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Elephant Training: Correspondence and Articles

Elephant Editors

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ELEPHANT TRAINING: CORRESPONDENCE AND ARTICLES

The following section has developed as a result of a note published in the last issue of Elephant under "Debatables" (see Elephant Number 3, p. 53) and other correspondences received in our office. There has been no correspondence received for the first issue entitled "Culling of elephants is an acceptable means of population control." However, the reader is referred to the following references:

Buss, I.O. Management suggestions for the African elephant. Pp. 19-35, in Proceedings of the Elephant Symposium, Corvallis, Oregon, 1979, and related papers (J. Shoshani, ed.). SUPPLEMENT to Elephant Volume 1, 79 pp.

Douglas-Hamilton, I. 1979. Why resurrect the dead elephant issue? *Africana*, 6(11):3-4.

Hanks, J. 1979. The struggle for survival: the elephant problem. Mayflower Books, New York, 176 pp.

Laws, R.M., I.S.C. Parker, and R.C.B. Johnstone. 1975. Elephants and their habitats. Clarendon Press, Oxford, xii + 376 pp.

Pienaar, U. de V. 1969. Why elephant culling is necessary. *Afr. Wildl.*, 23(3):181-194.

* * * * *

In reply to the second issue entitled "Asian elephants are more easily trained than African elephants", we received the following letter:

June 13, 1979

Dear Hezy:

Enclosed is my donation for "Elephant" No. 4. I have enjoyed all three issues of "Elephant" very much, even though I have not always agreed with some statements made by members when writing about the Asian and African elephant.

On page 53, volume 1 No. 3, under debatables, "Asian elephants are more easily trained than Africans," I would like to say I have trained both Asian and African elephants and find this not always to be true.

Elephants, like humans, are individuals, some learn quicker than others, race or continent of origin in my opinion has nothing to do with the elephant's ability to learn. I believe the Asian and African elephant to be equal in intelligence.

See
metho
198 p

Kasie

In my humble opinion the intelligence of the elephant of both species is superior to all land mammals, except perhaps the human animal and sometimes I have my doubts about the human's intelligence. The human animal is highly educated but, is it really so intelligent?

Due to the young African elephant's more hyperactive and nervous nature than that of the Asian I find it takes a little more time and patience to train some of them, but the intelligence and ability to learn, in my opinion is equal in both species.¹

During the years I worked with and trained both Asian and African elephants. I had the opportunity to work with and train five African elephants, two partially "broken" Belgian Congo elephants and three of the larger plains elephants.

Of the hundred or so elephants I have been fortunate enough to work with, one of my favorites was "Tembo," a female African (page 80 in "I Loved Rogues," see Reference 451 in Elephant No. 3). Tembo was a female, bought by the Brookfield Zoo, thinking her to be a male and which they believed her to be for two years, before I took charge of the elephants at Brookfield in July of 1937.

To the zoologist and student of biology who place the chimpanzee ahead of the elephant in intelligence I say, "Phooey." I have trained both elephants and chimpanzees. The chimpanzee is formed similar to man and like man makes the same stupid mistakes over and over again, much more often than his cousin the elephant does.

Sincerely,

George W. "Slim" Lewis
Redding, California

P.S. Thanks, Hezy, for a great publication, I am sure it will grow beyond your greatest expectations.

¹See Tennent, 1867, page 150 (Tennent, J.E. 1867. The wild elephant and the method of capturing and taming it in Ceylon. Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 198 pp.) for similar viewpoints.

Also, see a letter with comments on training from Bob Kellogg and Susie Kasielke in RECENT CORRESPONDENCE of this issue.

* * * * *

Below is an article (originally published in Greek) which is relevant to this discussion on elephant training. It is followed by an editorial note on the subject.

