

9 May 2022

**Shri Bhupender Yadav,**  
Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

**Mr Jairam Ramesh**  
Chairman Standing Committee, Environment and Forests

**Dr KM Selvan**  
Director of Project Elephant  
**Ramesh Pandey**  
Inspector General of Forests - Project Elephant

**Senior Advocate Ranjith Thampan**  
Kerala High Court

Respected Hon. Minister Bhupender Yadav and dear Representatives,

**URGENT OPEN LETTER OF CONCERN FOR THE WELFARE OF ELEPHANTS IN KERALA**

The [Pro Elephant Network](#) (PREN) consists of an international community of diverse individuals and organizations, comprising specific expertise, on wild and captive African and Asian Elephants, including the fields of science, health, conservation, welfare, economics, community leadership, social justice and the law.

The Members of PREN are concerned about the numerous reported deaths of captive Elephants in Kerala. Since December 2018, 77 Elephants have died, and at least six since the beginning of this year. The cruel treatment of some of Kerala's Elephants has been exposed internationally on numerous social media channels.



**Credit: Instagram Kerala Elephant Cruelty @elephantcruelty**

Damning [Documentaries](#) have exposed the cruelty shown towards Elephants in religious institutions including the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Guruvayur Temple which is called the "Guruvayur Captive Elephant Sanctuary " and "Punathoor Kotta", where 45 Elephants, mostly bulls, are permanently kept chained in their own urine and excrements. In an [interview](#) with award winning filmmaker Sangita Iyer, renown Spiritual Leader [Swami Bhoomananda Theertha](#) describes how Elephants' feet are set on fire to bring them under control, how handlers throw stones at bulls' genitals and how these herbivores are purposefully and maliciously fed meat.

[Reports in the media](#) confirmed, that a submission on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2022, by Honourable Member of Parliament Suresh Gopi requested that the Central Government consider according "Domesticated Animal" Status to Elephants who are held in captivity. The undersigned Members of PREN acknowledge and appreciate the Government's current policy is that Elephants are [intrinsicly wild](#) and that there should be not alteration made to this categorisation or associated terminology when referring to Elephants.

Numerous studies<sup>1</sup> and [reports](#) indicate that the domestication of wild animals by humans is a socio-biological process which takes thousands of years and involves changes in genealogy. Throughout the 3,000-year history of Human–Elephant relationships, most Elephants utilised by humans have been captured from the wild. Almost all captive Elephants in India are wild caught because Indian Elephants do not breed easily in captivity.

Elephants used for temple and other religious processions in Kerala, even though they are legally identified as "captive" animals, are indeed biologically wild. Wild Elephants remain victims of the unacceptable practice of violent and traumatic training in their early years, to ensure these majestic animals are subjugated under the control of the Mahout through the medium of fear. The fear is induced through pain, food deprivation and by causing deep psychological damage.<sup>2</sup>

The hidden reality of Elephants in captivity is contrary to the protection guaranteed by Indian law which protects Elephants as a National Heritage Animal, elevated to Schedule-I status under the [Wildlife Protection Act, 1972](#). This protection applies to all Elephants, wild and those held captive.

Many Elephants in Kerala are kept permanently chained in the backyards of owners and temples, forced to stand on hard concrete or granite floors, most often with no roof to protect them from the weather. They are [deprived](#) of adequate food, water, and any positive physical or mental stimulus.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Elephants are forced to stand on their own urine and excrement and in unhygienic conditions, leading to foot rot and deadly diseases such as tuberculosis. Research indicates that frequent, close contact within confined spaces leads to a [two-way transmission between Elephants and humans](#) and a high seroprevalence in these animals and their handlers.

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<sup>1</sup>- Zeder, M.A.; Emshwiller, E.; Smith, B.D.; Bradley, D.G. (2006) Documenting domestication: the intersection of genetics and archaeology. *Trends Genet.* 22: 139–155. doi:10.1016/j.tig.2006.01.007

- Price, E.O. (1984) Behavioral aspects of animal domestication. *Q Rev Biol.* 1–32.

- Russell, N. (2002) The wild side of animal domestication. *Soc Anim.* 10: 285–302 doi:10.1163/156853002320770083

<sup>2</sup> Rizzolo JB & Bradshaw GA 2018 Human Leisure, Elephant Breakdown. Impacts of Tourism on Asian Elephants

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345562567\\_Human\\_leisure\\_elephant\\_breakdown](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345562567_Human_leisure_elephant_breakdown)

<sup>3</sup> CUPA/ANCF's Captive elephants in India – Report 2009 <https://cupabangalore.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Captive-Elephants-of-Temples-of-India.pdf>



