

Book Review

Composing Worlds with Elephants

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While reading the book “*Composing Worlds with Elephants. Interdisciplinary Dialogues*” (edited by Nicolas Lainé, Paul G. Keil and Khatijah Rahmat) I remembered a story narrated by the Jenu Kuruba Adivasi people of Karnataka, who have lived with elephants for hundreds of years. According to the story, certain people control and tame elephants through special powers, but when they lose these powers, the elephants turn wild and may attack or kill them. This story echoes some of the main themes of the book, which challenges the dichotomy between wild and domestic and between nature and culture.

The book originated from an online conference on human-elephant interactions held in 2020. The chapters offer fresh insights into the entangled worlds of humans and elephants and look beyond the dominant frames of conservation biology and ecology. Although most contributors are trained in specific disciplines such as anthropology, biology, ethology, history, architecture, and geography, some integrate insights from other fields and use novel research methods.

The book is divided into four sections. An interesting aspect is that each section, except Section 4, contains an essay exploring elephant-related art. An essay by Shubhra Nayar and Paul G. Keil presents a comprehensive analysis of the Lantana Elephants Project. An article by Philippe Coste focuses on the author's experiences of photographing elephants and mahouts in Laos. Deborah Schrijvers provides a rich explanation of Carlos Casas' film Cemetery. As argued by the editors, the texts and images in the book enable readers to see human-elephant relationships beyond an academic lens, and I

agree with this perspective. When I witnessed the lantana elephants in Bangalore city, the combination of elephants, invasive lantana, and the urban backdrop prompted me to reflect on human-elephant relationships in the light of planetary change.

The first section explores the relationship between wild elephants and humans who share space. The initial chapters by Sayan Banerjee and Anindya Sinha examine human-elephant interactions through the lenses of political ecology and gender. As “the terms ‘human-elephant conflict’ or ‘habitat loss’ do not adequately conjure the daily experiences of farmers and elephants in high-conflict regions” (p. 50), Chapter 2 by Elizabeth Oriol and Toni Frohoff examines farmers' experiences to explore affective ecologies of human-elephant relations. Chapter 3 by Nishant M. Srinivasaiah and Anindya Sinha, and Chapter 4 by Lauren A. Evans and Redempta Njeri Nduguta, provide fascinating accounts of the personalities of individual Asian (India) and African (Kenya) elephants. They were identified and observed using various techniques over a long period.

The following two sections shift focus to the relationship between mahouts and captive elephants in South and Southeast Asia. One of the significant features of these sections is that many of the chapters highlight how the relationship between mahouts and elephants is characterised more by mutual trust and collaboration than by control and dominance. The historian Thomas R. Trautmann (Chapter 5) examines the role of forest people in the capture and training of wild elephants in the Indian subcontinent by drawing from history and present-day ethnography. In Chapter 6, Srikumar M. Menon and

Anindya Sinha provide a detailed account of elephant depictions in the old Buddhist stupa of Kanaganahalli, Karnataka. The elephant sculptures of this ancient stupa provide important insights into human-elephant relationships during the second and third centuries CE. Teckwyn Lim (Chapter 7) investigates the origins of elephant culture in Asia through a phylogenetic analysis of elephant command lexicons. Jacob Shell (Chapter 8) reflects on the future of Asian elephants and mahouts in the context of rapid human population growth, utilising the concept of ‘ecumenopolis’.

An insightful ethnographic study by Nicolas Lainé (Chapter 9) reveals that mahouts in Laos regard elephants as co-producers of knowledge. Mahouts incorporate the knowledge of elephants, particularly regarding medicinal plants and biodiversity, to benefit both species. In Chapter 10, Sreedhar Vijaykrishnan and Anindya Sinha provide a fascinating account of the relationship between captive elephants and mahouts from two South Indian communities, the Malasar and Malayali, comparing their elephant management practices. They also create a dialogue between the past and present of captive elephants and mahouts by utilising ethnographic observations and the ancient elephant treatise *Mātangalīla*.

An article by Jennifer Crawley (Chapter 11) examines factors influencing mahout-elephant relationships across Asia. She argues that the ‘mahout profession is threatened by low socio-economic status and diminishing knowledge and experience in elephant handling’ (p. 218). She recommends more systematic studies to document how these changes impact the welfare of both mahouts and captive elephants. Paul Keil (Chapter 12) examines the phenomenon of musth through a multispecies lens, analysing its physiological, behavioural, and cultural aspects to explain why it is a ‘biosocial’ event.

Since the final section of *Composing Worlds with Elephants* closely relates to my own concerns and experiences, I found it very interesting. As a conservation practitioner who works on human-elephant interactions, I have often encountered the limitations of methods and theories in both the social and natural sciences

while exploring the complexities of interspecies interactions. The chapters in this section offer detailed discussions on the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding elephants and humans in shared landscapes. Additionally, they explore the inherent challenges involved in bringing together various disciplines in elephant research. In Chapter 14, Anandi Gandhi employs multiple methods to study co-existence between elephants and farmers in Thailand. Chapter 15, authored by Tarsh Thekaekara, addresses the tensions that emerge when integrating natural and social science in the study of elephant behaviour in hybrid landscapes. A very insightful article by Hannah S. Mumby (Chapter 16) examines the possibility of incorporating the human dimension into elephant behavioural ecology research. In Chapter 13, Khatijah Rahmat uses “multi-temporality” to explore how elephants are conceptualised in various knowledge traditions.

One significant limitation of the book is that only one chapter is dedicated to African elephants. Furthermore, I believe a more in-depth exploration of role technological interventions in human-elephant coexistence could add greater diversity to the book.

Although the book explores diverse aspects of human-elephant relationships, I think the main question it seeks to address is how to live well with elephants in a rapidly changing world. It is undoubtedly an important resource for envisioning innovative approaches to human-elephant coexistence. The book provides valuable insights for conservationists, wildlife scientists, and anyone interested in the complexities of human-animal and human-nature interactions.

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