



Left/Below: PAWS' Asian bull elephant Nicholas



Veterinary Care for Elephants in a Protected Contact Management System

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The topic of elephant handling and training has become part of the national dialog on elephant care in light of a wave of legislative action banning the use of the elephant bullhook in progressive cities across the country, and, now, in California with SB 716, the bill that would ban the bullhook statewide.

One of the claims made by proponents of the circus-style training system known as "free contact," which relies on use of the bullhook to control elephants, is that elephants in free contact receive better veterinary care than those in "protected contact" management, which is what we practice at PAWS. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I have worked with elephants in both free and protected contact, and have a broad base of experience in caring for them. So I welcome this opportunity to share with you information about PAWS' comprehensive program of veterinary care for the elephants living at the ARK 2000 sanctuary.

All of the elephants at PAWS are trained and managed in protected contact which uses only positive reinforcement training. The elephant care team and veterinary care staff interact with elephants through a barrier which protects both humans and elephants. The elephants are trained to voluntarily cooperate with us with food treats and words of praise as their reward for moving into and holding a specific body position. Elephants at

PAWS are never punished or disciplined for any behavior.

In contrast, free contact describes a management system where human handlers occupy the same space with elephants, using no barriers, and use

a bullhook (aka ankus or "guide") on sensitive areas of an elephant's body to cue desired behaviors. This method of training is used in circuses, elephant rides, and in almost every context where you see a trainer physically interacting with an elephant with no protective barrier.

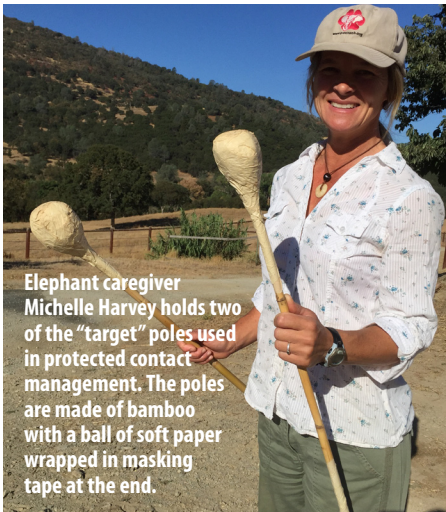
At PAWS, the elephants are asked to touch a specific body part to a "target" - a soft, padded ball on the end of a long stick. Once they move forward to touch the target, they are rewarded with words of praise and often a food treat such as small bits of fruit, vegetables, or other special treats. We might ask them to target their forehead, an ear, or a foot, depending on what part of the body we need to examine. The elephants learn a variety of specific behaviors that are essential for proper care and maintenance of health. Among those are holding still, presenting a foot, opening the mouth, turning around, and allowing any part of the body to be touched or examined.

As part of PAWS' comprehensive preventative medicine program, blood samples are collected at least twice a year from each elephant. Elderly or frail elephants are sampled monthly, or as often as necessary to monitor health status. Elephants stand next to a protective barrier and position their ear in a specially designed opening in the barrier. Elephants have thin skin and many large veins behind their ears - evolutionary adaptations to help them cool off in the heat. Blood samples

continued



Each elephant barn at ARK 2000 is equipped with a barrier wall that has been designed specifically for elephant care. Strategically placed openings, like the one in the photo above, allow veterinary and elephant care staff to work closely, and safely, with the elephants. Here you see Elephant Manager Brian Busta (right) asking Asian bull elephant Nicholas to voluntarily move toward the "target" and open his mouth and hold still, enabling PAWS' veterinarian Dr. Jackie Gai to check his teeth. Elephants grow up to six sets of teeth throughout their long lives, and it is important to make sure that they are aligned and wearing properly.



Elephant caregiver Michelle Harvey holds two of the “target” poles used in protected contact management. The poles are made of bamboo with a ball of soft paper wrapped in masking tape at the end.

are easily collected from an ear vein when an elephant is properly trained. The protective wall keeps the staff and veterinarian safe when working close to an elephant. Before a veterinarian can do a blood draw, a trainer must first get the elephant into the proper position by “stationing” the elephant with the soft target while rewarding with food and/or praise. Our elephants are so comfortable with blood collection that we could draw it daily if needed.

