

Winter 12-15-2017

# God Is an Elephant: A Creative Nonfiction Guide to Devotion, Friends, and Conservation

Erin G. Bentley  
ebentley325@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors\\_theses\\_17-18](http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors_theses_17-18)



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bentley, Erin G., "God Is an Elephant: A Creative Nonfiction Guide to Devotion, Friends, and Conservation" (2017). *Honors Theses AY 17/18*. 6.

[http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors\\_theses\\_17-18/6](http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors_theses_17-18/6)

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Honors Theses at Wyoming Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses AY 17/18 by an authorized administrator of Wyoming Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact [scholcom@uwyo.edu](mailto:scholcom@uwyo.edu).

RUNNING HEAD: God Is an Elephant

God Is an Elephant: A Creative Nonfiction Guide to Devotion, Friends, and Conservation

Erin Bentley

University of Wyoming

The Asian elephant is a smaller breed of elephant. But that's not the word that comes to mind when you first see one.

The elephant towered over us, its ears flapping constantly and its trunk hitting the ground in an arrhythmic *thump-thump, thump, thump*. It shifted its weight restlessly from foot to foot, its eyes scanning the group of college age students clustered in front of it.

The first thing that struck me about the elephants was their restlessness—how they all but danced back and forth, shifting the world around them. They would grab piles of dirt with their trunks and toss it over their backs, or across the waiting crowd. They would stare placidly at you while lightly tapping their trunks, fanning themselves with their large, paper-like ears, blinking slowly against the oppressive sun.

One of the first elephants we were introduced to was Bow. She was seventy-one years old by the time we met, a gentle old woman that was finally able to rest in the elephant equivalent of a nursing home. Or, well, a nursing home mixed with a hospital mixed with a daycare mixed with a farm. In other words, a sanctuary.

I visited ElephantsWorld the summer after my sophomore year of college. Someone from a volunteer organization known as *International Student Volunteers*, or ISV, had come and spoken to one of my large, lecture hall classes about the different programs offered. Intrigued, I had gone to their informational meeting later that week. I was originally torn between a sanctuary that worked with cheetahs and the sanctuary for the elephants. However, due to my mother's irrational fears of Ebola and civil wars and my own fascination with elephants, I

decided on the trip to Thailand. Thanks to a grant and leftover scholarship money, I found myself on a month-long adventure through Thailand and Cambodia. The first two weeks I spent volunteering in a small sanctuary in Kanchanaburi, Thailand.

This was far from an individual, soul searching safari. I met with the rest of my group at the airport as we sorted into vans for the ride to the sanctuary. I tried to put myself into the car that our advisor, an elephant veterinarian named Jessica, was in. I don't remember who rode with me in the vehicle, but there were several personalities that I do remember from our time in the sanctuary.

There was a small group of people that I found myself heavily involved with throughout the trip. We came from varied backgrounds and had different end goals, but the commonality we had was the elephants.

My first impression of Thailand was that the coffee was very good and excessively strong, and the traffic laws didn't exist. We flew along the shoulder of a major interstate surrounded by motorbikes and rusted cars. The caffeine content of the coffee made me car sick as our van wound in and out between traffic and across the city toward our destination.

A big wooden gate announced our arrival to ElephantsWorld, and the group in the van crowded the windows as we passed under it, searching for our first view of the elephants.

ElephantsWorld was founded in 2008, and proudly proclaims itself as the place where "we work for the elephants, and the elephants not for us!" The sanctuary serves as a type of "retirement home" for disabled, injured, abused, and rescued elephants that have come from previous lives working in the logging and tourist industries, or were saved from a life of begging

on the busy streets of the larger Thai cities. Each of these occupations has inherent dangers, as well as a history of abuse of the elephants that support them.

The sanctuary has several options for tourists who wish to come interact with their elephants. These programs can range from day excursions to month-long expeditions. The day long program is still packed with activities and time spent with the elephants and aiding the sanctuary. You feed, bathe, meet, and prepare food for the elephants throughout the day. From the interaction that I saw with the elephants, tourists were most often excited about feeding the elephants and getting in the water with them to scrub them clean. In the heat of the Thailand afternoon, it wasn't exactly surprising to me that people were almost desperate to get into the water.

The 1-4 week program is advertised as "the Mahout Program." Mahouts are the caretakers of the elephants. They are often with them close to 24 hours a day, and take care of all of the animal's needs, from feeding to wound care. This program allows you to aid a mahout in watching over their elephant, and includes everything that the day program allows as well as more intensive work with both the sanctuary grounds, the acquiring of food, and the elephant itself.

The mahouts that I encountered at ElephantsWorld were in general young, energetic, and excited to interact with us—with a few exceptions. It seemed as though they were bonded to their elephants similar to if you mixed the bond that most people felt towards pets with the bonds that they feel toward younger siblings. I hesitate to say that it was the bond between man and pet, because the elephants were more composed and thoughtful than your average animal, while the mahouts treated them with a hint of reverence. The relationship between

elephant and mahout is complex. It is both the interaction of master to servant, but also one of love and seeming friendship (“History of ElephantsWorld”, n.d.).

There isn’t a lot of evidence that indicates how long wild Asian elephants live, but in human care they often live an average of forty-seven years, with a record age of eighty-six. Bow was seventy-one, going on one hundred and five. She had been in the sanctuary for a little over two months when we arrived. Like most of the other elephants in the sanctuary, she shifted her weight between her feet and thumped her trunk on the ground, stretching it out to search the area beyond her feet. She stood predominantly on her front two feet, one back foot extended straight out behind her, the chain around her ankle preventing her from stumbling forward. She was blind and covered in wounds from leaning against cement and trees while she slept. It was nearly impossible for her to lie down, as she didn’t have the strength needed to hoist herself up afterwards.

