

The truth about elephant rides in Nepal

Elephant safaris appear a romantic way to see wildlife and to connect with one of the world's most majestic animals, but comes with much abuse. Recently some false statements have been made about elephant safaris in Nepal, claiming they benefit conservation and no longer involve animal abuse. This is not true. Please find the true facts here.



Claim #1: Elephant rides benefit conservation

Not true. There are two kinds of elephants in Nepal: those owned by the government and those owned by private individuals, mostly resort owners. The government elephants are involved in anti poaching rides and therefore contribute to a reduction in poaching. Thanks to a recent programme those living in Chitwan National Park are now off chain (with the exception of those living in the Elephant Breeding Centre). Government elephants are NOT used for elephant safaris.

Elephant rides are conducted by privately owned elephants OUTSIDE the national park, in the Baghmara or Kumroze Bufferzone areas. Riding inside the park is banned as many elephants suffer from Tuberculosis, triggered by stress and immunity problems. The park authorities have tried to introduce a limit to the number of safari elephants and their working hours, with little success.

Every person entering the bufferzone pays a fee which is used to improve the livelihoods of people, thus reducing poaching. But this would continue even if all rides would stop today as people instead would instead would watch wildlife on foot, by canoe or by jeep.

Claim #2: Welfare conditions of safari elephants have improved

Untrue. No improvement has been seen in the field. Among the recently employed elephants, smuggled across the border from India, are handicapped, overaged jumbos.

The main problems continue to be:

- Elephants are kept in simple shelters, basically a supported tin roof. They live alone or with a few others, shackled or chained.
- Diet generally lacks fresh fodder and required nutrition supplements
- Elephants are managed with wooden sticks and metal hooks. A large percentage suffers from visible injuries due to beatings
- The elephants are made to perform in 'elephant bathing', football, racing, beauty pageant, etc.

- The wooden or metal 'howdah' used for transporting tourists are highly uncomfortable and inappropriate and cause saddle sores or even spinal damage.
- Many captive elephants suffer from ill health. Around 20% suffers from Tuberculosis while others suffer from saddle wounds, feet problems, injuries from beatings or severe handicaps like blindness, limb deformities, arthritis and joint disorders
- Elephants are made to work even when temperatures exceed 40° Celsius. Skin conditions and overheating are common.
- Foot care is substandard, leading to painful conditions which can be fatal if not properly cared for.
- Elephants hardly get a chance to show natural behavior and to socialize appropriately.

Claim #3: Elephants are kept off chain

Untrue. Of the over 65 safari elephants in Sauraha only one is kept in a chain free enclosure, thanks to financial support from various animal welfare organisations. The others are chained all day, all night, when not working.

Tiger Tops is building a responsible elephant tourism outfit but this enterprise is not part of the cooperatives that manage Sauraha's safari elephants.

Claim #4: Tourists can select an elephant that is treated well

Untrue. The elephant rides are coordinated by two owners' cooperatives and one has no influence over what elephant is selected. Among the elephants are those which are fully blind, suffer from TB and have multiple injuries. Some are cruelly trained underaged elephant suffering. Since there is no limit to working hours, the elephants could be dangerously overworked.

Claim #5: Elephants are now humanely trained

Untrue. The Nepal industry still gets its new elephants illegally, by smuggling them across the border from India. Among them are those captured from the wild. They have all been trained by 'breaking' them using deprivation and emotional and physical abuse

The reason why elephants are brought from India is that very few captive working elephants manage to give birth to a healthy baby. The exception are two elephants, which are trained humanely with the support of animal welfare organisations. It will however take another ten years for these elephants to be of working age.

Claim #6: Elephant rides are safe

Untrue. Elephant rides continue to be dangerous. Safari elephants are wild animals that are traumatized into obedience. The deaths of various mahouts and a tourist show that they can be predictable. EWN continues to receive reports from tourists that witnessed

safari elephants getting into fights, and making unexpected moves. The industry has made no provisions to increase the safety of tourists.

Claim #7: Elephant rides help Nepal

Untrue. It is appealing to promote elephant rides to help Nepal, which has suffered so much during the 2015 earthquakes and the subsequent political crisis. But elephant rides benefit only a selected few owners (mahouts are notoriously underpaid), and the question remains if the cruel rides will give Nepal the kind of image it needs and deserves to rise above its difficulties.