Elephants at PAWS are also trained to place any one of their feet through a specially designed opening in the protective barrier and to hold it there to allow close examination of the foot, filing and trimming of toenails, pad and cuticles, and to stand still for X-rays of their toes, wrists, and Ankle joints. Arthritis and foot problems are common in captive elephants, the result of a host of conditions only found in captivity such as standing on hard surfaces and restricted movement. Being able to properly care for their feet and detect early signs of arthritis is vitally important.



Openings at the bottom of the protective barriers are specifically designed for elephant foot care. In this photo, Brian has asked Nicholas to voluntarily present his foot to Dr. Gai. While Dr. Gai does her examination, Brian keeps Nicholas still with rewards of praise and bits of fruit treats. Proper foot care is very important in captivity, and routine checkups help detect problems early.

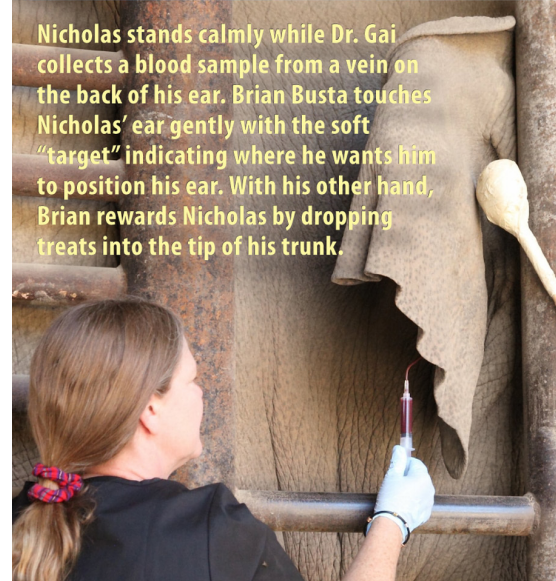
Even briefly uncomfortable medical procedures such as skin biopsies, lancing of abscesses, intravenous and intramuscular injections, vaccinations, and enemas can easily be performed in protected contact once an elephant has learned the behavior necessary for that procedure.

We are often asked if it is difficult to re-train an elephant in protected contact, when she or he had been handled in free contact prior to coming to PAWS. This was the story with Asian bull elephant Nicholas who arrived at PAWS in 2007, having been trained since birth in the free contact method of the circus where he once performed. In his previous home, Nicholas was so aggressive and fearful that veterinarians were unable to perform even the most basic testing such as blood collection or trunk washes without strong sedation or general anesthesia. Soon after settling in at PAWS, our staff worked to gain his trust and to assure him that he was safe from reprimand. When he first saw the soft target that we use, he shied away from it as if worried about being hurt by it. Once he realized that we would never physically punish him, and that his cooperation with us meant tasty and wonderful rewards, he quickly adapted to moving toward the soft target. Nicholas’ transition from free to protected contact is typical of many other elephants who have come to PAWS, as these highly intelligent and sensitive animals quickly learn there is nothing to fear.

We are also asked if the elephants ever just walk away and refuse to cooperate with us. The fact is, they can because their engagement with us is voluntary. (Elephants can also refuse to cooperate with trainers in free contact, as was seen with Nicholas, though it is usually at a painful cost.) These are very large, strong animals with an abundance of intelligence, individual personalities, and free will. In protected contact elephants have the freedom to choose whether or not to participate, as they are never dominated or coerced in any way. With proper reward-based training, they are usually both willing and eager participants in their own health care. Elephants almost always look forward to interacting with us, and we are usually able to perform the procedure or obtain the desired sample. Even a bull in musth, like Nicholas, looks forward to



Nicholas stands calmly while Dr. Gai collects a blood sample from a vein on the back of his ear. Brian Busta touches Nicholas’ ear gently with the soft “target” indicating where he wants him to position his ear. With his other hand, