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Your happiness or mine: Influence of affective states and level of contact on public perceptions of elephant tourism

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Abstract

Many captive Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Thailand participate in the tourism industry at attractions known as 'elephant camps.' There has been significant criticism of low welfare venues, where the elephants may experience injuries, poor nutrition, unnatural social environments and aversive handling. Despite increasing concern for animal welfare, the general public often have difficulty identifying the welfare issues affecting captive animals. The aim of this study was to investigate participants' willingness to support an elephant attraction and their perceived emotional value from the experience, based on the affective state of the captive elephant and their level of contact with it. Participants ($n = 590$) from the United States were randomly assigned to one of four vignettes (using a 2×2 experimental design) that described an elephant attraction, varying the affective state of the elephant (feels excellent, feels terrible) and the level of contact they could have with the elephant (low, high). A mixed methods approach was used, where participants provided answers to Likert-type questions, followed by an open-ended response. Participants showed greater willingness to support the elephant attraction and greater perceived emotional value from the experience when the elephant felt excellent, as opposed to when the elephant felt terrible. There were no significant differences between low and high contact for the measures included in this study. Qualitative responses varied greatly, with participants making many assumptions about the elephant and the attraction, revealing potential misconceptions that they had regarding the welfare of captive elephants. This research may be used to encourage a shift in tourism preferences to venues that reflect positive elephant welfare.

Keywords: affective states, animal welfare, contact, elephant, public perception, wildlife tourism