

Save The Asian Elephants: A breakthrough?

By Duncan McNair, Lawyer and Founder & CEO of Save The Asian Elephants (STAE)

"We will deliver on our 2019 Manifesto Commitment to ban the import of hunting trophies from endangered animals abroad, by bringing forward legislation to ensure UK imports and exports of hunting trophies are not threatening the conservation status of species abroad."

- DEFRA Action Plan for Animal Welfare, p.11

**"Don't bother - elephants are finished."
"You must be joking. Anyway it's India's problem."
"It's big money talking, and you'll never change that."
"Surely the travel industry will sort it out if you ask them?"**

These were some early putdowns I received on returning, appalled, from my first trip to India, in 2014, to investigate the horrors to Asian elephants in modern tourism of which I had been hearing.

They had some truth: the species is indeed in desperate peril. Yes too, vested interests like the UK travel industry could do so much, as could India and the other range states. But what to do? After all the UK cannot compel a mighty sovereign State like India to adopt our ideals of elephant welfare - particularly when our own cupboards rattle with skeletons such as brutal industrialised farming or a shameful legacy of trophy hunting.

I had noted that India has excellent animal welfare laws, according elephants the highest degree of protection. But these are widely circum-

vented by political interference and protection of vested interests.

Surely though the world's most revered species, the Asian elephant, should not end its long journey on Earth under the cruellest of all animal abuse, babies screaming and crying under extreme torture to break their spirits ("pajan") for easy use in tourism?

In 2015 I founded STAE, from the shared conviction amongst a growing team that in a functioning democracy a proper cause relentlessly advanced, linked to coherent, credible objectives, should prevail over time. STAE's policies were premised on driving up public awareness; but not contingent on the concurrence of vested interests profiting from the abuse, nor of governments of indigenous states over which external influence can only be limited.

I believed new UK law must be a first objective - a ban on the UK's enormous industry in adverts and sale of access to brutal elephant "attractions", so damaging to this endangered species in snatching baby and young elephants from the wild into ruthless torture and non-breeding captivity whose visceral horrors I had witnessed.

STAE engaged at once with travel industry's representative bodies. Thorough research has revealed the complete failure of the industry's self-regulation and its endless broken promises of change. Compulsion of law seems essential to stem supply, and demand, of this vast, unregulated, pernicious trade in abuse. To date STAE has identified over 1,200 tour companies promoting 250 venues to the UK market where extreme brutality is committed to baby and adult elephants. These places are also lethal for humans. Abused elephants regularly attack and kill. Moreover tens of thousands of cramped, fetid locations are a breeding ground for airborne viruses like TB and, science now indicates, Covid-19 which broken down elephants readily transmit to humans through exhaling, coughing, sneezing, spraying water. Mention of such deadly dangers is rare in tour operators' published output.

I have aimed to speak in person to every constituency of opinion - Parliaments, universities, vet schools, temples, churches, professions, busi-



ness, the public at large. The travel industry's mantle of secrecy, long concealing the horrors, lifted and with it public outrage. By Spring 2021 90% of Britons polled, 32m petition signatories and 100 key influencers backed STAE's policies for change. Government up to the highest levels has been helpful and receptive in our many meetings. They requested STAE provide a draft Bill. Hopes of change ran high.

In May 2021 came a breakthrough: Government's announcement of an Animals Abroad Bill to ban advertising and sales of "low-welfare" elephant (and other wildlife) tourist attractions.

We must not count chickens. The industry profiting from the abuse turns over many billions. We expect stiff resistance from its lobbyists, already at work. Important issues of structure of the Bill, of key definitions, sanctions and enforcement, lie ahead. If it holds, STAE considers such law apt for countries across the globe, steering the market towards genuine, ethical sanctuaries where elephants are observed from a respectful distance as they exhibit natural behaviour in

herds. Whilst Asian elephants suffer uniquely from abusive tourism, this change must herald the protection of many other species too.

Who knows the destiny of this ancient species, inhabitants of Earth long before Man? What Man has done so wrong, he can put right. Law must be instrumental in this. Asian elephants, "megagardeners of the forests" on which we all rely, deserve no less. We should see all species and their habitat as integral to Earth and its balance, their value not in their utility to Man but intrinsic, policy making involving animals and their terrain affording protection and respect. I hope there is time for the elephants, and better days for all the species.

Photo credit: Lek Chailert / Save the Asian Elephants