



Pinnewala Elephant 'Orphanage'

Born Free Position & Recommendations - February 2009

The Pinnewala elephant facility in Sri Lanka, is a well known tourist site and has achieved a high level of international awareness. However, Born Free considers it important to fully consider the level of care and management provided for the animals at the site. We believe that the facility has the potential to provide excellent standards and set an example of best practice throughout the region and even globally. However, following a series of visits to the site, we do not feel that it is yet fulfilling this role, and in the interests of working towards this goal we have recorded our concerns about some of the practices conducted by this facility. This document details our concerns and the steps that we would recommend to address them and thereby reach the highest international standards that we believe the facility is capable of.

Chaining

Concerns

Currently all adult male elephants at Pinnewala are chained up by at least one leg, either at the river or at the main site, for the majority of the time. When in musth (a state of arousal occurring approximately annually and lasting for several weeks or months) the males are chained by three legs permanently until the condition ends. Born Free would ideally like to see the practice of chaining elephants to be ended entirely.

Suggestions

Born Free recommends the construction of enclosures constructed which can safely contain these male elephants, both outside and during musth periods, allowing them to move without physical restriction and have access to appropriate environmental conditions (eg sufficient space, shade and water). Additional skilled elephant handling staff should be hired to supervise the animals on a one-on-one basis if they are to be taken to the river or leave the enclosure for other reasons. Restraint (using the most humane methods available) should only be used when absolutely essential (possibly for medical treatment), and for the minimum time possible.

Transfers

Concerns

Pinnewala has a history of transferring elephants to other establishments, both nationally and internationally, for a range of purposes. The conditions of care in many of these establishments are very low by international standards of captive animal welfare. We do not believe that this practice is consistent with the mission of an 'orphanage', which should comprehensively guarantee the highest care standards for its animals.

Suggestions

Born Free recommends an end to the transfer of animals from Pinnewala to any zoos, temples or private collections either in Sri Lanka or overseas. The only acceptable reason for transferring elephants would be to provide a higher standard of care at a facility with goals compatible with a sanctuary, and to demonstrably improve the welfare of the individual animal concerned. Initially there should be an end to all international exports of elephants bred, born or housed (at any time in their lives) at Pinnewala.

Breeding

Concerns

Pinnewala has operated a breeding programme since the 1980s, over which time some 20 or so elephants have been born at the facility – an average of around one a year. Born Free does not believe that this practice has any conservation value for the Asian elephant in general or the Sri Lanka subspecies in particular, but simply generates more elephants that will only ever experience the inadequate conditions of captivity. Born Free does not believe that this practice is consistent

with the missions of an 'orphanage', which should be minimising the number of animals held in such conditions and reserving space for animals in need.

Suggestions

Born Free recommends that the practice of breeding elephants at Pinnewala be halted immediately. Breeding could be prevented by immuno-contraception or by restricting the access of males to fertile females.

Visitors

Concerns

At times, visitors to Pinnewala are strongly encouraged by elephant keepers to have direct contact with the elephants, in exchange for financial reward (tips). Born Free does not believe that this practice is conducted in the best interest of the animals that are being cared for at the facility, and is especially concerned that the practice of tipping can become the primary motivation for the keepers, thus overriding welfare considerations. It could also pose a significant safety hazard for visitors who come in close proximity to these potentially dangerous and ultimately unpredictable wild animals.

Suggestions

Born Free recommends that all direct contact between the animals and regular visitors should be halted. Visitors should be clearly instructed not to give tips to keepers – instead a donations box should be promoted and the money collected shared by all staff on the basis of rewarding best husbandry practice.

General welfare

Concerns

Elephants have been seen chained in direct sunlight in the middle of the day.

Suggestions

Management of the animals should be more closely supervised and protocols should be established which prioritise the welfare of the elephants including their behavioural and social needs. Supervisory staff should monitor adherence to these protocols to ensure that the animals receive a high standard of care and are not subjected to any unnecessary suffering or discomfort such as prolonged exposure to direct sunlight in the middle of the day with no opportunity for relief (shade / water).

SUMMARY

Born Free understands the need for a sanctuary for those elephants that cannot be returned to the wild in Sri Lanka. As an organisation we have significant expertise around the world in providing lifetime care for other species on this basis, and supporting other organisations that do so. However, we do not believe that the current practices and policies of the Pinnewala Elephant 'Orphanage' are appropriate for a facility of this type. Were the recommendations above to be acted upon, and following a review of the situation to ensure there are no other concerns, Born Free would reconsider its current opposition to the facility.