Bow had been on the receiving end of terrible abuse, not necessarily from chains and hooks, but from long hours in trekking camps and the logging industry, and old injuries that had become worse due to incorrect or insufficient care. When she stood, she leaned heavily on her front feet, and shifted slightly to the right, as her left limbs had a chronic injury. She had a tendency to stare out over the sanctuary with what little eyesight she retained, watching the movements of the other elephants and listening to their trumpets.

There was one wound just behind her left ear that was knuckle deep and about the diameter of a closed fist, rubbed into her tough skin from leaning against cement while she slept. The wound extended an extra inch under her skin, and accumulated a thick, yellow pus. It

was our job daily to dig this pus out of the wound and then follow it with an antiseptic wash that would temporarily dye the skin purple.

ElephantsWorld has twenty-five elephants. The total population of Thai elephants that have been domesticated is around 2,700, while the population of elephants in the wild is somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. Ninety-five percent of the domesticated elephants are in private ownership (“Trekking”, n.d.), with the remainder belonging to the government or the King. I cannot speak to the elephants that belong to the government, but almost all of the elephants in the sanctuary had some degree of purple spottage (“History of ElephantsWorld, n.d.).

It was the summer after my second year of college. I was half way through a degree in animal science, pre-veterinary track, and still somewhat sure that I wanted to go to vet school. I had spent a summer working at a small town vet clinic, and had assisted with surgeries and appointments, had tested bulls for venereal diseases and had amputated a dog’s leg at the shoulder. The world of the clinic had been shown to me, and while interested, I was also hesitant.

While a certain amount of routine is necessary for day-to-day living, performing the same two surgeries over and over and over again filled me with boredom. I was looking for other applications of the field, a way that I could help more than just the people of a small town and the occasional wild animal.

The sanctuary offered me a glimpse into the other side of animal work—conservation.

Over several years of education, I have become familiarized with the different components of conservation. During a graduate seminar class in conservation genomics at the University of Wyoming, we were often side tracked by one of two things—the extinction vortex or the different methods of conservation. The extinction vortex is the idea that a species that begins down the road of extinction will encounter hit after hit that turns their extinction rate into the tornado that forms when you drain your bath water, while methods of conservation classically include zoos, breeding programs, habitat conservation, and formation of national parks and other wild land preservation. There doesn't appear to be any correct or best method of conservation. Zoos, while often looked down upon, offer the preservation of animal species that would otherwise go extinct. They allow for breeding programs and eventual release into the wild. For species that don't have a habitat to go back to, they provide a synthetic home that, while not always the best, is better than the habitat that has already been destroyed.

The breeding programs that are easier done in zoos often benefit the side of conservation that I have become the most familiar with over the last several years: genetics. The genetics of conservation is a vast and often confusing field that twists and turns and has several definitions for the same words. However, the idea behind it is sound. Through looking at the genetics of a population and the potential individuals available in any one breeding program a discourse can be developed that allows for the preservation of genetic variance. This variability in a population's genes is important for maintaining a population that can survive the pressures of selection. Genetics influence how rapidly a population descends into inbreeding, and all of the problems associated with it; so while zoos are perhaps not the best option, they



do allow for certain maintenances that would be otherwise impossible in a wild or extinct population.

Habitat conservation is one of the most encompassing methods, because it doesn't just preserve one animal. By preserving the forests of the Asian elephants, animals including bears large cats, and innumerable other species of mammals, birds, and fish, are also protected. However, this one can be difficult as it often requires assistance from governments and outside agencies. In addition, habitat conservation doesn't necessarily improve animal safety. Animals that are within a piece of habitat that has been conserved are not guaranteed exception from poaching. Unfortunately, the development of national parks also doesn't always serve as a complete mode of protection. Poachers are still known to go into national parks to hunt for ivory as well as the live elephant trade that is fueled by the tourist industry. As of 2014, Thailand was the world's largest unregulated market for ivory, which is procured in part from elephant's tusks (Russo, 2014).

A recent debate surfaced over a mass burning of ivory stockpiles that were intended for illegal sale. I was asked by my undergraduate advisor after I had returned to Laramie if it was the right move, namely: should they have burned the ivory, or flooded the market to bring down the value? Like much of elephant conservation there is no immediately correct answer.

Standing in front of Bow with a spray bottle filled with purple antiseptic, I took stock of all of the small, infected wounds. There were several of us that got up every morning to take care of Bow, since she needed extra care. We woke an hour before the others and walked down the dirt road that connected our dormitory to the large, open space where the elephants were

kept. We helped prepare Bow's food by peeling away the outer layers of banana trees and cutting them into smaller pieces that were easier for Bow to eat. In addition, a large part of our job was to clean the wounds that Bow had developed from either rubbing against trees of her concrete shelter, and watching to make sure that her health didn't deteriorate further.

My finger disappeared under the thick flap of skin, squeezing the buildup of dead white blood cells, bacteria, and dirt out from underneath it in a viscous glob. Her ear beat against my back, partially cooling me but mostly just flinging dirt across my shoulder as she stood quietly, the only protest the soft slapping of skin against my shoulders.

I was consistently amazed by her quiet strength, her solemn patience to bear her burdens until she could no longer bear her own weight, and I wasn't the only one of the group impacted by these qualities.

Amanda was a second year vet student, and she graciously put up with me quizzing her relentlessly on the ins and outs of it, how she liked it, what the workload was, and whether it was a worthy pursuit. She was recently engaged, and shared stories of her husband while we all marveled at the ring on her finger that was custom made to look like a tree branch. We rode together in tuk-tuks across Cambodia and talked about the qualities of sunlight.

"It feels heavy, you know," I said, the dense forests flying by us, the humidity making the heat press down tight against our skin.

"Heavy?" She asked. "I've never thought of sunlight as heavy."

"Yeah, you know. When you can feel it press down on you. The sunlight in Wyoming is warming but it's light, you can't really feel it like you can feel the heat here."

“You know; I’m going to miss travelling with you. When I travel with my husband I’ll say ‘what do you think of those trees?’ and he’ll say something like ‘they’re green?’ whereas when I ask you you say something like...”

“Deep, dark.” I chimed in, “haunting.”

“Exactly.”

The elephants left a large impact on Amanda, as she convinced her husband to come back to ElephantsWorld for their honeymoon instead of a traditional Hawaii trip. By the time she returned, Bow had passed. Though she never spent much time with her, she told me later on that she remembered feeling very comforted by her calm, content, and peaceful demeanor, a sentiment that is also prominent in my memory. I don’t have the capability to imagine the pain she must have been in daily, with the numerous wounds and the inability to lie down. Despite this, I never remember seeing her be anything other than serene. It’s this steadfastness in the face of adversity that I saw first in Bow, a surety that despite one’s situation all there is to do is carry on. When I feel physical, emotional, or mental pain I think back to her standing at the end of her chain, trunk tapping the ground, ears flapping gently against the pain brought on by healing.

In addition to our time at the sanctuary, we stayed a few nights in the Thai equivalent of a national park to help dig salt pits for the wild elephants and see the other side of elephant conservation. The wild elephants we encountered were not seen besides signs of their footprints and foliage damage from their passing, but could be heard in the night. We were told upon entering the park that we weren’t allowed to check in to social media, post where we

were, or indicate what we were doing in order to protect the wild elephants near where we were from poaching.

We entered the national park and rolled into what served as our base camp. It was a covered pavilion surrounded by a large grassy area and the encroaching edge of the forest. At the briefing for our upcoming weekend in the park, they told us that we weren't allowed to post online where we were or that there were elephants in the park—as it would potentially lead poachers to the herd in the area.

A group of us that had grown close to each other over the trip laid on our backs in the afternoon and stared through the tree leaves. Our native Thai advisor, Tom, played the ukulele and one of the people I had grown the closest to sang in a trembling treble. Since I can't sing at all, I turned toward my only vocal talent—rapping—to entertain the small group of us that laid in the sunshine. I rapped to the Black-Eyed Peas' "Where is the Love?" while sitting in a small half circle with the singer from earlier, Emily and Janet.

"Yo', whatever happened to the values of humanity / Whatever happened to the fairness and equality / Instead of spreading love we're spreading animosity / Lack of understanding, leading us away from unity...Gotta keep my faith alive 'til love is found."

When I finished, Janet turned toward me and said that she'd never really listened to the lyrics before. She told me that listening to a friend speak the song was more impactful than listening to the artist. I attribute that more to the setting than to my vocal abilities, to the proximity of borderline mythical beasts than how well I can rap over the irregular strum of an ukulele.

We hiked, we went on night safaris and saw very little, and we dug salt pits for the elephants. We hiked a tiered waterfall to the top and swam in its waters, we cooked and ate an elaborate meal. A few of us were stung by bees, a few more of us laid awake in the darkness for fear of jaguars in the jungle.

But all of us lay awake that night and listened to the sound of elephants in the bushes.

The tourist industry has a massive negative impact on Thailand's elephants, though this seems largely ignored by the Thai government ("Trekking", n.d.). I found this particularly disturbing, as the government seemed more interested in the profits brought about by tourism than the welfare of its national symbol. Looking back now, I'm not exactly sure why I was surprised that a government would put income before welfare, but that's a topic for another time. Elephants' tusks are hunted for ivory while their young are hunted for tourism.

Elephants used to be mainly employed in the Thai logging industry, until that was outlawed in 1989. This didn't stop the illegal use of elephants in logging, but it did cause a major shift for the employment of elephants and their mahouts towards tourism.

Elephants are used in a few different capacities when it comes to the tourism industry. The first, and most common of which, is direct entertainment. This mainly includes the use of elephants at circuses and trekking camps. Semi-captive settings, such as camps, and completely captive settings, including circuses, are the preferred means of tourist interaction. While on the surface both of these industries seem to be supportive and harmless to the animals, in actuality they each pose unique risks (Malikhao, 2017).

.

In circuses there has long been worry about elephant welfare. Since they are fairly large animals (upwards of 6,000 pounds), the storage and maintenance of these elephants in small cages has been an issue. The United Kingdom's based Farm Animal Welfare Council has come up with several standards to be used when assessing the use of animals for the tourist industry. When it comes to wildlife, the perceived welfare of these animals is based strongly on how closely living conditions replicate how the animals live in the wild. With elephants, this is difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

Another consequence of tourism on the health of the Asian elephant is the use of elephants, especially elephant calves, in begging. The capture of wild elephants to supply the tourism market has recently been recognized as a threat to their overall population. Babies are preferred, as tourists will often pay more to interact with babies than larger, older elephants.

The use of elephants in begging poses many problems. Elephants have finely developed senses, especially in their feet, that make being in the larger cities over whelming and frightful, especially for the younger elephants. Baby elephants will often be made to walk through these larger cities to interact with tourists via handing them different trinkets that can be bought from the mahout, or simply interacting or performing for tourists. The use of any elephant in either the tourist or logging industry starts, and sometimes doesn't end, with appalling abuse.

The other use of elephants that has recently been identified as harmful and problematic is trekking camps. Elephants, unlike horses, are not structured to bear weight on their backs. Elephants have large, bony protrusions that spike upwards from their spine. Being such large creatures, they are built to bear weight below their spine, not above it. The use of elephants in these trekking camps often involves large, heavy baskets that are strapped to their backs so

that they can be ridden. While elephants can bear weight directly over their shoulders—which is the location that many mahouts ride their elephants—the weight on their spine from the heavy baskets and tourists can cause severe damage to the elephant’s **backs** (Schweig, 2016).

The body was a common theme that kept arising throughout my trip, and not just for elephants. Cassidy was a recent graduate looking to apply to vet school. She hadn’t made it in the first time she applied, but didn’t seem discouraged. She had an air of grace about her that reminded me of a dancer, so I wasn’t surprised when I learned that she was one. Though quiet, she seemed grounded, but also almost ethereal, otherworldly. If there was anyone on the trip that took the journaling time seriously, it was Cassidy. She almost always seemed as though she was in the middle of an introspective moment, and she was one of the members on the trip that taught me that the female body was nothing to be ashamed of. She was the first woman I’d ever encountered that was truly comfortable with her sexuality, and she wasn’t afraid to discuss it. If there’s anyone that the patriarchy should be afraid of, it’s her. Nothing was off topic, and we covered everything from periods to elephants, from masturbation to God all under the same stretch of sky.

We sat together and talked about how a woman’s body is perceived in shame. We talked about the influence of the patriarchy on how we saw ourselves. I remember talking about our first impressions of each other when we arrived.

“I remember thinking,” I started, “that everyone here was beautiful. And I know better than to compare myself to others, but I couldn’t help it.”

After being nicely yelled at for several minutes, Cassidy turned to me.

“I remember thinking about you, after we met in the airport, *she’s really funny, I hope she likes me.*”

Being admired in any small way by someone as seemingly stunning and all-knowing as Cassidy, combined with the uplifting anger of the group towards my own self-image, was one of the most impactful conversations of the trip.

It was these conversations about body that led me to think even more about the structure of the elephants. The human body is built to walk long distances and run and strive and live. We were built so that if we break we build back stronger. We were built to tolerate pain and stress and anger and sadness and heavy loads.

Elephants were built to sense the ground through their feet. To flap their large, well-circulated ears in order to cool themselves off. They were built to walk slowly, turn themselves into a flesh and blood submarine with a trunk for a periscope. They were built with compassion, they were built to grab onto sticks and food and trees with their trunks. They were built to carry a large amount of mass beneath their spine. They were built with compassion.

But they were not built to carry humans on their backs.

Through the ISV program we were able to work with more animals than just the elephants, though those were our main focus. We were also able to work with the other animals at the sanctuary, including the dogs that somehow wound up there and the livestock animals that they kept on the grounds.

The livestock animals that were held at the sanctuary ranged from small chickens to water buffalo. The water buffalo lived up to its stereotypical nature, as while we were there we



were tasked with doing our best to aid a sheep that had had its leg gored by the buffalo. The sheep was left with a large hole in its leg, about two inches in diameter, and much deeper. It was located in a problematic spot, as it was on the inside of the leg and couldn't be bandaged due to the likelihood of it being contaminated with the sheep's urine. The sheep was tied down so that we could apply medicine to the wound. There were three of us that were helping the vet and leader of the trip with the sheep. It was my job, once gloves were donned, to reach into the hole in the sheep's leg and remove the maggots that were killed from the powder that another girl put into the leg.

There isn't an experience that is quite comparable to being knuckle deep in a muscle pulling out fat, white bugs. I can't tell you that it was similar to reaching your hand inside a turkey before thanksgiving, or stuffing a piece of chicken with cheese and ham, because kneeling in the dirt, in the heat, with my hand sweating and itching in the glove and small white maggots between my fingers is not comparable, truly, to any other experience I have had beside, perhaps, scooping pus out of the wound on Bow's neck. I don't know what happened to that sheep, but I hope that the pain that was caused to it was in some way relieved by the lessened presence of small bugs fighting their way through dead tissue, leaving trails from where they had been and smashing themselves into places that they should never have been able to access.

In addition to the animals on the sanctuary, we went on a "tour" of the surrounding countryside to test local farms for brucellosis. We aided the local vets with capturing, getting blood from, and moving goats on several farms. At one specific farm, we were handling the goats in a large enclosure, about four girls, myself included, took turns with either bleeding,

holding, or spray painting the line that indicated that the animal had been sampled and recorded. We had started with closer to ten girls working but several of them had gone outside, either due to being uncomfortable with the work, getting bored, or needing a break. We had been warned by our group leader that you should always hold both the horn and the ear of the goat while moving it because the horns were liable to break if handled exclusively. Shortly after we had been given this lecture, one of the Thai farmers hauled a goat out of the chute and broke off the top half of its horn, which immediately started to bleed.

One girl, who I was standing behind at the time turned away with tears in her eyes and sobbed, “I can’t, I can’t,” before shoving the spray paint can into my chest and running out of the building. The remainder of us looked at each other, unsure if someone should go after her, but instead resumed our work. Shortly thereafter, I found myself in a position to talk to our group leader and brought up that many of the girls seemed uncomfortable with what we were doing.

She shrugged unsympathetically and said that she thought that all people should understand where their meat comes from, and the processes that occur in the industry. What they then did with that information—whether becoming vegetarian or continuing to eat meat, was their own choice.

What struck me about this was that most of the group didn’t seem to understand why we were testing the goats in the first place. The girl who had run out of the facility told me later, after she had found out that the goats were going to be sent to slaughter, that she had thought the goats “were going to go on to live a long, happy life.” The statement itself, while harmless, still sparks some anger in me. The fact that someone could consume meat for their

whole lives and still be ignorant of the process belies a more serious flaw that I have begun to notice not with meat eaters (since I am still one even after the supposed trauma of brucellosis testing), but with many people across the United States.

I have recently begun to understand the importance of knowing every side of an issue that you choose to take a stance on. This includes methods of conservation, dietary restrictions, and religion, but this was the first instance that I encountered it that actually made me angry. The anger that I felt, and still sometimes feel at this statement is perhaps not justified, but the tone of voice and the remainder of the conversation seemed almost scripted, almost straight out of a PETA propaganda video. As the descendant of a long time ranching family, and a vet-in-training at the time that had worked with many different livestock species, I resented what she said as an ignorant statement. However, I have come to know that not all people are comfortable with being involved with the processes of the livestock industry. The situation with the goat was difficult, and not ideal. I also never enjoy seeing an animal in pain, in fact, the main motivation behind my initial want to pursue animal science lay in my want to help animals as best I could.

After the whirlwind trip to local farms, we found ourselves back at the sanctuary. Bow stood, as always, gazing distantly with blind eyes. It felt good to sit in her presence in silence for a moment and think. It isn't a well-known fact that riding elephants can cause serious damage. The abuse that many elephants in the lumber trade and the tourist industry go through is likewise not recognized by most people outside of those industries or the people trying to stop the abuse. The lack of knowledge that people have about the beef industry, though it made me angry at the time, isn't exactly surprising. Many people don't like to think how the meat gets

from the meadow to the table. However, when in the presence of Bow it wasn't the unfamiliarity with processing plants that I was most bothered by. The ignorance toward both the industries that are harmful and the problems facing wild elephants needs to be remedied so that we can move forward with conservation.

Most of the people that I have talked to since my trip to ElephantsWorld have been clueless as to the harm that befalls the Asian elephants in both the wild and captivity. None of them have been aware of the harmful effects of riding in a basket on an elephant. If we really want to take steps towards bettering the situation of the Asian elephant in the wild and captivity then we need to start with education.

When we were introduced to the elephants, one of the first things I had noticed was the chains. They were long, allowing the elephants to move within a twenty foot or so radius of where they were tied. At night, they were tied to even longer chains in the jungle outside of the walls of the sanctuary that allowed them even more freedom to wander.

Every elephant was bound by a long chain around their foot that permitted them to wander but forbade them from freedom. Later that night I wrote a single thought in my journal that would entertain me for a while later, *would you rather be on a chain in the jungle or "free" in captivity?*

ElephantsWorld opted for the chain. One night we were allowed to walk the elephants—with the assistance of their mahouts—to their sleeping places. I held onto a thin cord that bound me to my respective elephant, and trekked out into the edges of the jungle that surrounded the sanctuary. When we came upon the chain, I wasn't exactly surprised, or

disheartened, but merely curious. The question it posed was one I've continued to wonder about. Would you rather have the pretense of freedom that is a lie, or the feeling of restriction when allowed freedom?

As of yet, there has not been a definitive answer to which method is best. Personally, I don't anticipate that there will ever be. The factors that complicate this situation are endless, but the largest contributing factor is the presence of available land. If the sanctuary doesn't have enough land to build an enclosure that will allow the elephants to roam with some sense of freedom, or doesn't have the funds necessary to build the walls and enclosures needed, then they will require the chains. In such cases, it is better to be chained in a sanctuary than to be abused on the streets.

An elephant's skin is thick, gray, and rough. There are small hairs that stick up out of it that are equally as coarse. Elephants are giant, thousands of pounds, intimidating. They can lift people, carry them on their backs, throw them like a shotput. Everything about an elephant makes it seem like a beast of great proportion and overwhelming in stature. Everything about an elephant would indicate that it is a beast unconquerable, an indomitable force. Why then, do they plod docile behind a human the circumference of its foot?

Baby elephants, no matter what industry they are bound for later in life, must go through a ritual known as "paah jaan." This is a ritual in which the calf is made to submit to its mahout, similar to the old fashioned ideals of "breaking" a horse. Often, the calf is taken away from its mother and placed in a smaller wooden cage. Inside the cage it is forced to endure beatings with a nailed bamboo stick on his legs and trunk, as well as enduring wounds from the

iron hook associated with the mahout trade. They may also be deprived of water and food during the time that this takes place. This forced submission and resulting fear of humans is what allows for almost every elephant in the industry to be controlled by their human caretakers.

We were introduced to the paah jaan at a second elephant sanctuary we visited after our tenure at ElephantsWorld, Elephant Nature Park (ENP). Unlike ElephantsWorld, ENP did not allow the use of hooks by the mahouts, and did not chain the elephants, instead allowing them to roam in walled-in captivity. It was during our brief visit to the sanctuary that we were first introduced to the brutality of the ritual.

