

Erin Bentley

Artist's Statement

God is an Elephant

My research for my Honors Project started the summer after my sophomore year of college, when I embarked on a volunteer trip to work on an elephant sanctuary in Thailand. The program was through International Student Volunteers, and was a two-week sanctuary trip followed by two weeks exploring Thailand and a final five days in Cambodia.

When I returned, I had to put more of a shape to the project. I had originally planned on writing a fiction piece that centered around the elephant sanctuary and the people I met on the trip, but after signing up for a nonfiction class at the University of Wyoming upon my return I decided to try nonfiction. I wrote a short nonfiction place essay called ElephantsWorld during the semester, and my honors thesis advisor suggested using it as a jumping off point for the rest of the project. Though normally a fiction writer, I decided that by writing nonfiction I would be better able to make an impact on the elephants, and bring many of the problems that the Asian elephants face into at least a small public lens.

Shortly after returning from Thailand I applied for a job at the Wildlife Genomics and Disease Ecology Laboratory and began working there in January the year after. This job opened my eyes to the world of conservation, and I became immediately aware of the problems currently facing the conservation of the Asian elephant. While many people are aware of the ivory trade, far fewer are aware of the damages or the use of elephants in the logging, begging, and tourist industries. After becoming more interested in conservation, I decided to change the focus of my honors thesis to not just talk about the sanctuary itself, but the conservation and

care of captive Asian elephants as a whole. The purpose of my project evolved from simply a recounting of my time in Thailand to a piece that's function is to bring the harms of the various industry to light, and encourage responsible tourism while addressing the personal impacts that my time in the sanctuary had on me.

To prepare for this piece, I read several nonfiction, fiction, and poetry books that focused around nature and nature writing. However, there were a few books that really impacted what and how I was writing, and influenced my honors thesis more than the others. The first of these books was the very first book I read. *Never Cry Wolf*, by Farley Mowat, focused on one man's journey into Alaska to research a largely misunderstood animal, the wolf. His honest account of his actions, feelings, and interactions with both the wolves and the people that he met along the way was inspiring. He didn't shy away from writing scenes that made him look silly or foolish, and addressed how he felt even if it seemed unjustified. This quality particularly impacted a few scenes in my thesis. I tried my best to imitate Mowat's approach toward honesty when addressing my own feelings, specifically in the scenes concerning the Brucellosis testing and the tuk-tuk ride to the hospital in Cambodia. In both situations, I had to acknowledge that perhaps what I was feeling was unjustified, but I couldn't ignore the truth of what I was feeling. I used Mowat's honesty for inspiration, and admitted that even though my feelings may have been unfair, they were, in the moment, important.

The second book that I read that had an impact on my piece was *The Man-eaters of Tsavo*, by John Patterson. This book, written over a hundred years ago, addressed the journey of a hunter and sportsman in Africa, who was called in to supervise the building of the railroad and had to take care of lions that were terrorizing the workmen's camps and dragging off and

eating workers. What was interesting about this book, and what influenced my own writing the most, was his inclusion of the culture of the native peoples. Though it sometimes came across as racist—a product of the time it was written, I imagine—he does address the viewpoints of both the workers and the native peoples about his hunting of the lions, how they perceived the lions, and how that culture may have influenced other occurrences throughout the book. This became important for me when I began looking at the usage of elephants in cultural practices and the large role that the elephant plays in Thai culture. In order to fully address how we can aid both wild and captive elephants, the role that elephants play culturally and economically has to be taken into account.

Finally, the last book that I read that had an impact on my thesis was *The Last Elephant* by Lee Cracker. This book describes the journey of a journalist/photographer that wanted to go to the various elephant camps and sanctuaries across Thailand to document the care and use of elephants in the tourism industry. While somewhat enlightening, I found I could not agree with several of his stances concerning all-or-nothing conservation of elephants. A stance that doesn't take into account the necessary inclusion of elephants in Thai culture and industry is an unrealistic one, and though his overall message was a good one—that we should conserve elephants—I think that the best way to deal with problems surround Asian elephants is to acknowledge their required roles in Thai culture and economy and instead push for keeping the wild elephants wild, and taking better care of the captive ones.

Though my readings had an impact on my writing, many classes that I have taken also influenced my thesis. A large section of my thesis considers the types of conservation available, and almost all of the information contained in that portion is what I refer to as “background

knowledge,” or knowledge that I have gained through a plethora of outside reading combined with the many biology, ecology, and conservation courses I have taken throughout my undergraduate career. My work in the genomics laboratory, as well as my studies in a conservation genomics grad seminar, helped me provide the necessary analysis and background for the conservation section of my thesis.

With the influences of these works, I was able to expand upon the goals of my thesis, namely, bringing awareness to the plight of the Asian elephant. Though my thesis focuses on the elephants and people that I interacted with at the ElephantsWorld sanctuary, I worked in larger conservation issues and situations that encompass the use of elephants throughout Thailand. I used the sanctuary as a “home base” and a thread to draw people in and make them emotionally invested in not only the sanctuary elephants, but the Thai elephants in general. Through the elephants at the sanctuary I could talk about specific traumas as a model for what all elephants are currently facing.

While addressing these goals, I had to also take into account my own biases. Since most of my background is scientifically based, I wanted to be as unbiased as possible when presenting the trials that the elephants go through, so as to make the science more believable and plausible. This was difficult since it was, after all, a creative nonfiction piece, and I needed to include my own self-discovery throughout the pages. I therefore decided that I could at the very least introduce the topics in an unbiased manner, even if the following analysis showed my personal thoughts and feelings. I tried to back everything that I said with sound science, as well as present the different sides of the arguments. I addressed the feelings that I had, and acknowledged that though they may not have been justified, they were what I was

experiencing at the time, and were not inherently invalidated because of their lack of justification. Bias was an interesting struggle for me, because the inclusion of the self makes a piece almost inherently skewed.

In order to avoid some of the bias that comes with talking about controversial issues, I tried to acknowledge the other sides of the elephant industry. Though there are camps and uses of elephants that are harmful, there are also important ceremonies and cultural occurrences that rely on the elephant. When elephants are treated correctly, their use becomes less controversial, and more about their cultural importance. The elephant is very highly regarded in Thai culture, and that is because much of Thai society has been built using the elephant. The occupation of mahout, an elephant caretaker, can run in family lines, from father to son, much like the elephants that the mahouts use. I came to understand that if I wanted to really get at the heart of elephant conservation and welfare, I would need to acknowledge that not all usage of elephants is bad, and that sometimes these gentile giants are a necessary component for the livelihood of Thai citizens.

Overall, this thesis was difficult to pare down into what needed to be included, and I had a hard time fully inserting myself into the piece—instead focusing on the facts behind the industries and the harm that the elephants face. I have always struggled with the self-discovery portion of creative nonfiction, and I tried my best to tackle this issue and refine my own abilities throughout the writing of this thesis. As I've said before, I don't write nonfiction as much as the other genres, but there are components of nonfiction besides self-discovery that I strove to incorporate into this piece. One component that is tangential to self-discovery is self-exploration, and I think that that component, above the others, is prevalent. If this experience

were to be summed up in one creative nonfiction element it would not be an epiphany-based, suddenly understanding my place in the universe element of discovery—but rather the bumbling, sometimes scary, sometimes exhilarating exploration that comes from stepping completely out of your comfort zone.

Other creative nonfiction elements overlap with fiction, such as place/scene setting and dialogue. I included the bits of dialogue that I could remember, and summarized the ones that I couldn't. This summary was due in part to another, large portion of creative nonfiction writing: honesty. I tried my best to be completely honest throughout this paper with the things that I said and addressing how the different experiences made me feel, and I think that this component of creative nonfiction links heavily with my struggle with bias. Through being honest with my own thoughts and emotions, I immediately inserted bias into the conversation.

In the end, the goals of educating people on the plight of the elephants took the front seat, and though perhaps not the most creatively correct methodology, it is a development that I am willing to compromise on. Hopefully through the presentation of this thesis, I can encourage people to consider their own tourism habits, as well as look beyond themselves to the conservation of an amazing, insightful, and impactful species.