Given the complex brain of Elephants,<sup>4</sup> advanced cognitive abilities, suite of emotional responses and physical expressiveness in a socially embedded life-style, it should not come as a surprise that the denial of natural conditions would lead to physical and psychological trauma and abnormal behaviour, including aggression.<sup>5</sup> In addition, recent research suggests that the impoverished environment provided for these animals has detrimental effects on the brain itself.<sup>6</sup>

Stereotypy, the invariant restrictive and apparently purposeless repetition of motor patterns,<sup>7</sup> is commonly seen in captive Elephants held in impoverished conditions. Exposure to psychological stress, has direct physiological consequences that impact the body's ability to function.<sup>8</sup> This includes neural disfunctions, brain damage<sup>9</sup> and premature death.<sup>10</sup>

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that Elephants thrive in tight-knit herds and cultures of their own.<sup>11</sup> In the wild, they create tools, use their massive bodies and physical organs constantly to gather food, graze, socialize<sup>12</sup> and mate.<sup>13</sup> Elephants have evolved to move across vast areas, in order to meet their nutritional needs;<sup>14</sup> they consume between 200-250 variety of barks, berries, fruits, leaves, roots, herbs, shrubs, grass and even extract minerals from soil. All of these activities keep them physically, mentally and emotionally engaged. It is known that these highly empathetic animals<sup>15</sup>, once torn from their families and subjected to violence and confinement suffer from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, B., Lubs, J., Hannan, M., Anderson, K., Butti, C., Sherwood, C.C., Hof, P.R., & Manger, P.R. (2011). Neuronal morphology in the African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) neocortex. *Brain Structure and Function*, 215, 273-298. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00429-010-0288-3>

<sup>5</sup> Rizzolo JB & Bradshaw GA. 2016. Prevalence and patterns of complex PTSD in Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*). Proceedings of Asian Elephants in culture and nature. *International Conference on Asian Elephants in Culture & Nature*, Sri Lanka. pp.291-297 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311511597\\_Prevalence\\_and\\_Patterns\\_of\\_Complex\\_PTSD\\_in\\_Asian\\_Elephants\\_Elephas\\_maximus](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311511597_Prevalence_and_Patterns_of_Complex_PTSD_in_Asian_Elephants_Elephas_maximus)

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, B., Rally, H., Doyle, C., O'Brien, L., Tennison, M., & Marino, L. (2021). Putative neural consequences of captivity for elephants and cetaceans: *Reviews in the Neurosciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/revneuro-2021-0100>

<sup>7</sup> Mason G. J. 1991. Stereotypies: a critical review. *Animal Behaviour*, 41:1015-1037.; Kurt F & Garaï M. 2001. Stereotypies in captive Asian Elephants- a symptom of social isolation. Scientific Progress Reports in: *A Research Update of Elephants and Rhinos*. Proceedings of the International Elephant and Rhino Research Symposium, Vienna June 7-11,2001. pp.57-63.

<sup>8</sup> Romero LM. 2004. Physiological stress in ecology: lessons from biomedical research. *TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution*, 19(5):249-255.; Bondi CO, Rodriguez G, Gould GG, Frazer A & Morilak DA. 2008. Chronic unpredictable stress induces a cognitive deficit and anxiety-like behavior in rats that is prevented by chronic antidepressant drug treatment. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33:320-331.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Bob Jacobs et al, 2021. Putative neural consequences of captivity for Elephants and cetaceans ([PDF Putative neural consequences of captivity for Elephants and cetaceans \(researchgate.net\)](#))

<sup>10</sup> Clubb R., Rowcliffe M., Lee P., Mar K.U., Moss C. & Mason G.J. 2008. Compromised survivorship. *Science*, 322:1649.

Wiese & Willis 2004 Calculation of longevity and life expectancy in captive Elephants

<sup>11</sup> Poole J & Granli P. 2009. Mind and movement: Meeting the interests of elephants. In: Forthman DL, Kane LF & Waldau PF (Eds.) *An Elephant in the Room: The Science and Well-being of Elephants in Captivity*. Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine's Center for Animals and Public Policy, Tufts University, pp.2-21.

<sup>12</sup> Moss CJ & Poole JH 1983. Relationships and Social Structure of African Elephants. In: *Primate Social Relationships; An integrated approach*. R Hinde (Ed). Blackwell Publ

<sup>13</sup> Sukumar R. 2003. *The Living Elephants. Evolutionary Ecology, Behavior and Conservation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>14</sup> Ullrey et al 1997 Elephants: Nutrition and dietary husbandry

<sup>15</sup> Bates L.A., Lee P.C., Njiraini N., Poole J. H., Sayialel K., Sayialel S., Moss C. J. & Byrne R.W. 2008. Do Elephants show empathy? *Journal of consciousness Studies*, 15(10-11):204-225

<sup>16</sup> Bradshaw et al, 2005. Elephant Breakdown; Bell Rizzolo J. et al, 20016. Prevalence and Patterns of Complex PTSD in Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*)



**Arjunan collapsed and died - Photo Credit: Venkitachalam**

On April 20, 2022, the Forest and Wildlife Department has again opened the registrar to include new Elephants to be used for parades, **Annexure I**. This seems to be in contempt of India's Supreme Court Order dated 18 August 2015, which had finalised the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015 as the last deadline for registrations. This further extension questions the validity of the law and exposes the continued trade and transport of Elephants from the wild into captivity in Kerala.

