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### Service Learning Final Report


When I went on my service learning trip during the summer of 2017/2018, I didn't realize the person who would benefit the most from the service was myself. Since then, I've had wonderful opportunities to reflect upon the experience and utilize the knowledge I had gained. I've come to the understanding that those seven days in a remote Karen hill village in Chiang Mai, Thailand was life-changing. It shifted my perspectives in life, in how I should treat others, not only humans but every living being. In this report, I will detail how I journeyed to help abused elephants and how they helped me become a better person to build a better world.

My service-learning trip, aptly named the "Journey to Freedom", was organized by Elephant Nature Park, a program that aimed to allow participants to "care for elephants and [be] embedded in local tribal village culture" ("Welcome to Elephant Nature Park."). The objectives of the service-learning were apparent on the organization's website, which states it enables participants to "learn the impacts elephants suffer in the entertainment industry" and for them to "aid [the elephants'] rehabilitation and support rescue sites". By doing so, the participants will also volunteer at the tribal villages by teaching English, engaging in cultural exchange, and providing physical labor to build infrastructure and feed rescued elephants. The organizer, ENP, was established during the 1990s, with the overall aim to "provide a sanctuary and rescue center for elephants" and "serve as an umbrella of care for all those under its protection". It is generally regarded as an ethical, if not the most, ethical sanctuary for animals in Thailand. The




organization has also received numerous awards over the years, including but not limited to the Smithsonian and the Asian Hero of the Year (Times Magazine 2005). ENP has been featured in several publications and documentaries, such as the “National Geographic, Animal Planet, BBC, CNN, and Thai and worldwide printed press, radio stations, TV channels”, to promote its tireless work to improve the lives of the abused.

From my service-learning and subsequent research, I’ve learned the background of the organization’s target beneficiaries: the abused elephants in the entertainment industry. Elephants have long been used as tools in human history, from weapons of war in ancient history to logging trees, and now to being abused in entertainment industries, such as in circuses, trekking camps, and street begging (Craker). Captive elephants undergo a process known as “Pajaan”, the “crush”, which describes how baby elephants’ souls are broken. From a young age, before they are weaned, nursing baby elephants are separated from their mothers, locked in small cages, tied up, beaten, burned, starved, and tortured until their will is broken. Afterward, they’re sold into industries to behave in a manner that goes against their natural behaviors. They’re forced to work in circuses, painting pictures with their trunks, or in trekking camps, carrying humans on their backs for twelve hours straight, when they would naturally be eating twenty hours a day in the wild with hundreds of different vegetation, socializing with their tight-knit, loving family members, and engaging in mud baths to nourish their skin. Other than the immeasurable and horrendous emotional scarring they endure working in the entertainment industry by being separated from their natural family, community, and behavior, they also endure physical injuries of broken bones, lacerations, blindness, lameness, and malnutrition, from being mistreated. Elephants are abused by humans because they have long been used as financial assets, as they are the primary source of income for many Thai people. The growth of the tourism industry has



also fueled the demand for elephants in the entertainment industry. For example, Chinese tourists alone saw their “presence in Thailand increased by 263 percent since 2011” (“*Oxford Business Group*”). The elephant camps tripled to meet this demand.


As the demand for elephant entertainment camps rose, so did the cases of abused elephants. My service learning was, therefore, part of a larger initiative by organizations, such as ENP, to address this phenomenon. The role I played doing my service learning journey was that of an active participant; I engaged in all activities with an eager heart and an open mind. On the Monday which my service started, I traveled with my group to the mountain village where I would be staying to help the elephants. On the first day, after we settled in, our guide and instructor, Yo, spent the afternoon leading us to a few rescued elephants, and from a distance to them, explained their respective traumas and history to us so we can begin our learning. This education continued throughout our service learning, in between short and temporary services, our guide would unload onto us vast amounts of information of the pain the elephants suffer while guiding us to see for ourselves their pain, through our direct observation of them being uninhabited in the wild, being happy but scarred. We hiked into mountainous terrain to see rescued elephants nursing wounds and broken bones. We planted sugar cane and cut high protein grass for the injured elephants to consume. We helped out in the elephant rescue and rehabilitation center with minor administration details but mainly spent our time learning how the elephants receive help in the sanctuary. We engaged with all of these elephant activities from a respectful distance while being attentive to the emotional and physical abuse they received from us, humans. Other than our service devoted to elephants, we also engaged in volunteered teaching at a village school for young children for an afternoon and conducted cultural exchange with the local disadvantaged village women.



After I've finished my service-learning, I realized I had an expectation mismatched, that I had numerous misconceptions. Firstly, before my service, I thought volunteers were deeply needed by the community and, most importantly, by the elephants. Our contribution was supposed to be enriching to the local community and that it will have an important impact on the welfare of the target beneficiaries. Secondly, I thought elephants were just animals, creatures we needed to be kind to because we were superior and thus had responsibility for them. However, after the completion of my service-learning, through my observation and learnings, I realized how narrow-minded I was. Firstly, while the community was appreciative of our small services, we did not actually address their actual needs. Additionally, we did not provide any direct, substantial impact on the elephants. I realized I learned more and felt more impacted by the elephants than they were by us.