We all crowded into a dark room, with the sounds of tourists below us and elephants in the distance, to watch a short video on Thailand's elephants and the formation and mission of the sanctuary. There was a trigger warning at the beginning that foretold the upcoming scenes of abuse.

Two years later I can still see the grainy image of a baby elephant being dragged across an open space. His legs are hobbled so that he stumbles, his ears are tight against his head and you can all but taste the fear on him as he is dragged across the dirt and shoved tightly into a small cage. I can't remember the noise he made in that video, but I can remember the look on his face, the lost and hopeless look of a child in pain.

The training of animals was not only important to the educators at Elephant Nature Park, but also to members of our troupe. Emily wanted to be a dog trainer, and with her gentle voice and serene disposition, I'm sure she could train almost any animal under the sun. She hailed from

Texas, and had the epitome of the laid back hippie attitude. Her long blonde hair hung loose around her and she always squinted her eyes like she was just about to laugh—usually she was. She, Janet, Amanda, and I, often roomed together throughout the trip. She, along with Cassidy had one of the biggest impacts on my views, and more importantly, how I viewed myself. Emily was the image of body positivity, the driving force behind my willingness to accept myself—though it still took a few years after the fact. The incident that stood out to me the most was when we sat in our hotel room in Chaing Mai and quizzed Janet about her boyfriend. While Amanda and I asked things like “is he cute?” Emily took no time cutting to the heart of what any relationship should be.

“Does he treat you right?”

It was after that statement that I reevaluated a lot about what I thought about relationships. I was simultaneously in awe of her and ashamed of myself, though briefly.

The question that Emily poses is the root of my view on elephant conservation. Elephants are a traditional part of Thai culture. They have been used for thousands of years for various industries, they have been passed down through Thai families. The mahout position is one that can be carried through generations. To suggest that all elephants in Thailand should be wild would be to disregard a major component of Thai culture. Through readings, I have come across a variety of people that think that all elephants should be wild, but I find this stance to be unrealistic and harmful to the Thai people that have relied, and continue to rely on elephants for life.

Instead of adopting the idea that all elephants should be free, I believe that wild elephants should stay wild, and captive elephants should be treated right. There shouldn't be

any more of the capturing of young elephants or poaching their parents, the only elephants that should be in captivity are the ones that were born there. There are inherent dangers with releasing animals that are habituated to people back into the wild. Due to animals not being afraid of humans there might be more conflict that arises through their reintroduction.

In addition to keeping the wild elephants wild, captive elephants should be treated well—as Emily would have it. In the United States we have standards of care for all animals, pets to livestock. By introducing and enforcing these types of laws in areas where people own the Asian elephant, as well as outlawing industries that inherently harm them, we can aid conservation while still preserving a major part of Thai history and culture.

While fear is the main tactic for controlling elephants, especially in the beginning, the mahouts that we encountered were not evil, animal abusing people. From what I could tell, they were passionate, fun loving, and dedicated. Amanda went back to ElephantsWorld for her honeymoon, and had experiences with the Mahouts that surpassed what we had seen at ElephantsWorld. I talked with Amanda afterwards, and she had many insights to the relationships between the mahouts and the elephants. “(My husband and I) were part of the Mahout Program and spent two weeks one on one with our assigned elephants, Gai-na and To-me, and their mahouts. I had always loved Gai-na, after learning that her mahout, Me-eh, helped bring her to Elephant’s World after realizing the horrid conditions she would be kept in at a local trekking camp. He truly cared for her well-being which was clear to see when you watched the two of them interact. Gai-na and To-me also had an interesting story, as they had previously worked together at a trekking camp and immediately recognized each other when



they were reunited at Elephant's World. They have been best friends at Elephant's World ever since."

One time with the mahouts that I remember vividly was sitting around the main eating/social area after dark. Emily was stationed at the guitar and the mahouts and students gathered in a half circle around her while we all screamed the lyrics to "Zombie", by The Cranberries. It was apparently one of the favorites of the mahouts, as we sang it several times each night that we gathered together, drinking cheap Thai whiskey and listening to Emily sing in a trembling voice.

In addition to being genuinely good people, the mahouts also had special bonds with their elephants that told of something deeper than a mere master-servant relationship.

During one of the days we were tasked with making sticky rice balls for the elephants. They were simple, mostly rice, fruit, and a nutritional powder, and we split up into groups to make them for the different elephants. I was assigned to a group that made the sticky rice for two elephants.

Wasana was an exceptionally picky elephant. If she didn't like the consistency of the ball, or if there was too much powder on it, or if there wasn't enough mango, or if it was Tuesday, she would refuse to eat it.

She must not have liked something that was on my hands, or maybe just me in general, because every time I gave her a ball she would give it a test squeeze or two with the end of her trunk and then toss it blithely over her shoulder and into the dirt behind her. Then she would stare placidly ahead and wait for the next one to be handed to her.

Her mahout wasn't of Thai descent like many of the other mahouts. He was a tall, lanky, tanned Swiss man with long white hair and circular glasses. I never got around to asking about his story, but he was calm and quiet and stayed in his own house separate from the mahout village with a dog that didn't like people very much.

The dog, the elephant and the man seemed to prefer the company of themselves. I only once or twice saw him interact with the rest of the mahouts on the nights where we would gather at the communal space and sing.