While the Central Government has clearly specified in the latest Amendment Bill of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 that “[.] any transfer or transport of an existing captive Elephant for a religious institution may be conducted by a person having a valid certificate of ownership, according to the Elephant data submitted by the forest department before the Supreme Court in 2018, there were 521 captive Elephants in the state. To date that number is 444 Elephants, [of which only 19 Elephants have proper documents of ownership](#) and another 13 Elephants are in the custody of the forest department.

The Elephants used in these parades are often transported in precarious and unregulated conditions. In March 2022, an incident involving a truck carrying a bull Elephant crashed into another truck. We are not aware of any investigation following the incident.



**An Elephant standing behind a damaged truck after collision - Photo credit: VK Venkitachalam**

Elephants are paraded during excessive heatwaves and can [collapse](#). They are deprived of food, water, and adequate shelter. They are provoked or beaten with illegal weapons to bring them under control, such as spiked chains and capture belts, utilised to inflict maximum pain and suffering.

PREN Members have supported the [submission](#) from the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre (WRRC).



**We, the undersigned Members of PREN, respectfully urge the Indian Government to suspend the registration of Elephants in line with the India's Supreme Court Order and to urgently take stringent actions and enforce the Wildlife Protection Act and India's Supreme Court Judgements which will improve the protection of the Elephants in Kerala and all Elephants in captivity in India.**

Thank you for your consideration and attention to this important and urgent matter.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stefania Falcon', with a checkmark at the end.

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PREN Coordinator

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#### **SIGNING MEMBERS OF PREN**

Owais Awan	Advocate High Court, Islamabad
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Dr Jessica Bell Rizzolo	Postdoctoral Researcher, the Conservation Criminology Lab, Dep of Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University
Janey Clegg	Committee Member, SPCA Mutare, Zimbabwe
Professor David Bilchitz	Director, South African Institute for Advanced Constitutional, Public and Human Rights and International Law - South Africa
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Dr Harvey Croze	DPhil (Oxon) Collaborating Researcher – Amboseli Trust for Elephants – Kenya
Nomusa Dube	Founder, Zimbabwe Elephant Foundation
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Michele Franko	Captive Elephant Caregiver and Advocate – USA
Chief Stephen Fritz	Indigenous Leader, South Peninsula Khoi Council – South Africa
Dr Toni Frohoff	Ethologist and Behavioral Biologist, Founder of TerraMar Research
Dr Marion E. Garai	Elephant Behaviour Specialist - South Africa
Dr Ross Harvey	Environmental Economist, Botswana
Heike Henderson-Altenstein	Director, Future for Elephants e.V.
Alok Hisarwala Gupta	Animal Rights Lawyer and Researcher, India
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Peter Hodgskin	Founder, Hands-off Fernkloof, South Africa
Sangita Iyer	B.Sc., M.A., Founder of Voice for Asian Elephants Society, Nat Geo Explorer and Wildlife Filmmaker
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Jim Karani	Advocate, Lawyers for Animal Protection in Africa – Kenya
Dr Winnie Kiiru	Founder, Conservation Kenya
Brigitte Kornetzky	President and Founder of Elefanten in Not - Switzerland / India
Professor Bob Jacobs	Neuroscience Researcher – Colorado College – USA
Lynne James	Independent, Elephant Conservation, Zimbabwe





Kahindi Lekalhaile	Africa Network for Animal Welfare, Kenya
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Dr Nurzhafarina Binti Othman	Founder: Seratu Aatai, Elephant Conservation and Research Coordinator at HUTAN-KOCP - Malaysia
Sharon Pincott	Elephant Behavioural Specialist, ex-Hwange, Zimbabwe
Michele Pickover	Director, EMS Foundation, South Africa
Bharati Ramachandran	CEO of the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations – India
Ian Redmond OBE	Founder, African Ele-Fund and Elefriends Campaign, Chairman of Ape Alliance and Co-founder of Rebalance Earth
Dr Jan Schmidt-Burbach	Veterinarian, Head of Wildlife Research and Animal Welfare, World Animal Protection International
Ingo Schmidinger	Elephant Husbandry – Co-Founder iScapes
Dr DJ Schubert	Wildlife Biologist, Animal Welfare Institute - USA
Dr Liz Tyson	Animal Welfare Law, Programs Director - Born Free USA
Antoinette Van de Water	Director, Bring the Elephant Home, South Africa
Vasanthi Vadi	Trustee of the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations – India
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