THE TAMING OF ELEPHANTS*
by Randolph Molter
Translated from Greek by Efstratios Efthvoulidis

From the hunting memoirs of the famous
hunter of wild animals, Randolph Molter

I was residing at that time in Assam, which is located between Bangla Des (today's Bangladesh) and Virmania (today's Burma), in an area where the jungle is truly endless. In that area there were a large number of elephants and that's how I decided to try to tame an elephant by myself.

I had read a famous ancient book called "Hastivitiarnava," which happens to be the oldest book that talks about the taming and training of elephants - a book from which not one detail on the topic of the training of wild elephants has been changed, even though centuries have gone by since the book was written - and I was truly amazed. And because the capturing of a wild young elephant was not such a difficult task in that area, I decided I was going to try my luck about training one of them.

Luckily, I did not have to worry about the capturing of an animal (elephant) because an older hunter had previously caught two young elephants and was selling them at a ridiculous price. So I bought them, along with two older, already tamed elephants, which were supposed to be sent to a zoological park in London, England. I immediately began my task.

The technique for their taming is a reasonably complex and interesting job. The first thing to be done was to put the two untamed young animals inside a strong fence with the tame elephants, who would set an example and calm down the excited young ones. That stage of the training usually takes several weeks.

Next stage, although a cruel one, is very necessary. In this stage the animals are tied down strongly in such a way that their movements are very limited. For two days they are given neither food nor water. That way they lose

*This article appeared in Romantso weekly magazine (Tuesday, March 11, 1980, Issue No. 1930, p. 18).

their offensiveness. The third day I loosened up their ropes somewhat. I chased the torturing insects from their bodies - without setting them free yet. This was done while trying with calmness and very easy motions, to approach them up to the point that they began to show signs of nervousness. At the same time we gave them limited amounts of fresh food and water - not sufficient to stop their hunger and thirst.

During that time, according to the book, the trainer must sing to them a very soft sounding song.¹ Myself, I had anything else but a soft voice, and if I were to sing to them I would accomplish the opposite.

Instead, I solved my problem differently; during the time I was taking care of the animals, I was playing a record with a musical piece written by Mendelssohn called "The Song of Spring," and I was surprised when I found that indeed the young elephants were calmed by it.

The stage of feeding and taking care of the animals, while constantly trying to approach them closer and closer, lasted five weeks. The book claims that two weeks are plenty of time, at the most three. Myself, due to lack of experience, it took me five weeks before I was able to approach the animals without their showing any signs of nervousness.

That's when the third stage of training goes into effect. During this stage the trainer is not trying any longer to gain the animal's approval of his presence, but rather its friendship and devotion. So I began patiently to rub their backs with grass (that being something that they like tremendously), to wash them with plenty of water, and to give them all the food they needed to suffice their hunger.¹ And the more they got used to me, the more I loosened the ropes they were tied with. When they finally became so used to me that they did not leave their fence when I was around it, I then set them free from their ropes, letting them move freely within the fenced area even when I was not nearby.

Of course, all this time they were constantly listening to Mendelssohn's musical piece, "The Song of Spring."

¹Elephant catchers in the hills of Assam do just that: "The catchers were feeding them sugarcane, rubbing them with grass and leaves, and singing them lullabies" (Putnam, J.J. 1976. India struggles to save her wildlife. Nat. Geogr., 150(3):333).

Finally, the day of the last stage of training arrived. During this stage, everything happens in the presence of one or two already trained elephants, because from this point on they are the teachers of the young animals. Only by their example can one teach the young all the tricks that they must know.

An elephant can learn to obey 20 to 30 or more commands according to his intelligence - which by the way varies from animal to animal. The only restriction being that in order to learn these commands the other two tamed elephants serving as examples must also show them. Without the tamed elephants it is very difficult to teach the young animals those tricks, if any at all. Of course, a lot of patience and tenderness is needed in the trainer's manners, and as funny as it may sound, elephants are very sensitive animals and also very stubborn. Because of that, the commands given to them by the trainer not only must be by the use of the same words, time and time again, but also by the same movements, expressions, and tone of voice. Any physical chastisement by the trainer does not gain him anything during his training efforts; the reverse is true.

At the end I succeeded. I trained my two young elephants to obey 35 different commands. It was a record that made me very proud of my accomplishments.

Editor's note: According to William T. Hornaday, "The number of things that an Indian elephant can be taught to do, and do correctly, is limited only by the mental capacity and industry of his trainer" (Hornaday, W.T. June 1924. The elephant in jungle, zoo, and circus. The Mentor, 12(5), Serial No. 256, page 16).

* * * * *

In regard to elephant training, Becky Heller, librarian at Glendale (Arizona) Community College, requested help in her letter addressed to the editor:

March 17, 1980

I am writing to request your help in answering a reference question for one of our instructors here at Glendale College. He would like a list of the 26 verbal commands that an Asian elephant can be trained to follow. Jonathan Fisher, Senior Editor of National Wildlife, suggested that I write to you. It was in an article in International Wildlife January-February 1978 that we first found reference to this phenomenon.

I have been successful in finding references in Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia Volume 12, p. 495 which lists "lift the chain, climb over the tree, and smash the obstacle." Also in The Elephants by Georges Blond (New York: Macmillan, 1961) on page 139 he lists "go forward, halt, watch out, turn around, go into hiding."

Thank you for any additional information you can give me on this question.

Sincerely,

Becky Heller, Librarian
Glendale, Arizona

In response to her request, Efstratios Efthyvoulidis compiled this section on verbal commands, some examples of tonal commands, and a figure of physical commands.

LIST OF COMMANDS FOR ELEPHANT TRAINING
compiled by Efstratios Efthyvoulidis

I. Verbal Commands

In the Urdu language (the national language of Pakistan, also spoken in some parts of India), we find the following commands being used by the elephant trainers (Rensch, B. 1956. Increase of learning capability with increase of brain size. Amer. Natur., 90(85):81-95 and Rensch, B. 1957. The intelligence of elephants. Sci. Amer., 196(2):43-44 and 46):

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Go (no Urdu word given) | 11. Squirt water on your back ("Derr-tol") |
| 2. Stop ("Aschoro") | 12. Squirt water under your belly (no Urdu word given) |
| 3. Kneel down (no Urdu word given) | 13. Lie down on your belly (no Urdu word given) |
| 4. Get up (no Urdu word given) | 14. Lie down on your side (no Urdu word given) |
| 5. Go forward ("Mall-mall") | 15. Lift up your trunk (no Urdu word given) |
| 6. Go backward ("Datt-datt") | 16. Give me the object (no Urdu word given) |
| 7. Turn around ("Tschei beri") | 17. Duck under (the water) (no Urdu word given) |

- | | |
|--|--|
| 8. Lift your foot ("Tol-tol") | 18. Pass the obstacle
(no Urdu word given) |
| 9. Push the object with your feet
("Toker-toker") | 19. Drink (no Urdu word given) |
| 10. Push the object with your head
("Diouk") | 20. Break the obstacle
(no Urdu word given) |

Following is a brief list of commands used by the elephant catchers of Assam (Putnam, J.J. 1976. India struggles to save her wildlife. Nat. Geogr., 150(3):333):

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Forward ("Ageth") | 5. Lift one leg ("Utna") |
| 2. Backward ("Pichu") | 6. Lift with the trunk ("Biri") |
| 3. Circle ("Chai") | 7. Catch with the trunk ("Dhar") |
| 4. Sleep ("Tere") | |

In addition to the commands above, Grzimek *et al.* (Grzimek, B., *et al.* 1975. Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia, Volume 12, Mammals III. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, p. 495) presented these instructions in English only:

1. Lift the chain, 2. Climb over the tree, 3. Smash the obstacle.

One more command is included in The dynasty of Abu (Sanders, I.T. 1962. The dynasty of Abu. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 194): 1. Turn right.

