Sanctuarization: Reworking Captive Elephant Labour in Sri Lanka

Mara Benadusi, Università di Catania
ORCID:0000-0001-8947-6301, e-mail: mara.benadusi@unict.it

Abstract: This article explores contemporary human-elephant relations in Sri Lanka's roadside riding camps through the lens of interspecies labour. Rather than opposing care to exploitation or tradition to reform, it argues that key ethical and political transformations become visible in the reorganization of work itself: who works, under what conditions, and with which forms of authority. Based on multi-sited research conducted between 2021 and 2024, the article focuses on a roadside riding camp where wider circuits of labour, welfare, and ethical claims are made visible and negotiated in practice. Through three ethnographic vignettes centred on chains, protective tubing, feeding devices, and debates over ritual participation, the article shows how compassionate care unfolds through material micro-adjustments that redistribute effort, vigilance, and limited autonomy across species. Building on these encounters, I develop the concept of sanctuarization to describe the gradual and uneven reconfiguration of captive elephant labour in the name of care. Sanctuarization operates both as material adjustment and as anticipatory imagination, animating visions of sanctuary that reshape present routines without dissolving captivity. In this sense, roadside camps emerge as provisional and contested "sanctuaries-in-the-making," where labour, freedom, and responsibility are continually renegotiated within enduring infrastructures of constraint. In doing so, the article reframes debates on elephant tourism by foregrounding labour as the primary terrain on which ethical transformation is materially negotiated.

Keywords: Captivity; Animal Sanctuary; Interspecies Labour; Circulation; Multispecies Ethnography

Antropologia pubblica, n. 1, 2026 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine © 2026 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL
ISSN: 2531-8799 • ISBN: 9791222335469 • DOI: 10.7413/2531-8799066
This is a peer-reviewed and open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

Prelude

Kamala[1] walks along the dusty path of a roadside riding camp in Sri Lanka's Sabaragamuwa Province. A foreign woman and her two children sit on her back, their hands pressed into the folds of her skin. The children shift between excitement and uncertainty as her body sways beneath them. Her movement follows a series of brief vocal cues from her *mahout*.[2] She slows, halts, stands still. At another instruction, she raises her trunk and curls it upward, holding the position while photographs are taken. When the signal changes, she lowers it and resumes walking. Around her, the camp proceeds through a familiar sequence: tourists waiting under a tin roof, fruit cut on a plastic table, a chain adjusted, phones and cameras lifted and lowered. Kamala walks a short distance, turns, pauses, enters the river. What feels exceptional to visitors unfolds here as routine. Her body structures the rhythm of the space.

Read in isolation, this scene appears to exemplify domination, discipline, and passive animal compliance – an image that has shaped much contemporary critique of elephant tourism. Yet such a frame proves incomplete once one follows elephants beyond the moment of display. Outside the visitors' gaze, interactions rarely unfold as a simple command-response sequence. Instead, they involve hesitation, adjustment, interruption, and negotiation among mahouts, elephants, tourists, and an increasingly visible range of actors engaged in animal welfare. It is in such less visible moments that the dynamics of elephant tourism become analytically legible. A few minutes later, the previous riders step aside and the routine begins again.

Kamala stands in the river between bathing sessions, her body half-submerged in the brown water. A couple of tourists linger nearby, waiting for their turn to enter the river with her. Close to the bank, the elephant welfare advocate with whom I am spending the day speaks informally with two mahouts. She explains that a foreign welfare expert is available to conduct target-training sessions at the camp. The proposal, she says, would introduce small adjustments into daily routines: more varied activity, fewer long stretches of standing still between rides, regular foot-care sessions. She shifts easily between technical terms –

---

1 All names of people and elephants mentioned in this article are pseudonyms. Identifying details of camps, temples, and other workspaces have been anonymized to prevent identification. In some cases, contextual details have been altered or omitted to protect participants' privacy.

2 A *mahout* is the primary human caregiver and handler of an elephant in South and Southeast Asia. Beyond training and control, the role involves daily forms of embodied coordination through which elephants are guided, cared for, and worked with. Mahouts rely on a repertoire of vocal cues, bodily gestures, and tactile signals to communicate with the animal and to manage its movements and behaviour in everyday routines (Hart, Sundar 2000).

positive reinforcement, enrichment, care protocols – and a softer vocabulary of attentiveness and bodily relief. As she speaks, Kamala begins a slow oscillation in the water, her body rocking forward and back in a steady rhythm. The advocate gestures toward the swaying and suggests it may indicate stress, something that could be mitigated through changes in routine and training. The mahouts listen without interrupting. One of them finally replies that Kamala has always moved like that – "since she was small. It is not distress", he insists, "but habit. Part of her character". The advocate notes that repetitive behaviours are often associated with restricted routines. The mahout shrugs slightly and repeats that this is simply how Kamala is. No one presses further. The difference in interpretation remains unresolved.

A few steps away, the couple slows at the edge of the river. They have overheard fragments of the exchange and now ask about the elephant's swaying. For a moment, they do not descend the steps. The bathing, which a few minutes earlier had seemed like a simple tourist activity – scrubbing Kamala's skin with coconut husks, laughing as she sprays water – now appears differently. They look back toward the advocate, as if reassessing what they are about to take part in. From the water, Kamala's mahout calls to them and gestures for them to come down. After a brief hesitation, they step into the river. The brushing begins. Gradually, their bodies relax. The bathing continues. For a brief moment, however, the sequence falters, revealing the negotiations that sustain it. Welfare expertise, biographical knowledge of the elephant, economic necessity, tourist expectation, and the elephant's own bodily gestures intersect in real time. What is at stake is not simply whether Kamala works, but how her work and even her movements are interpreted, organized, and justified. In these moments, what becomes visible is not simply domination or care, but the organization of interspecies labour. Here, labour refers not only to physical exertion but to the distributed coordination of bodies, affects, and routines through which human-elephant interactions are organized. Elephants do not simply occupy the position of labouring bodies, but actively shape the limits and possibilities of these arrangements through their movements, responses, and refusals. Ethical disagreement does not revolve solely around captivity as an abstract condition. It unfolds in the ongoing negotiation of how elephants should work and how their behaviour should be interpreted. At stake is the distribution of responsibility, effort, and well-being across human and animal participants.

The sections that follow trace these negotiations across longer histories of labour and capture, showing how new welfare paradigms reconfigure – rather than replace – earlier regimes of discipline and expertise. I use the term *sanctuarization* to describe the gradual and uneven process through which captive

elephant labour is reorganized in the name of care. Rather than denoting the creation of formal animal sanctuaries, sanctuarization refers to the incremental reshaping of labour relations, spatial arrangements, and ethical authority within ongoing regimes of captivity. What emerges is not a linear shift from exploitation to care, but a layered transformation of work in which older asymmetries persist even as new moral vocabularies gain force.[3]

This perspective challenges several common interpretations in the literature on elephant tourism. First, it complicates the view of tourism primarily as a site of exploitation, by showing how ethical reforms are negotiated through the reorganization of everyday work. Second, it questions the assumption that sanctuaries represent a definitive moral solution to captivity. Third, it moves beyond viewing welfare interventions as purely technical reforms. Rather, sanctuary logics reorganize how labour, care, and authority are distributed without dissolving the infrastructures of captivity in which elephants continue to live and work.

