check for signs of cruelty: Bullhooks are used to guide and control elephants. Properly used by a skilled and sensitive *mahout*, the bullhook causes no harm; unfortunately, excessive use of bullhooks (or other implements) by heavy handed or inexperienced *mahouts* is widespread, resulting in wounds to head and flesh. *Howdahs* should always be removed when not in use.

Are they being fed? Elephants in the wild forage for up to twenty hours daily so there should be an ample supply of fodder and water.

Are they being shaded and kept clean? Elephants suffer in the heat too, and dislike standing in their own feces. Food should be kept off the floor, so it doesn't get mixed up with dirt and urine. Dung from healthy elephants should be large, round and solid – as in humans, diarrhea is an indicator of sickness.

Are they healthy? Healthy elephants flap their ears and swish their tail almost constantly. An immobile elephant is most likely a sick elephant. Equally, swaying constantly from side to side and swinging legs (a behavior never seen in the wild) indicates that an elephant is stressed and/or bored from having been chained up too long – particularly if the chain is excessively short and constricting.