Most of the mahouts were men, with two exceptions. One woman was older and Japanese, she would ride her bike to the sanctuary each morning and was said to be the only person who could work with her specific elephant. The only other woman was also not of Thai descent, and had left college in Canada to be a mahout in Thailand. Bow's mahout joined us after we had been at the sanctuary for about a week.

It seemed that the return of her mahout had a tremendous uplifting effect on Bow. This relationship was mimicked with many elephants and their mahouts. Though we had been working with her every morning, the next time that we saw her she seemed stronger, more aware, more awake than we had seen her yet. The return of her mahout had one very obvious and immediate effect on Bow—she was able to return to the water.

It wasn't only Bow and the elephants that relished the water. The entire group I was with anticipated the time of day when we would flock to the river that wound its way serenely through the sanctuary. The river wound its way lazily through the sanctuary, the section that was used to bathe the elephants was a gradual bend that served as a beautiful background for pictures and a haven in the heat of the day. During the waking hours it was a refuge, but during

the night we had been warned that it changed its character. During the night, as they told us, snakes came out and swam in the river, and we were cautioned several times to stay away from the water after the sun had set.

The elephants found the water, in all its pleasures and horrors, to be a blessing. They didn't appear to care much for threat of snakes below the water, instead relishing the cooling properties and the brief respite from the Thai sun.

When she returned for her honeymoon trip, Amanda found that the water held just as much importance in the routine of the daily elephants as before. "The more time I spent around the elephants the more I loved them." Amanda told me. "They all had unique personalities and quirks. I especially loved hearing all of the elephants gossip in low grumbles whenever Nemochi played with the little ones. Nemochi loved those babies and always wanted to be with them, and I think the other older elephants seemed relieved to have a babysitter on duty to keep the young elephants out of their hair while they enjoyed munching on leaves or bathing in the mud. There is also just nothing quite like watching Gai-na and To-me sink deep into the River Kwai, so that only their eyes and the tips of their trunks were visible, all against the backdrop of beautiful mountains in the distance."

The first time Bow was brought back to the water, I was standing on the docks. She had been growing steadily healthier through the two weeks I had been at the sanctuary, and it appeared that the return of her Mahout a few days prior had given her a boost of strength. I had my back turned, busy taking a photo of one of the many dogs that had been adopted into the resident pack, when I heard a call come up from the Mahouts around me.

Bow rushed toward the water, her blindness for once not affecting her, as if she could feel the water in her bones and it was calling her to it. She splashed in, her trunk raised and her gait barely slowed by the change in viscosity of her surroundings. Her Mahout stood on the shore with a smile before kicking off her flip flops and wading after her elephant with a bucket and a soft call.

I have personally debated following in the footsteps of these non-traditional mahouts. Every now and then when the homework gets too stressful or I'm staring at a test question that's blank I don't know how to fill, I think *I could be bathing an elephant in Thailand right now.*

While it is usually just a fleeting thought, it's one I have consistently. It's a battle between immediate gratification of never taking another test and the knowledge that if I continue with my degree program I might be able to help more than one elephant. If I stick with conservation, I might be able to help all of them.

Janet was from an Israeli immigrant family out of New Jersey. She had just finished her undergraduate degree in creative writing was considering pursuing an MFA. I don't remember how it was that we ended up together for large portions of time, but I remember her distinct accent and her stance on gun control. We debated the ethics of having a gun, the difference in our experiences growing up. She came from a place that required military service to retain citizenship, I came from a rural Wyoming family that used guns to shoot cans off of logs. In the end, in what was perhaps the most civil discussion about guns that has ever happened around

the topic of gun control we agreed on pretty much the same thing. Guns can be used in ways that are not harmful, but fully automatic weapons seem a pointless.

The main part of the trip that concerned Janet was during our five days in Cambodia. Janet caught Dengue Fever—a fairly serious, mosquito borne viral disease that is prevalent in that area. She became seriously ill and was taken to the hospital. Since I was one of the few remainders of our groups, and Janet and I had become close, I came with her to the hospital. When she was diagnosed with Dengue, they told her that she was at the stage where she was either going to get better, or she was going to get a lot worse.

She fought the idea of staying in the hospital, but due to encouragement from myself, her boyfriend, and our group leader at the time, she stayed. I had offered to come back that evening and stay the night with her at the hospital, to which she seemed immensely relieved.

That night was the night that I like to refer as “The Time I was Saved by the *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* Horse.”

In order to make any of this make sense, I feel that it might be imperative that I include a background. Cambodia is one of the major sites of the sex trade. It obviously, at least to myself and the other people on the trip, that this is a serious subject. However, the different restaurants in Cambodia seemed to make light of an otherwise terrible situation—with signs outside their establishments that read:

*Eat and drink more, it makes you harder to kidnap.*

At the time, it seemed morbidly funny. Now, after I’ve had a few years to think about how truly luck I was, it’s horrifying.

Janet was in the hospital, and I was standing outside our hotel with our group leader while she negotiated a price for the tuk-tuk. She managed to convince them to pick me up the next morning—I would pay them half of the fee upfront, and half of the fee after I was returned to the hotel. I climbed into the tuk-tuk, thinking that she would be accompanying me on the journey, since I didn't speak Cambodian and didn't really know the way to the hospital. I knew a few landmarks from our trip previously in the day—like the muscled skeleton of a horse outside a *Ripley's Believe it or Not* Museum, but not much else.

As I climbed into the taxi, she looked up at me, almost worried, borderline shocked and said, “wait, how will I know when you get there?”