II. Tonal Commands

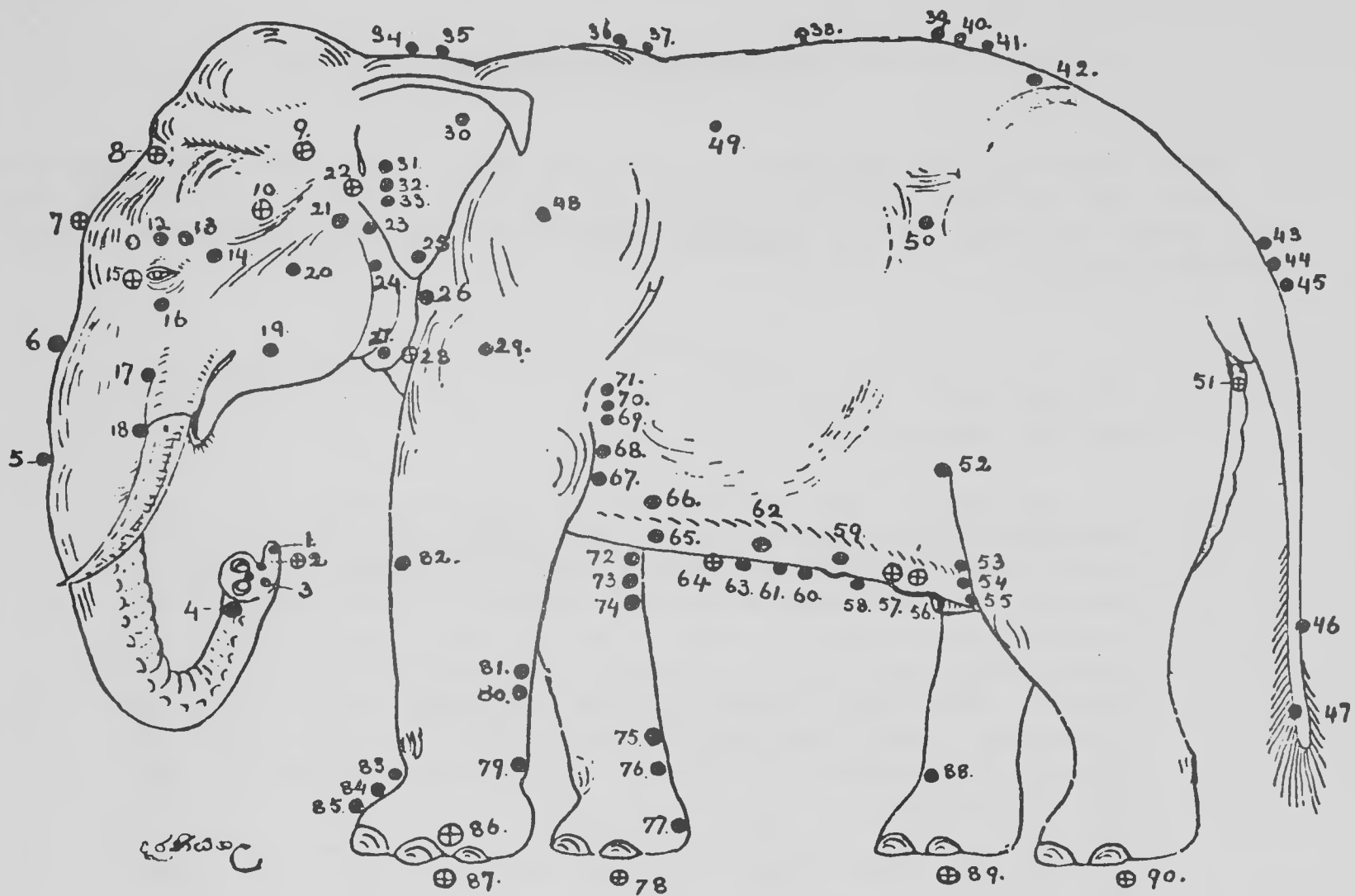
According to Blond (Blond, G. 1962. The elephants. Andre Deutsch Limited, London, p. 141), men standing some distance away from the animals were able to guide elephants in Cambodia by whistling through shells. Various notes and modulations signified different orders. Some examples are:

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| 1. Go forward | 4. Turn around |
| 2. Halt | 5. Go into hiding |
| 3. Watch out | |

III. Physical Commands

Elephants are given commands physically as well as verbally by mahouts in Ceylon. According to Deraniyagala (Deraniyagala, P.E.P. 1955. Some extinct elephants and their relatives and the two living species. Ceylon National Museum Publication, Colombo, pp. 69 and 70), reflex actions are induced by pressing, pulling or striking appropriate sensitive spots on the animals with a goad or hook. Deraniyagala has presented the following drawing and list of 86 spots used to control an elephant (see Figure 1).

70
60
50
1. Tu
2. Su
3. Pr
4. Fr
5. Fr
6. Br
7. K
8. K
9. K
10. K
11. B
12. B
13. R
14. B
15. K
16. K
17. G
18. C
19. G
20. L
21. B
22. K
23. B
24. S
25. R
26. S
27. O
28. K



- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Twists its trunk. | 29. Stops. | 68. Drops on the ground. |
| 2. Straightens his trunk. | 30. Brings under control. | 69. Turns round. |
| 3. Frightens. | 31. Travels. | 70. Rouses, infuriates. |
| 4. Frightens and makes it trumpet. | 32. Travels. | 71. Rouses, infuriates. |
| 5. Frightens and makes it trumpet and stops animal. | 33. Travels. | 72. Turns round. |
| 6. Brings under control. | 34. Lowers head. | 73. Rouses, infuriates. |
| 7. Kills. | 35. Bonumbs. | 74. Kills. |
| 8. Kills. | 36. Stops animal as well as makes animal walk. | 75. Stops animal. |
| 9. Kills. | 37. Stops animal as well as makes animal walk. | 76. Stops animal. |
| 10. Kills. | 38. Lowers the seat. | 77. Stops. |
| 11. Brings under control. | 39. } Frightens. | 78. Stops. |
| 12. Brings under control. | 40. } Frightens. | 79. Kneels. |
| 13. Rouses. | 41. } Frightens. | 80. Kneels. |
| 14. Brings under control. | 42. } Frightens. | 81. Travels when two nilas are touched; |
| 15. Kills. | 43. } Frightens. | 82. } stops when one nila is touched. |
| 16. Kneels. | 44. } Frightens. | 83. Raises fore foot for mahout to mount. |
| 17. Goes backwards. | 45. } Frightens. | 84. Gives fore foot. |
| 18. Controls animal while being tied to a tree. | 46. Stops animal. | 85. Raises fore foot for mahout to mount. |
| 19. Gives his shoulder. | 47. Travels. | 86. } Offers seat. |
| 20. Lowers heel and neck and stops. | 48. Stops animal or makes it walk. | 87. } Offers seat. |
| 21. Brings under control. | 49. Offers seat. | 88. } Offers seat. |
| 22. Kills. | 50. Stays without fidgeting and puts trunk to ground. | 89. Offers hindfoot and twists. |
| 23. Bends head. | 51. Gets up and runs. | 90. Draws hind foot backward. |
| 24. Stops animal. | 52. } Turns round. | 83. Raises the fore foot. |
| 25. Rouses, infuriates. | 53. } Turns round. | 84. Raises the fore foot. |
| 26. Stops animal. | 54. } Turns round. | 85. Raises foot; mahout sets his foot upon middle toe nail of fore foot in mounting. |
| 27. Offers seat. | 55. Kills. | 86. Kills. |
| 28. Kills. | 56. Kills. | |
| | 57. Kills. | |

Figure 1. Nerve centers or nila goaded by mahouts in controlling elephants. Hard prodding at ⊕ results in death (after Deraniyagala, 1955, see text).