From Husbandry to Circulation: Transforming Elephant Labour

Ethnographic research on captive[4] elephants has long examined the relationships between elephants and their mahouts through the lens of skilled, embodied, and culturally embedded labour. Scholars working in South and Southeast Asia describe how mahouts learn to read elephants' gaits, anticipate hesitation, sense fatigue, and respond to subtle shifts in breathing, posture, or trunk movement. Capture and training, whether in timber economies, village set-

[3] The fieldwork for this article was supported by the RULNAT (ANR-19-CE03-0006) project, "Ruling on Nature: Animals and the Environment before the Court" (https://rulnat.cnrs.fr/), funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR). Additional research support was provided by the project "WildConnect: Wildlife Circulation and the Enactment of Civilization in Diachronic Perspective," funded by the University of Catania under PIA.CE.RI. 2024–2026, Linea 1 (CUP: 7D722212160).

[4] In this study, I deliberately adopt "captive" to describe elephants engaged in labour in Sri Lanka. This choice does not reject local or regulatory categories such as "tamed," but foregrounds the structural constraints shaping these relationships. Importantly, captivity also affects humans: mahouts often work without long-term security, labour protections, or institutional support, and their lives are deeply entangled with the vulnerabilities and risks of the elephants they care for. Their labour unfolds under conditions that can threaten physical safety and social well-being, creating a shared – though asymmetrical – exposure to precarity. While "tamed" highlights cooperation and skill, it risks minimizing the unequal infrastructures sustaining human-elephant labour. By contrast, "captive" captures both the agency of elephants and the broader ecology of constraints shaping their work, highlighting how the relationship unfolds amid limited freedom, negotiation, and shared – though asymmetrical – vulnerability.

tings, or ritual contexts, are not treated merely as techniques of control but as forms of relational labour[5] embedded in social, ecological, and ritual worlds (Lainé 2020a; 2020b; Locke 2016; 2017; Mar 2024). From this perspective, human-elephant work unfolds through apprenticeship, attunement, and long-term cohabitation. At the same time, animal justice scholarship and advocacy foreground the coercive and constraining dimensions of these same practices. Training methods, tethering, and behavioural conditioning are read as techniques that reshape elephant bodies and dispositions in order to render them compliant, often at significant physical and psychological cost (Green *et al.* 2025). During my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, several advocates described conventional training as effectively "crashing" elephants, producing lasting harm under the guise of discipline or care.

Figures 1 & 2. *Elephant Kraal, Alligator Pool* (left) and *Elephant Kraal, a Captive* (right), National Museum of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The term *kraal* refers here to the organized practice of elephant capture, which involved enclosing sections of jungle to confine and separate wild elephants. *Photo by the author*

Placed in dialogue, these perspectives illuminate a central tension: multispecies labour is both an arena of intimate skill and cultural continuity and a site of structural asymmetry and ethical conflict. Rather than resolving this tension by privileging either "care" or "exploitation," this article approaches elephant labour as a contested and negotiated field in which moral vocabularies, embodied techniques, and power relations converge in everyday coordination. I argue

[5] In human-animal studies, relational labour frames "work with, by, and for animals" as a shared, negotiated practice, highlighting how agency, care, and responsibility are co-produced across species (Coulter 2016; Mouret, Lainé 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

that it is through the reorganization of labour – rather than solely through debates framed in terms of rights or welfare – that contemporary transformations in captive elephant life become analytically visible.

In Sri Lanka, this field has undergone significant transformation. Historically, elephants were embedded in royal sovereignty, temple institutions, and ritual performance (Jayewardene 1994; Santiapillai, Wijeyamohan 2016). Their labour materialized prestige, lineage, and authority in public ceremonies such as the Kandy Esala Perahera.[6] Colonial regimes intensified capture and export, integrating elephants into imperial trade networks and plantation economies, reshaping both local livelihoods and ethical frameworks surrounding nonhuman life. Following economic liberalization in 1977 and especially after the end of the civil war in 2009, captive elephants were increasingly drawn into expanding circuits of tourism, festival economies, and global visibility.

This shift altered not only where elephants work, but how value is produced through their work. Whereas captive elephants once often remained embedded within long-term relations with particular families or temple institutions, many now circulate through leasing arrangements, festival contracts, and temporary transfers between facilities. During fieldwork between 2021 and 2024, I observed elephants moving between roadside camps, religious processions, private residences, hotels and safari parks, continually recalibrating routines in response to changing human companions and spatial configurations. Their economic and symbolic value lies not simply in possession, but in circulation: in the capacity to generate income, prestige, and affect across multiple sites (Whatmore, Thorne 2000). This circulation does not concern elephants alone. Mahouts increasingly move not only between facilities, but between elephants. Long-term attachments – in which a mahout remained paired with a single animal for decades – are becoming less common. As handlers shift from one elephant to another in response to market demand, seasonal contracts, or managerial decisions, the husbandry model premised on long-term attachment is destabilized. The assumption of durable, intergenerational bonds – central to much anthropological writing on mahout-elephant relations – no longer holds as a structural norm.

Following Barua's work (2014; 2016; 2017; 2018) on "lively commodities," this reorganization of circulation can be understood as a form of multispe-

[6] Historically, elephants in this religious festival carried the sacred Buddha Tooth Relic and the insignia of various deities, adorned in elaborate garments and ritual paraphernalia, and accompanied by dancers, drummers, and tightrope walkers. Although the festival has evolved over time, these ceremonial elements continue to play a central role in contemporary processions.

cies capital. Value is generated not only through elephants' responsiveness, "charisma",[7] and embodied presence, but also through the skilled mediation, mobility, and labour of mahouts and other actors who translate animal gestures into economically and affectively productive events. A ritual procession, a tourist photograph, or a structured enrichment session does not simply display elephant life; it mobilizes a distributed network of interspecies work. Labour, in this context, exceeds physical exertion and becomes affective, performative, and infrastructural, enacted through bodily discipline and spatial coordination. Yet this expansion does not dissolve asymmetry: elephants remain tethered, transported, and regulated, while mahouts operate within precarious and shifting labour arrangements.

At the same time, new ethical regimes have entered this landscape. These interventions do not simply regulate elephants; they reconfigure who holds interpretive authority over their bodies. Wildlife officials, veterinarians, foreign welfare experts, and transnational advocacy organizations increasingly intervene in feeding schedules, training protocols, movement regulations, and habitat design. Online publics scrutinize ritual processions and tourist encounters, amplifying debates about welfare, rights, and the legitimacy of captivity (Benadusi 2024). As a result, the once relatively bounded dyad of mahout and elephant is now embedded within wider networks of expertise, regulation, and moral evaluation. Care becomes distributed across heterogeneous actors, and labour is redefined through competing standards of what constitutes a "good life" for working elephants. In Sri Lanka, this reconfiguration has not taken the form of a proper institutional shift toward fully established sanctuaries. Rather, it unfolds gradually, through processes of imitation, adaptation, and selective incorporation of models developed elsewhere, particularly in Thailand and Cambodia, where elephant sanctuaries have become internationally visible. Local actors draw on these precedents unevenly: some adopt elements of "no-riding" policies, enrichment protocols, or volunteer-based care in response to tourist demand; others experiment cautiously with new welfare routines under the guidance of visiting experts. Activists, transnational trainers, and welfare professionals circulate between sites, carrying techniques, narra-

[7] Lorimer (2007; 2015) distinguishes among ecological, aesthetic, and corporeal forms of nonhuman charisma. Ecological charisma derives from an animal's material properties, aesthetic charisma from its visual and behavioural appeal – often mediated through representation – and corporeal charisma from the affective intensity of close encounters. Charisma, in this account, is not an intrinsic attribute but a relational quality shaped through human perception and interaction. As such, it carries ethical and political effects, influencing conservation priorities and the symbolic and economic value attributed to particular species.

tives, and evaluative standards that are reinterpreted within Sri Lanka's specific legal and economic constraints. Sanctuarization, in this sense, operates not as a completed institutional form but as an ongoing, glocal process shaped by internal advocacy, external influence, and market adaptation. While existing scholarship has examined animal sanctuaries as institutional alternatives to exploitative regimes of captivity, this article develops sanctuarization as an analytic to trace how sanctuary logics are selectively incorporated within ongoing infrastructures of animal labour and control. A growing body of scholarship has analysed sanctuaries as ethical refuges, post-captivity environments, and sites where conservation, welfare governance, and tourist expectations intersect (Kopnina, Baker 2023; Sadashige 2024; Speiran 2025; Eason 2017). These studies focus primarily on sanctuary settings as distinct organizational forms. By contrast, sanctuarization draws attention to the gradual and uneven incorporation of sanctuary logics within ongoing regimes of animal labour and control, without presuming a fixed transition beyond captivity itself.

Across temples, roadside camps, orphanages, and other sites aspiring to sanctuary status, elephants thus navigate hybrid environments in which traditional routines coexist with newly institutionalized forms of welfare. Some facilities continue to structure daily life around rides, bathing sessions, and staged feeding for photography. Others reject riding and emphasize enrichment, observation, or volunteer-based care. Even in centres that aspire to ethical tourism or partial rewilding,[8] elephant work is not eliminated but reconfigured. Animals are required to unlearn former routines and develop new patterns of movement, social interaction, and responsiveness suited to semi-natural or visitor-managed settings. Work persists, but its moral framing shifts.

To analyse these transformations, this article adopts a circulatory perspective. Building on interspecies ethnography (Locke 2013; Lainé 2016; 2018; Lainé, Keil, Rahmat 2023; Locke, Buckingham 2016) while questioning the assumption of stable, long-term mahout-elephant pairings, I trace how labour and care are negotiated across shifting sites and actors. Between 2021 and 2024, I conducted mobile, multi-sited ethnographic research in Sri Lanka, following elephants and the humans who engage with them – mahouts, owners, facility managers, volunteers, and welfare experts – across interconnected spaces. This circulatory human-elephant ethnography attends to how ethical judgements,

[8] Rewilding generally refers to restoring species, ecological functions, and natural processes in human-modified landscapes to enhance biodiversity and nonhuman autonomy (Jørgensen 2015; Perino *et al.* 2019). As Lorimer *et al.* (2015) note, however, rewilding is also socially and ethically mediated, involving ongoing negotiation over animals' freedom and human responsibility rather than a simple withdrawal of care.

bodily techniques, and authority structures move across locations rather than residing within a single relational dyad or institutional setting.
Within this reconfigured landscape, captivity cannot be understood simply as spatial confinement. Rather, my ethnographic materials suggest a regime of infrastructural dependence and regulated mobility that shapes both elephants and the humans who work with them. As the vignettes that follow will show, restricted movement, contractual arrangements, managerial oversight, and commercial scheduling structure daily life, even as elephants cooperate, resist, pause, or redirect interactions. Such responses become moments through which labour is renegotiated and moral disagreement rendered visible. Captivity, in this sense, emerges not simply as the opposite of agency but as the condition within which agency and constraint are continuously worked out. It also shapes human precarity: many mahouts work without long-term security, moving between elephants and facilities as market demands shift. Interspecies labour thus unfolds within shared – though asymmetrical – conditions of infrastructural constraint.
What emerges from this landscape is not a linear transition from domination to care, nor a simple replacement of older practices with compassionate ones. Rather, elephant labour in contemporary Sri Lanka is being reorganized through circulation: of animals, of capital, of expertise, and of ethical claims. The vignettes that follow examine how this reorganization is enacted in practice. They treat labour not as a fixed category but as a relational and negotiated process, showing how elephants, mahouts, volunteers, and welfare advocates continually adjust routines in response to shifting public demands, market pressures, and moral expectations. In these negotiations, care, coercion, autonomy, and value emerge not as moral opposites but as effects of organized interspecies labour – recalibrated through circulation and constraint.

Negotiating Captive Elephant Labour

The following vignettes move inside these reorganized circuits of labour, not by mapping elephants' movements across the island, but by dwelling in one particularly dense nodal setting where circulations converge and become ethnographically visible. In roadside camps, shifting ethical visions, commercial pressures, and welfare interventions come together, making visible the infrastructures through which freedom, authority, and responsibility are negotiated in concrete encounters. Rather than illustrating abstract principles, the scenes attend to the situated adjustments through which interspecies work is recalibrated in practice.

Along the Links of the Chain: Shaping Freedom under Constraint

During the Thai Pongal festival in January 2022, with a Monday Poya extending the holiday period, the roads leading to Sigiriya are clogged with vehicles heading to the celebrations. At the first stop we return to a riding camp along the road, leased by a local manager who profits from renting out elephants. There we meet Saman again, a young male with a broad trunk and a pale grey head marked by faint pink spots, immediately recognisable to local handlers. He moves with an even, steady rhythm under the guidance of his mahout.

Before arriving at the Sigiriya camp, Saman spent part of his life as a "temple elephant," living in and around a Buddhist shrine and participating in religious processions and ritual duties. At other times in his early years, he passed through hidden and hazardous networks: captured, leased, and redistributed by brokers, each transaction shaping the economic, symbolic, and performative roles elephants are made to fulfil. Within this underground system, Saman was reportedly involved in various forms of work, including elephant cricket matches – an account I received from local insiders. In these events, mahouts rode their elephants at speed, urging them to strike a ball. Held away from public scrutiny, these games unfold in the same shadowed terrain as other activities that move young males like Saman from one form of labour to another. Saman's trajectory does not signal a linear shift from one form of labour to another but illustrates how elephant work is continuously reallocated across overlapping circuits of value, visibility, and regulation.

At the Sigiriya camp, Saman works within the tourist economy, posing by the roadside to attract passing vehicles, parading alongside restaurants with his mahout in search of clients, and interacting more fleetingly with visitors in transit, often just for a photograph before moving on. He also spends long hours bathing in the river below, while tourists watch from the veranda of a nearby café, often sipping drinks as they look on. These activities may appear slight when viewed from the outside, yet they compose a patterned rhythm of labour that takes shape through Saman's body over the course of the day. Long intervals of waiting, the stillness under the midday sun between rides, the repeated pacing along the same short strip of asphalt, and even the extended immersion in the river each impose distinct demands. Together, they produce a specific bodily regimen: one that is neither incidental nor effortless, but central to the everyday operational tasks expected of elephants in roadside camps.

Figure 3. Saman, a male elephant, carrying tourists at a riding camp in the Sigiriya area, accompanied by his mahout. Visible on his right foreleg is rubber tubing, recently fitted around the ankle chain by a visiting welfare team to reduce friction and abrasions. *Photo by the author.*

Figure 4. Saman bathing in the river alongside a female elephant from another riding camp in the Sigiriya area. The mahout of the female elephant stands nearby. *Photo by the author.*

Saman's current mahout, Gamini, has eight years of experience working with elephants, though not exclusively with him, and comes from the Kandy region. Unlike traditional caregivers – trained from childhood by an older, usually family-related mahout and responsible for a single animal over the course of its life – Gamini did not inherit his role. Instead, he received rapid on-the-job training, assisting more experienced mahouts before taking full responsibility for elephants at temples and riding camps. This shift reflects a broader transformation in Sri Lanka's captive-elephant industry, where a new generation of mahouts moves quickly between religious premises, stables, and other facilities, seldom forming long-term attachments to the animals they oversee.[9] Stability is no longer the background condition of this relationship; it becomes something that must be achieved, if only temporarily. Two of Saman's previous mahouts died from elephant-related injuries, a risk that remains common when managing young males, particularly within a working sector defined by the rapid circulation and turnover of animals, caregivers, and managers. Against this backdrop, Gamini takes particular pride in having established what he describes as a relationship of trust, friendship, and guidance with his animal, often emphasising to us that he can "handle" elephants like Saman where others could not.

Wages in camps such as this typically range from LKR 15,000 to 20,000 per month (€ 42-56), with very basic food and lodging provided, while state-run facilities offer higher pay, around LKR 30,000 (€ 84). The work is physically demanding and risky, with little meaningful compensation for mahouts or their families in cases of serious injury or death, rendering the occupation highly precarious. Yet younger mahouts, generally agile and strong, navigate these demands through a distinctive embodied style that intertwines technique, aesthetics, and social performance. This approach constitutes a corporeal repertoire – a technique of the body in Mauss's sense (1934) – through which the mahout's authority and identity become visible. The careful choreography of posture, the precise handling of the bull-hook – a traditional hooked stick used to guide and control elephants – and even the seemingly peripheral details, such as the draping of the sarong or the choice of headgear, function as performative markers of skill, authority, and identity. Through these practices of connotation, the mahout's labour is also transformed into a multispecies spectacle, visible to

[9] In their systematic review of mahout-elephant research, Palanivelan *et al.* (2025) identify a similar trend toward younger and less experienced mahouts replacing traditional handlers, which risks undermining the transfer of specialised knowledge.

tourists, passersby, and social media audiences, making tangible the otherwise often-invisible work of care, guidance, and risk management. In this light, the mahout's body becomes simultaneously a medium of labour and a site of social display, negotiating perception, recognition, and economic value. Gamini's wife first noticed him riding Saman, guiding him steadily along the path – a moment that illustrates how corporeal expertise translates into relational and affective visibility, bridging technical competence, social attention, and personal encounters.

Following the work of elephants like Saman in the tourist circuit, our visiting team engages with individual animals to observe and support their care and daily routines, always with the consent of the mahouts and managers. One member of our group, Bob, is an experienced elephant caregiver – a foreign professional active across several Asian countries – who practices "compassionate care," a globally recognized approach emphasizing positive reinforcement, attentive foot care, and enabling elephants to express behaviours closer to those they would naturally exhibit in forest environments. At each site, he works alongside mahouts, providing guidance and suggestions to gradually adapt local practices. The second member, Ashika, is a Sri Lankan elephant advocate campaigning against the exploitation and suffering of captive elephants. She operates both online and on the ground documenting welfare conditions, engaging mahouts and managers, and, in urgent cases, pressing for institutional action or relocation of animals. Together, Ashika and Bob are part of a transnational network of advocates supporting efforts to guide Asian elephants toward conditions more akin to "sanctuary" settings, following precedents in Thailand and Cambodia. My role in the team builds on trust developed through months of research with elephant experts in Sri Lanka, and for today's session I am tasked with documenting care and retraining practices through detailed filming.

As foot care begins, Saman is gently guided to lie partially reclining on the ground, Gamini seated across his broad belly, hands touching his body to keep him calm. One of Saman's front feet is carefully lifted and held in place, allowing Bob to kneel beside it, so close that he must tilt his head beneath the raised foot to reach its underside. In his hands, a heavy metal rasp – reminiscent of tools from iron workshops – moves with rapid, deliberate strokes. Every shift of Saman's weight makes the task feel precarious; even a subtle movement could send Bob sprawling. This is more than simple cleaning. Years of walking on asphalt and long hours chained have left Saman's feet and nails in a compromised state; untreated abscesses can quickly threaten his overall health. Throughout, Bob murmurs encouragement –

"Good boy, good job" – while patting Saman's ankle in a steady, measured rhythm, responding to the animal's signals and maintaining a sense of mutual attunement. With the rasp, he shapes the thick, ivory-coloured nails, and with a hooked tool, he carefully removes necrotic tissue or clears small perforations, each action attentive to Saman's comfort, trust, and the precarious balance of safety.[10]

The mahout's young assistant stands close to the animal, ready to intervene if needed, while Ashika keeps Saman focused with a complementary exercise: he extends his trunk to take the bananas she offers one by one from a safe distance. I move around the group, filming every gesture. Conversations flow in Sinhala and English: Bob asks questions, points out areas of concern on the feet and ankles, and explains to the mahout how to recognize early signs of abscesses or deeper scrapes and prevent complications. Pointing to the dry abrasions on Saman's ankles, he says, "If an elephant stays too long in the water, the skin can get damaged – you see here?" He traces the rough patches lightly with his fingers. "How long does he usually spend in the river? Maybe you could try loosening the chain slightly, giving him a bit more freedom. That way he might decide for himself whether to go for a bath or stay on dry ground." Saman's body is the only one that actively engages with each of us. With his trunk, he prompts Ashika to offer bananas at a steady, deliberate pace; with his feet, he signals to Bob where he feels pain or when he needs a break; and with me, he carefully negotiates the space I occupy as I move around him for filming, responding to my movements without showing stress or defensiveness. His responsiveness to the calm presence of the mahout makes the work a continuous, dynamic negotiation of attention and movement, allowing a complex, seemingly improbable task to unfold smoothly.

[10] Elephant foot care is a key aspect of welfare management, involving daily inspection, cleaning, and skilled trimming carried out with specific tools and veterinary-informed techniques. These practices, together with positive-reinforcement training, allow animals to participate voluntarily and safely. In this session, however, the full approach cannot be applied because essential safety supports – such as the stands normally used to stabilise the elephant's feet during treatment – are not available, limiting both precision and the level of voluntary cooperation normally achievable.

Figure 5. Saman receiving foot care treatment from the visiting animal welfare expert at the riding camp. *Photo by the author.*

As the foot-care session unfolds, it is clear that it is only one element of a broader, interspecies exchange, grounded in the coordination of bodies, tools, and attentions among Bob, the mahout, Saman, and the rest of the team. Each visit addresses immediate health concerns while, through repeated, reciprocal interactions – touching, guiding, signalling, and responding – provisional and fragile trust is established. Bob's suggestions are offered as possibilities rather than directives, and the mahout, Saman, and the team negotiate these adjustments through movement, posture, and timing. Trust is enacted in concrete gestures: how Saman shifts his weight, how Gamini steadies him, and how we move around him for feeding, treating, and filming. Over time, these episodic interactions can shape routines and practices of work and care, though their outcomes remain contingent and never fully predictable.

Trust is also the result of ongoing negotiation. On this visit, we bring three objects that articulate shifting relations of labour, care, and attention among us, the mahouts, and Saman. The first is a new metal chain, purchased in Colombo and explicitly requested by Gamini during previous visits from Bob. In a context where "unchaining" names the very ethos of Bob's work, the chain is more than a tool: it is a probe into what is possible within the circuits of labour that structure Saman's life. Its presence signals a space where concessions are made and limits are tested. Along its links, centimetre by centimetre, movement is redistributed

as the chain is loosened or tightened: Saman's labour becomes both constrained and enabled, while the mahout's attentiveness, vigilance, and control are calibrated against the possibilities each link affords. Freedom here does not stand outside restraint; it is measured through it. In this small arena of material practice, care, authority, and autonomy are rendered visible through action.

The Tube and the Barrel: Organizing Care in Practice

The second object we brought with us this time is a length of perforated rubber tubing, designed to encase the chain around Saman's ankle and reduce abrasions. Its introduction follows the opening created by the chain: a provisional space of trust allows Saman and the mahout to engage in a more demanding training exercise. Saman repeatedly explores the unfamiliar tubing with his trunk, nudging and testing it, revealing both curiosity and the effort required to accommodate the novel object. Gamini observes Saman's reactions, gauging how far the elephant will accept the tubing and adjusting his guidance accordingly. Bob supervises throughout, offering incentives and suggestions to ensure that the interaction remains productive without overwhelming either elephant or mahout. In this triangular engagement, labour is both physical and relational, arising through anticipation and the gradual, effortful process of shared learning.

Once the tubing is in place, Saman's first steps are cautious and measured, as if recalibrating the subtle differences in pressure created by the rubber covering. The chain now moves differently, requiring a renewed attentiveness. He reaches toward it with his trunk, testing it. At moments the gestures suggest hesitation rather than curiosity. Gamini watches closely, weighing whether to intervene or allow the adjustment to unfold. For several minutes, the tubing remains an unsettled presence – neither fully rejected nor fully integrated. Such modifications depend not simply on technical insertion, but on bodies learning each other's limits, and on the recognition that change is rarely immediate or stable.

Building on this preparatory exercise, the third object – a tall plastic barrel suspended upside down from a tree and filled with foliage – requires a further escalation of effort and coordination. Saman must stretch his trunk, lift his body, and manipulate the foliage to feed, engaging muscles and problem-solving skills underused in his usual routines. For the mahout, the task is substantially more demanding than simply tossing greenery to an elephant's feet: he must insert the food into the barrel, attach it at the correct height on the tree trunk, and repeatedly lift or adjust it to refill or reposition it. Observing and responding to Saman's movements, the mahout negotiates how far he is willing to engage in this extra work, calibrating his actions to the elephant's

responses and the demands of the task. For Bob, the barrel serves as a site for demonstrating and modelling alternative forms of labour that integrate ethical concern, practical re-education, and shared effort. This is also a space of negotiation: not all mahouts are willing to undertake these additional tasks, and the "capable mahout" is evaluated precisely on his readiness to extend his practice in ways that give concrete meaning to the "ethical" principles associated with elephant ecotourism.[11]

Figure 6. In a neighbouring riding camp, a female elephant (previously shown bathing with Saman) performs a foraging exercise, using her trunk to retrieve foliage from the barrel provided by the visiting welfare team. Similar enrichment practices circulate between camps in the area. *Photo by the author.*

Taken together, these objects make visible the entanglement of labour, care, and the negotiation of work. Each link in the chain, each movement of the rubber tubing, and each reach toward the suspended barrel represents a mo-

[11] In Sri Lanka new-generation mahouts tend to engage more readily with novel "compassionate" practices, such as barrel or tubing exercises. Their participation is shaped both by the growing demand for tourism experiences framed as ethical and by the proximity and competition between nearby camps, which encourages imitation: when one camp introduces new practices, others may follow. Traditional mahouts may approach these practices differently. Mahouts' relationships with elephants thus vary in responsiveness and collaboration. Managers who rent elephants can also play a role in facilitating welfare-oriented approaches, balancing operational needs with tourist expectations.

ment where ethical possibilities, technical knowledge, and bodily agency intersect, requiring adaptation and learning from both humans and elephants. Through these small calibrations, the everyday labour of the roadside camp becomes a site where negotiated adjustments of freedom and constraint are enacted, producing incremental changes in routines, interactions, and the practical organization of work. Here, the relational labour between elephant and mahout becomes visible through the concrete compromises and efforts that both must make. The mahout tests how far Saman will accept new objects and tasks, while the elephant experiments, accommodates new requests, and sometimes resists. Meanwhile, the welfare expert guides and monitors this shared learning toward gradual transformations in care and practices. At the same time, Ashika, leveraging her local knowledge and contacts, negotiates these modifications with mahouts and managers across facilities, tracks the movement and condition of elephants, maintains connections throughout the network, and ensures that relationships and information flows remain active over time.

When the foot-care session ends, we walk slowly toward the strip of land behind the road leading to the river. The air is humid, carrying the faint scent of wet soil and leaves crushed underfoot. Bob suggests moving Saman's resting place away from the exposed roadside, into a small patch of vegetation where the shade is thicker, the soil softer, and movement less constrained. A nearby tree offers a practical anchor point for the elephant. Every additional metre of slack in the chain becomes a small gain in autonomy: the chance for Saman to choose among the vegetation for the most palatable leaves, to step onto looser soil rather than asphalt, to orient himself under a patch of shade – small, provisional freedoms negotiated through the very instrument of restraint. Gamini moves alongside Saman almost distractedly, not paying much attention to the elephant's movements. He carries the bull-hook hooked backwards over his shoulder, leaving the chain slack. There is a rhythm to their interaction, a choreography born of trust and repetition, yet conveyed without fanfare. Today, the mahout even leaves the bull-hook aside as they enter the undergrowth – an unspoken acknowledgment of the provisional autonomy the elephant is granted. The implications reach beyond Saman's immediate welfare. Every decision over where he stands, where he steps, and where shade falls unfolds within an intermediate space where local and external actors negotiate what is described as "more ethical" labour. These adjustments are not mere gestures of care – they are embedded in the social and economic circuits of the camp, acts of negotiation and provisional legitimation that entwine practical care with the everyday realities of human and elephant lives in captivity.

Figure 7. Saman moving through the foliage near the river during a brief loosening of the camp's usual spatial controls. *Photo by the author.*

Meanwhile, Saman moves a few steps closer to the river, now alone among the bushes, several meters from us, inhabiting the space with a degree of freedom unusual for a roadside elephant. It is a brief moment within the ongoing constraints of chains, roads, and human schedules. This temporary negotiation of space, what could be described as micro-sanctuarization,[12] highlights the narrow margins of agency afforded to captive elephants within the persistent structures of control that shape their lives. By the next day, he will return to the asphalt, more tightly chained, and begin to sway his head rhythmically. This movement has been learned over years in captivity and is deeply embedded in both memory and muscle. Bob observes that even in elephant sanctuaries, these stereotypies take years to fade. The body retains its history as indelibly as the mind.

The chain on one hind leg is tight around the tree, allowing only a few centimetres of give, while the front leg chain, anchored to the trunk supporting

[12] I use the term micro-sanctuarization to describe small, incremental changes in the working environment shared by elephants and mahouts, driven by practices of compassionate care and ethical tourism principles such as "no touch," "no feed," and "no ride." These adjustments do not create a sanctuary outright but produce provisional "sanctuary-in-the-making" conditions within conventional work settings. The practical meaning of "sanctuary," however, remains context-dependent and varies across facilities.

the mahouts' shelter, is longer but still under tension, permitting only minimal movement. From the managers' perspective, this placement optimizes visibility, accessibility, and control. It also allows the mahouts to remain in the shade beneath the shelter, talking and chewing *betel*[13] as they wait for the next tourist, without needing to supervise the animal constantly. Saman remains mostly still, occasionally undulating his trunk among the foliage. His movements are constrained by the spatial limits of the pad. The blue barrel suspended from the high branches and the pink tubing secured around his ankle mark the previous day's interventions while remaining fully functional. Ethical intentions, provisional care, and minor gains in freedom exist only in tension with managerial decisions, the rhythms of roadside tourism, and the economic imperatives structuring daily life. What was possible yesterday in shade and soft soil now endures merely as a trace, a fleeting adjustment within the rigid geometry of chains, asphalt, and daily schedules.

Into the Darkness: Frictions in the Making of Sanctuary

As darkness falls, we drive along the roadside with Gamini to observe elephants emerging from the forest. These are not anonymous wild herds but usually solitary males – forest dwellers searching for food as they navigate a landscape already deeply shaped by human presence. They appear at night, when their captive counterparts – Saman and the others – are finally at rest after a day of work. Their nocturnal movements are acts of negotiation, reclaiming fragments of space and resources shaped by the rhythms of daytime tourism and human activity. In this liminal, contested zone, the close proximity and subtle overlaps of wild and captive lives become visible, revealing the contradictions at the heart of human-elephant landscapes.

In this threshold space, as we drive along, the conversation between Bob, Ashika, and Gamini intensifies, filled with rapid exchanges, overlapping ideas, and animated gestures. I find myself on the periphery, listening to the flow of plans, critiques, and ambitions – peering into a world just beyond my reach, present yet somehow excluded from the momentum of their shared vision of a sanctuary. In this vision, mahouts and other figures, such as Bob and Ashika, might work together to co-manage an elephant camp, assuming roles not only as caregivers but also as stewards of the elephants, guiding both their daily care and the broader well-being of the herd. Gamini imagines forming a "gang

[13] *Betel* is a mildly stimulant leaf chewed in many parts of South Asia, often wrapped around areca nut and sometimes with lime, producing a red-stained saliva and mild psychoactive effects.

of like-minded mahouts," creating a sanctuary free from the humiliations he endured during his apprenticeship. He recalls moments like the Esala Perahera in Kandy, when a ritual master publicly corrected him for mishandling an elephant's chain – a vivid example of the hierarchies and pressures woven into this work. Ashika, too, envisions the opening of Sri Lanka's first "true" elephant sanctuary, modelled on those that already exist in other Asian countries, where she, Gamini, Bob, and a network of "good mahouts"[14] could collaboratively enact ethical care, build lasting bonds of trust with the elephants, and coordinate responsibilities across the team.

As the conversation about a future sanctuary intensifies, Gamini begins to outline his vision: a place where elephants could roam freely, no longer giving rides to tourists, a large forest compound devoted entirely to "ethical" tourism. Most importantly, it would be a space where he and "other mahouts like him" could work independently, free from a single owner, reclaiming control over their own lives as well as the lives of the elephants. He imagines that there, he could remain with Saman for the rest of his life, no longer forced to move from one elephant to another. Yet, there is one element he is unwilling to give up: the Kandy Esala Perahera. Turning to Bob, he asks directly what he thinks. For Gamini, this festival is the moment when mahouts are most publicly visible, taking centre stage in a nationally celebrated cultural event. It is not only a deeply significant moment of long-lasting tradition in the country, but also a time when leading their elephants adorned in full regalia is an act of immense personal and professional importance for them. A tense silence follows. The weight of the question hangs palpably in the air. Bob responds calmly but firmly: during the parade, the elephants suffer, and he cannot support their involvement. The misalignment is clear. The disagreement does not concern whether elephants should be cared for, but which forms of labour can be rendered ethically legitimate. Gamini's ethical horizon remains anchored in the ritual worlds that shaped his work with elephants, while Bob's approach – rooted in global welfare principles – cannot accommodate practices that entail suffering. Ashika softens the translation into Sinhala, reframing Bob's disapproval as a general stance against animal distress while adding that "cultural traditions deserve respect and must be renegotiated by those who inhabit them." Her translation does more than con-

[14] Mumby's study of mahouts working with captive Asian elephants in Nepal finds that mahouts themselves associate being a "good mahout" with specific skills, not just with technical tasks such as feeding and cleaning but with the ability to communicate effectively with their elephant, demonstrating attentiveness, respect, and a close understanding of the elephant's behaviour, with responsiveness to verbal cues and polite interaction highlighted as key indicators (Mumby 2019).

vey words; it carefully recalibrates them, creating a narrow passage through which the conversation can continue. In that moment, what surfaces is unmistakable: the limits of ethical alignment, the point beyond which shared imaginaries cannot stretch without fraying.

As the car moves slowly, straining to spot an elephant in the dimming light, Ashika leans forward, almost teasingly, and asks, "Do you really know who I am, Gamini?" The weight of the question hangs in the air, probing whether the mahout truly grasps what it means to be an animal rights activist – the responsibilities, the stakes, and how her work intersects with, or even challenges, Gamini's world. The mahout hesitates, words caught between thought and admission, then finally concedes, "Not exactly." In that fleeting pause, the car feels smaller, the air taut with unspoken tensions. Though they share the same journey and conversations, the full contours of their moral and professional worlds remain shadowed, only partially illuminated by the dim road ahead.

Just then, an elephant appears, breaking the intensity of the moment. A car in the opposite lane stops to admire the animal: a large tusker only a few meters away. We continue slowly, reducing our speed to maintain a safe distance. At that point, Bob draws on his experience, explaining the elephant's behaviour and showing us how to approach him safely. As the sight gradually eases, the conversation shifts to what Ashika, Gamini, and Bob know best together: the individual stories, personalities, and anecdotes of each elephant. Names pass between them – elephants transferred, reassigned, recovering, overstressed, in musth – each carrying its own histories of labour and vulnerability. Ashika shifts fluidly between English and Sinhala, conveying Bob's observations to Gamini and rendering the mahout's points back into English, keeping the dialogue moving across linguistic and cultural lines. I sit in the car, following the cascade of names and updates: some elephants I know well from months of observation, others are new to me. The conversation flows around habits, temperaments, and the care each elephant requires, with Gamini contributing enthusiastically. He gestures animatedly as he recounts episodes in which elephants have shown acts of insubordination or violence toward their caregivers or the crowd, lingering on the most gruesome details and subtly emphasizing his own skill and prowess as a mahout, having so far avoided such incidents himself. Ashika interjects continuously, weaving into the conversation insights from her ongoing informal animal policing work, collecting information on individual elephants in real time. Meanwhile, Bob repeatedly grounds the discussion in the realities of daily life, the animals' suffering, and specific care practices, often revealing his preferences for working with certain mahouts he considers more responsive and taking every opportunity to commend Gamini's attentiveness.

Seated together in the vehicle, intimacy and shared imagination are possible, but only within the narrow confines shaped by unspoken differences and the divergent priorities each brings, the tension of distinct perspectives pressing gently against the small space we share along this stretch of road at night. "Bubbles," as Ashika would describe them to me the following morning at breakfast – each of these worlds presents itself to the others, yet only partially. Each bubble preserves its own internal logic and invisible boundaries. Much remains unspoken: experiences and knowledge that can only be observed or intuited at the edges, never fully accessible to those outside. In Strathern's (1991) terms, these are "partial connections," worlds that touch without ever fully merging. What circulates between these worlds is not consensus, but the practical negotiation of how elephants are to work, and under what ethical terms.

Meanwhile, other solitary forest elephants, briefly illuminated by the headlights of passing cars, move slowly along the roadside, sometimes pausing in the middle of the lane. Each halt forces us to stop, each careful step navigates the obstacles posed by vehicles. They appear as surreal, almost sculptural presences. In these moments, the supposed separation between freedom and captivity seems to collapse: human and elephant lives intersect, negotiated moment by moment, and continuously shaped by one another. As we drive on, the subtle micro-adjustments of the evening linger in our minds, a reminder that the boundaries between these worlds are always partial, never fully graspable, and defined within persistent constraints – highlighting the tensions and contradictions of the intertwined lives of humans and elephants in these hybrid landscapes.

Even in this provisional window of codetermination, the reality of "becoming an elephant" in the Anthropocene (Hathaway 2013; 2015; Bhat, Dundi, Praet, Marvin 2023; Lorimer 2010; 2015) never ends. Saman will soon be prepared for the next Perahera, and in a few months he will leave the camp to join a new temple, re-entering the familiar cycles of ritual work. Gamini will move on as well, taking charge of a female calf at another facility. Bob will follow his own path to Thailand, hopping from one elephant camp to another, country after country, tracing the networks of care and labour that connect these spaces. Ashika will remain in Sri Lanka, revisiting these and other sites, her phone always ready to track the movements of mahouts and elephants. I will follow alongside, drifting from one story to the next, collecting fragments of encounters, gestures, and whispered details. In this ongoing dispersal of humans and elephants alike, labour persists – redistributed, reattached, and redefined across shifting landscapes of captivity.

Conclusions

This article has traced a field of human-elephant labour increasingly defined by movement. Elephants circulate between temples, roadside camps, and tourist venues; mahouts move between animals and employers; and alongside them travel other figures who follow, intercept, and attempt to redirect these trajectories. Ashika tracks elephants and handlers through informal chains of information, positioning herself where transfers occur. Bob moves from one premise to another, carrying techniques, tools, and welfare proposals that depend on access and timing. Circulation here is not abstract mobility but patterned following – a field in which labour, care, and authority are constantly repositioned. Rather than mapping these movements across the island, this article has focused on one nodal site where such trajectories intersect and become visible in practice.

Under these intensified movements, continuity does not disappear, but it becomes unstable. Bonds between elephants and mahouts are forged within compressed temporalities and precarious contracts. Trust must be enacted quickly, sometimes under risk, and may be interrupted by injury, transfer, or managerial decision. What earlier accounts described as durable dyadic attachment (Klixbüll 2016) appears here as something provisional: not absent, but repeatedly reconstructed within infrastructures of ownership, tourism, and regulation. "Labouring together" becomes a situated achievement rather than a background condition.

Ethical transformation, in this landscape, does not arrive through declarative reform. It unfolds through material adjustments: a chain loosened by a few links; a rubber tube tested and resisted; a feeding barrel that redistributes effort between elephant and mahout; a ritual debated but not abandoned. Ashika's translations keep disagreement in motion rather than resolving it. Bob's proposals depend on mobility and access rather than institutional authority. Elephants' responses – hesitation, compliance, refusal – set practical limits to what can be sustained. Sanctuarization does not replace captivity; it reconfigures it. It operates as a process through which labour is redistributed, ethical authority multiplied, and limited zones of autonomy experimentally produced within enduring regimes of infrastructural constraint. Rather than marking a linear shift from exploitation to freedom, sanctuarization intensifies negotiation, rendering visible the contested reorganization of work itself.

Attending to labour reveals that captivity here is less a fixed state than an infrastructural condition that binds actors asymmetrically yet together. Elephants remain tethered within regimes of ownership and visibility; mahouts navigate precarity and proliferating moral expectations; activists and experts

operate through partial, situational influence. Contemporary human-elephant life in Sri Lanka persists within this moving assemblage of constraint and negotiation. It is sustained not by the disappearance of control nor by the triumph of care, but by the ongoing work of staying in relation – link by link, transfer by transfer. These relations persist within the very constraints that make them possible.