Firstly, in regards to the humans we were supposed to help: the village school children and women, we did not address their needs. We were only informed that we would visit their school and engage in cultural exchange in hopes of "developing local school children's learning experiences". No further information was received, and we had therefore not prepared anything in response. While we taught them English words, I found what they truly desired was art supplies to draw and engage in creative work. Surface improvements can therefore be made by simply enabling better communication between organizers and volunteers so that the volunteers can do prior research on the local tribal community and address their needs accordingly, such as by providing the correct school materials.

However, in regards to the main target beneficiaries of my service-learning trip, elephants, I had delivered during my service with no direct, measurable impact. I did not address the elephants' dire medical needs or aid directly in their rescue from entertainment sites that




abused them. The little service I had contributed to the elephants was in terms of providing cut vegetation to injured elephants, thereby giving them immediate relief of food consumption. It seemed to me I had done nothing to help my target beneficiaries for the long term and that it was difficult to measure the success of my trip because how could I determine the happiness of an elephant? However, after my reflections and readings, I've come to the understanding that while my service during my service-learning trip provides short term aid at most, my continued support for organizations like ENP and what they stand for enables long term improvements for my target beneficiaries. Organizations like ENP addresses both elephant and community needs constructively by providing the mahouts, human owners of elephants, with sustainable, fairly paid jobs, their wives and children are provided with educations and training to better their future, and the elephants are cared for to live as freely as possible in sanctuaries. ENP can do all this because of the economic contribution of the service-learning participants. Additionally, there is an importance that a larger organization, outside of individual participants, help facilitate this well-rounded impact on a sustainable and holistic scale. Furthermore, there is a reason why ENP's service-learning programs are tailored to be so devoted to the volunteers' education: it addresses the supply and demand problem effectively, which thereby tackles the problem of abused elephants at its root.

Through my research on service-learning, I've learned how it is both equal parts of service, giving, and learning, receiving. In the article, "Service-Learning as Social Education", it states how "service-learning is a pedagogical process that actively involves students in social analysis, social criticism, and social participation". Therefore, it is a process that immerses students in an environment where they can actively learn the root of the issues they service, critique it, and their understanding, to engage in addressing it actively. My service-learning



program thus devoted much of its time to my first-hand education as that is the most effective way for me to learn about the issues of the target beneficiaries I service, and the most constructive way I, as a student, can help them, through my education channels. Since my service ended, I've given four presentations, two in secondary school, two in university, on the life-changing learnings I received on my service learning. By extension, I can measure my contribution to helping abused elephants by how I utilized what I've learned to keep the dialogue about ethical animal treatment on-going. Continuous advocacy from not only me, but from other volunteers, through presentations, blog posts, YouTube videos, enables an increasing awareness for ethical treatment, which, due to these conversations, continues to lead to a rise in eco-tourism; which thereby addresses the root of the issue: elephants no longer being in entertainment camps for tourists to visit, but in sanctuaries, for them to observe from a distance (Jacobitz).

Lastly, what I've gained from my service-learning was a renewed perspective on life and all its beings. Before my service, I thought elephants were just animals to be cared for because humans, being the superior species, were responsible for protecting them. From meeting elephants firsthand and reading scientific, animal behavioral research, I've realized how warped and detrimental this mindset is. Human beings have lived with the assumption that we are the ruler; as the Greek philosopher Protagoras so eloquently puts it, "Man is the measure of all things". But by that extension, we, human beings, thus assign things and beings value in accordance with how it compares to us. But I only needed to pay attention to the elephants, and I realized how flawed that understanding of humans in relation to other species is. In "Beyond Words", the scientific book unravels the elephant world and how the elephant "think and feel". If we humans perceive ourselves as the ruler which all other beings fall short of, we will miss the



larger truth of the world. Humans are animals; we are part of a larger natural community. Our emotional responses, which we think are so uniquely human, such as love, grief, sorrow, are a result of our inherited emotional and nervous systems, a product of our evolutionary biology, a product which transcends and is shared by many beings in the world, such as elephants. By joining the service-learning, I saw for myself that its validity. The observations I had and the logical deductions I made proved to me that elephants are feeling, thinking beings who are not subordinate to us but part of our larger community of life. Humans are not separate from animals, and other animals are not separate from us. Therefore, humans should have the mentality of compassion for our fellow brethren, rather than the mentality of domination. It is not our place to assign value, function, or meaning to other beings, such as elephants; they have their own lives and dignity we, as part of a larger community of natural life, need to respect, for us to build a better, more understanding world.



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