



Via electronic delivery

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Honourable Minister Varawut Silpa-archa,

## **PRO ELEPHANT NETWORK'S REMARKS ON THE REPATRIATION OF ELEPHANT SAK SURIN TO BE PERMANENTLY RETIRED IN THAILAND**

The [Pro Elephant Network](#) (PREN) consists of a significant international community of diverse individuals and organizations, comprising of specific expertise, related to wild and captive African and Asian Elephants, including but not limited to the fields of science, health, conservation, welfare and well-being, economics, community leadership, indigenous knowledge, social justice and the law.

The Thai Royal family gifted three Elephants, including Sak Surin, to Sri Lanka, in 2001, in order for the Elephants to be trained and perform Buddhist religious rituals. Sak Surin was then renamed and is known in Sri Lanka as Muthu Raja

The members of PREN applaud the difficult decision taken by the Government of Thailand to lead the repatriation of Sak Surin from the Kande Viharaya Buddhist Temple in the Kalutara District of Sri Lanka, following concerns relating to his mistreatment. Thai authorities had to embark on a logistically, financially and politically challenging project to safely return the Elephant to Thailand.

The four-tonne male Elephant's rehabilitation will include the treatment of his extensive injuries including abscesses, wounds and scars, which are an indication of prolonged abuse and neglect.

Elephants are large-brained mammals who display [complex cognitive capabilities](#), and [sentience](#), and demonstrate social needs<sup>1</sup>, empathy<sup>2</sup>, and determination<sup>3</sup>.

The Asian Elephant is able to use tools<sup>4</sup> and, together with only a few other non-human species, such as some great apes, dolphins, rays and the Eurasian magpie, passed the mirror test, proving [self-recognition](#) abilities and a sense of self-awareness.

When males come into their annual musth cycle, their testosterone levels rise steeply making them more aggressive; all attempts to manage captive males during this process through isolation, separation and confinement, [impact their welfare](#).

All Elephants require access to expansive, diverse habitats and move across long distances.<sup>5</sup> They also need to be provided with opportunities for individual autonomy and socialization. These essential needs typically cannot be met in captive environments, leading to health deterioration and stereotypic behaviours reflecting the welfare-compromised environment. Stereotypic behaviour, the invariant restrictive and purposeless repetition of motor patterns<sup>6</sup>, remains the most widely used welfare indicator<sup>7</sup> for captive Elephants in poor welfare conditions exposed to psychological stress and has direct physiological consequences on the body's ability to function.<sup>8</sup> This includes neural dysfunctions, [brain damage](#) and compromised survivorship.<sup>9</sup>

Extensive [research](#) highlights how Elephants can suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and refers to how humans and elephants share the parts of the brain that are susceptible to trauma and the connections between the right prefrontal cortex and the limbic system and how this influences and can compromise individual's ability to regulate stress and emotions. [Research](#) also refers to "hyperarousal" or the inability to respond adequately, which could manifest as depression and severe agoraphobia, or on the other hand, "hyperarousal", which is hyper-vigilance, such as, for example, in

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<sup>1</sup> Wittemeyr G., Douglas-Hamilton I. & Getz W. M. 2005. The sociology of elephants: analyses of the processes creating multitiered social structures. *Animal Behaviour*, 69:1357-1371.

<sup>2</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>3</sup> 1 Clubb R. & Mason G. 2002. A Review of the welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe. RSPCA Report, University of Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> Hart B.L., Hart L.A., McCoy M. & Sarath C.R. 2001. Cognitive behaviour in Asian elephants: use and modification of branches for fly switching. *Animal Behaviour*, 62:839-847.

<sup>5</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>6</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>7</sup> Williams, E, Chadwick, CL, Yon, L & Asher, L (2018) A review of current indicators of welfare in captive elephants (*Loxodonta africana* and *Elephas maximus*). *Animal Welfare*, 27(3): 235-249

<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 behaviour in rats that are prevented by chronic antidepressant drug treatment. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33:320-331.

<sup>9</sup> Clubb R., Rowcliffe M., Lee P., Mar K.U., Moss C. & Mason G.J. 2008. Compromised survivorship. *Science*, 322:1649.

Elephants, when they charge with no provocation, or, in captivity, when they react aggressively even if there is no actual danger.

The extraordinary efforts to repatriate Sak Surin are highly commended by all the members of PREN, as well as the decision by the Thai authorities to stop [sending Elephants abroad](#).

[Reports](#) by Elephant experts, including members of PREN, illustrate that the population of captive Elephants in Thailand in the tourism industry has increased steeply since the use of Elephants in the logging industry was banned. Microchipping and a better-maintained Elephant database are important tools to prevent the laundering of wild Elephants into captivity; nevertheless, the illegal capture and movement of live Elephants across the Myanmar-Thai border for use in tourism continue to be an issue, and the captive breeding of Elephants continues to lead to an increase in the captive Elephant population used for commercial purposes.

The negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global tourism industry presented huge challenges for Thailand and clearly demonstrated that this new industry is unsustainable in times of crisis and a liability to the well-being of Elephants relying on profits from tourism. Some camps struggled to feed and care for the Elephants, leaving many isolated and starving.

Also, a growing number of global travel companies are changing their excursion offers to exclude facilities that offer Elephant riding and Elephant shows, and are instead prioritising wildlife-watching experiences or observation-only experiences of captive Elephants. Thailand's captive population of Elephants needs to be carefully managed as increasing numbers of captive Elephants compete for scarce resources, such as limited food for the Elephants, fragmented land use and reduced availability of skilled labour in mahouts; in addition, an increased dependency on income from tourists has led to a lower quality of care.

The global trend away from the utilisation of Elephants in tourism will negatively affect the mahouts. An unpublished study by Chiang Mai University has shown that over one-third of the mahouts have no life savings and depend on a minimum wage job while bearing significant risks of serious and sometimes [fatal injuries](#). Efforts need to be focussed on providing alternative livelihood opportunities for people who currently rely on the exploitation of captive Elephants.

## **IVORY**

Sak Surin, one of the three Elephants donated, grew to become a large tusker. Most male Asian Elephants have tusks, Sak Surin developed extremely large tusks which reach the ground when the Elephant walks. Such tuskers are prized for their ivory. The members of PREN recommend that the authorities take all precautions to make sure that Sak Surin/ Muthu Raja is not exploited for his exceptional features.



Sak Surin is prepared for his departure from Colombo Sri Lanka. Credit: RARE

The ivory trade remains a huge concern for the international community of Elephant conservationists. With the domestic market still providing some opportunities for ivory laundering in Thailand, the captive Elephant industry can have an unintended role in the international [illegal ivory trade](#) both directly – the breeding of captive Elephants – and indirectly – with increased value on individual Elephants and consequent increase in poaching of wild Elephants [for ivory](#) and other body parts and increased trafficking of [Asian Elephant hides](#).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While PREN members would like to congratulate the Government of Thailand on the actions taken to bring Sak Surin back to safety, we are extremely concerned that the commercial captive Elephant industry is expanding. The Government has taken very few steps to prevent the suffering of Elephants in captivity and initiate a phase-out of this increasingly unacceptable industry.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that captivity cannot provide for the welfare of Elephants and that any use of these highly intelligent animals for direct interaction with visitors requires cruel training and inhumane husbandry conditions, and presents unacceptable risks for the safety of all involved.

Members of PREN recommend permanently retiring Sak Surin in a facility in Thailand where he can receive adequate medical treatment and be managed by trained staff under a regime of positive reinforcement in [protected contact](#), and where he can roam and live, as much as possible, the life of an Elephant, away from unnecessary human interaction.

In terms of Elephant enclosure size requirements and standards, [research](#) has stressed that it is a mistake to use a human perspective when attempting to assess what size enclosures Elephants need. The report *Expansive, Diverse Habitats Are Vital For The Welfare Of Elephants In Captivity* emphasised that Elephants evolved to live in spaces 1,000 to a million times bigger than even a very large enclosure of 10 hectares. The full referenced report, endorsed by 25 leading Elephant specialists, concluded that

large quantity of quality space is critical for good welfare in Elephants and that although nothing less than areas equivalent to wild ranges of 100km<sup>2</sup> (10.000ha) and upwards truly enable Elephants to flourish, however, for those Elephants that must remain in captivity, there is evidence to support a proposal that 100ha or more of diverse, natural habitat where to roam free, would offer individual Elephants the opportunity to live a fulfilling life.

Members of PREN urge the Government of Thailand to build on their laudable recent consideration for Sak Surin's well-being and focus on addressing the concerns around the domestic captive Elephant population, by considering a ban on captive breeding as a first phase of a gradual and carefully managed phase-out in conjunction with enabling safer, more sustainable livelihoods for the people who currently rely on the captive Elephant industry.

Thank you for your consideration and attention to the well-being of Sak Surin and the Elephants of Thailand.

We look forward to receiving updates on Sak Surin's healing path and permanent retirement in Thailand.

Yours sincerely,



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