References

Barua, M.
2014 Circulating Elephants: Unpacking the Geographies of a Cosmopolitan Animal. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39 (4), pp. 559-573.
2016 Lively Commodities and Encounter Value. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34, pp. 725-744.
2017 Nonhuman Labour, Encounter Value, Spectacular Accumulation: The geographies of a lively commodity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42, pp. 274-288.
2018 Animal work: Metabolic, Ecological, Affective. *Cultural Anthropology*, https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/animal-work-metabolic-ecological-affective.

Benadusi, M.
2024 Running Amok: Taming, Wildness and Captivity in Legal Struggles over Elephants' Rights in Sri Lanka. *Civilisations*, 73, pp. 31-52. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/15j2i

Bhat Dundi, D., Praet, I., Marvin, G.
2023 Good, Quarrelsome, Bad: Animal Agency and Human-Elephant Interactions in the Western Ghats, India. *Frontiers in Conservation Science*, 4, pp. 1-12.

Coulter, K.
2016 *Animals, Work, and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Eason, S.J.
2017 *Alternative Elephant Tourism and Social Media Engagement: A Case Study from Thailand*. MA thesis, University of Canterbury, https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/cc77c7d2-d7f8-48c7-a2ee-7c95986cb7d2/content.

Green, J., Schmidt-Burbach, J., Hartley-Backhouse, L.
2025 Giants in Tourism: Captive Conditions, Industry Trends, and Animal Welfare Implications for Asian Elephants in Tourism from 2014 to 2020. *Frontiers in Ethology*, 4, 1532995.

Hart, L.A., Sundar
2000 Family Traditions for Mahouts of Asian Elephants. *Anthrozoos*, 13 (1), pp. 34-42.

Hathaway, M.
2013 *On the Backs of Elephants: Transnational Environmentalism and Elephant 'Agency'*, in M. Hathaway (ed.), *Environmental Winds: Making the Global in Southwest China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 152-184.
2015 *Wild elephants as actors in the Anthropocene*, in Human Animal Research Network Editorial Collective (eds.), *Animals in the Anthropocene: Critical Perspectives on Non-Human Futures*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp. 221-242.

Jayewardene, J.
1994 *The Elephant in Sri Lanka*, Wildlife Heritage Trust of Sri Lanka, Colombo.

Jørgensen, D.
2015 Rethinking Rewilding. *Geoforum*, 65, pp. 482-485.

Klixbüll, N.
2016 *Cultural Values and Practical Realities in Sri Lankan Human-Elephant Relations*, in P. Locke, J. Buckingham (eds.), *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 115-136.

Kopnina, H., Baker, L.
2023 Conservation, Animal Wellbeing, and Indigenous Participation at an Elephant Sanctuary in Mondulkiri, Cambodia. *Society & Animals*, 32 (5-6), pp. 560-581.

Lainé, N.
2016 *Conduct and Collaboration in Human–Elephant Working Communities of Northeast India*, in P. Locke, J. Buckingham (eds.), *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human–Elephant Relations in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 180-204.
2018 Cooperating with Elephants in Northeastern India. *Sociologie du travail / Sociology of Work* 60 (2), pp. 141-160.
2020a *Living and Working with Giants: A Multispecies Ethnography of the Khamti and Elephant in Northeast India*, MNHN, Paris.
2020b Pratiques ethno-vétérinaires sur les éléphants au Laos. *Revue d'ethnoécologie*, 17, http://journals.openedition.org/ethnoecologie/5917.

Lainé, N., Keil, P.G., Rahmat, K. (eds.)
2023 *Composing Worlds with Elephants: Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, IRD Éditions, Marseille.

Locke, P.
2013 Explorations in Ethnoelephantology: Social, Historical, and Ecological Intersections Between Asian Elephants and Humans. *Environment and Society*, 4, pp. 79-97.
2016 *Animals, Persons, Gods: Negotiating Ambivalent Relationships with Captive Elephants in Chitwan, Nepal*, in P. Locke, J. Buckingham (eds.), *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 159-179.
2017 Elephants as persons, affective apprenticeship, and fieldwork with nonhuman informants in Nepal. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7 (1), pp. 353-376.

Locke, P., Buckingham, J. (eds.)
2016 *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Lorimer, J.
2007 Nonhuman Charisma. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25 (5), pp. 911-932.
2010 Elephants as Companion Species: The Lively Bio-Geographies of Asian Elephant Conservation in Sri Lanka. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35 (4), pp. 491-506.
2015 *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Lorimer, J., Sandom, C., Jepson, P., Doughty, C., Barua, M., Kirby, K.J.
2015 Rewilding: Science, Practice and Politics. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 40, pp. 39-62.

Mar, K.U.
2024 Historical Account of Managing Overabundant wild Asian Elephants in Myanmar by the Kheddah System of Capture. *Animals*, 14 (17), 2506, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14172506.

Mauss, M.
1934 Les techniques du corps. *Journal de Psychologie*, 32 (3-4), pp. 271-293.

Mouret, S., Lainé, N.
2023 Nature(s) at Work: Animal and Environmental Studies and their Relation with Work. *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, 17 (1), http://journals.openedition.org/rac/29856.

Mumby, H.S.
2019 Mahout Perspectives on Asian Elephants and their Living Conditions. *Animals*, 9 (11), 879, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9110879.

Palanivelan, J., Nagarajan, H., Fernandaz, C., Jasimudeen, S., Manivasagam, S., Rajagopal, S.P.R., Bhojan, V., Manivasakan, S.
2025 Guardians of Giants: A Bibliometric Analysis of Mahout-Elephant Relationships. *Frontiers in Animal Science*, 6, 1599053, https://doi.org/10.3389/fanim.2025.1599053.

Perino, A., Pereira, H.M., Navarro, L.M., Fernández, N., Bullock, J.M., Ceaușu, S., Cortés-Avizanda, A.
2019 Rewilding Complex Ecosystems. *Science*, 364 (6438), eaav5570, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aav5570.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M.
2017 *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Sadashige, J.
2024 *Hands Off the Herd: Negotiating Tourist Desires and Animal Welfare at a Thai Elephant Sanctuary*, in J. Hooper, C. Kline (eds.), *Emerging Voices for Animals in Tourism*, CABI, Wallingford, pp. 46-56.

Santiapillai, C., Wijeyamohan, S.
2016 *Conservation and the History of Human/Elephant Relations in Sri Lank*a, in P. Locke, J. Buckingham (eds.), *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 229-241.

Speiran, S.I.M.
2025 The 'Sanctuary Gap': Reviewing the Research on Captive Wildlife Sanctuary Tourism. *Animals*, 15 (4), 496: pp. 1-18. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15040496.

Strathern, M.
1991 *Partial Connections*, Rowman & Littlefield, Walnut Creek.

Whatmore, S.J., Thorne, L.B.
2000 Elephants on the Move: Spatial Formations of Wildlife Exchange. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18 (2), pp. 185-203.