My gut hit my feet with enough force that I thought it would break through the bottom of the tuk-tuk.

“What?” Was all I had time to say before the driver pulled away, leaving me alone in the back while careening through narrow streets in a country whose language I didn't speak. A country that I knew was well known for its role in the sex trade.

I clutched my overnight bag to my chest and sang old hymns, looking for landmarks that I recognized that would let me know that I was on my way to the hospital and not somewhere entirely different. Looking back on it, it may have been inappropriate for me to think that of the young, polite, and reliable tuk-tuk driver. But in another, realer, sense, all I could think about was what I could do if this turned out to be something else.

I sat in the back of the tuk-tuk the most terrified I'd ever been in my life, praying for some kind of sign. Then, the only landmark that I knew in the whole city arose before me on the other side of the street: a great muscled horse and a sign that read “Believe it or Not.”

I can still see that horse in my mind. The immediate release of the emotional strain I had been under lifted in one great breath, imprinting the horse on my memory. I spent the night in the hospital on the couch next to Janet's bed. I woke every hour when the nurse came in, but the exhaustion from the twenty minute tuk-tuk trip mad it almost impossible not to fall back asleep.

I left in the morning, on the same tuk-tuk I rode in on.

Janet stood next to me while we lined up on the last day of our time in the sanctuary to say goodbye to Bow. I mentioned that I would particularly miss her since I had been one of the few people that consistently took care of her in the mornings.

"We'll all miss her, she's everyone's baby," was Janet's response.

While at the time I was almost irritated that she would claim the same level of attachment as I had to Bow, I have since come to realize that she was right. Bow was the first elephant that the entire group was introduced to, the gateway into the problems facing Asian elephants. In a way, the time I spent with Bow lead to my current interests and my passion for conservation. Bow planted the seed in my mind that such gentle creatures shouldn't be treated like slaves, that creatures that were meant to be wild shouldn't be kidnapped at birth and forced into labor.

The sanctuary was home to more elephants than Bow, and more outcasts than the stray dogs that had found their way there. It seemed ElephantsWorld had a way of collecting the stray, the lost, and the broken, offering shelter and healing within its walls. Amanda said it best when she talked to me a few years after we left. "I have missed ElephantsWorld every moment since I left it."

The last morning of the two-week volunteer trip I got up early and made my way down to the shore of the river, careful to keep an eye out for snakes that may have been retiring from their stint in the water and moving back to the banks.

Some of the elephants were in the jungle, others standing quietly behind me in the valley, but either way I could feel a weight beginning to grow in my chest at the thought of leaving the sanctuary. An Asian elephant can weigh up to 6,000 pounds, and now I could feel one sitting on my stomach. I said my goodbyes to Bow and the dogs and the people, thinking at the time that I likely wouldn't be back. As the years continue to go on, however, I find myself drawn back to the shores of the river, wanting once again to have those friends by my side and the elephants within my sight.

The very nature of the sanctuary, with its "sky on fire" sunsets, its gently plodding elephants, and its inherently introspective vibes made it unsurprising when we sat around a giant bonfire on our last night and talked about faith.

I wasn't surprised to learn that almost everyone around me was an agnostic, but given the group of people I was immediately open to discussing my own stance with faith, which is always tenuous and shifting.

They brought up the typical "how could a god let bad things like \*blank\* happen?"

Back then I gave a response more along the lines of "everyone has free will, God is just hoping you'll use it well." I didn't know the definitions of my own beliefs. I understood that I had no right to hold a belief that I hadn't analyzed, but after the analysis I didn't know where it put me. If the person I am now were to go back to that midnight conversation, I would quote a professor from the University of Wyoming and say:



“I believe in a grieving God.”

A grieving God is one who is more humanistic than an all-powerful one. A grieving God has hopes for us and helps us, but in himself is human in nature.

I know now that I believed in science, in things I can touch. I know that I believe that there is something out there that made the infinitesimal chance of life actually occur, and I know that I believe in the elephants.

God, grieving or not, is an elephant. He bears his burden in silence, shifting weight from foot to foot. He taps his trunk lightly against the ground, and flaps his ears when he's in pain. His skin is rough, a thick, and grey, but inside of it all he stands quiet. He looks out at the world of his creation with the darkened eyes of an elephant, the darkened eyes of a great beast that knows more than it lets on and hopes for more than it can attain. If God were incarnated as any being of flesh and blood, he would be Bow.

### References

- “History of ElephantsWorld.” *ElephantsWorld*, [www.elephantsworld.org/history-elephants-world/](http://www.elephantsworld.org/history-elephants-world/).
- Malikhao, Patchanee. *Culture and communication in Thailand*. Springer, 2017.
- Russo, Christina. “Global Wildlife Summit: Fight Against Illegal Ivory Stalled in Thailand.” *National Geographic*, National Geographic Society, 9 July 2014, [news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140709-poaching-elephants-cites-ivory-trade-animals-science/](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140709-poaching-elephants-cites-ivory-trade-animals-science/).
- Schweig, Sarah V. “This Is What Happens Inside Elephants' Bodies When People Ride Them.” *The Dodo*, The Dodo, 16 Apr. 2016, [www.thedodo.com/what-happens-inside-elephant-ride-1733390285.html](http://www.thedodo.com/what-happens-inside-elephant-ride-1733390285.html).
- “Trekking.” *Thai Elephant Conservation Center - Activities*, [thailandeledphant.org/en/index.html](http://thailandeledphant.org/en/index.html).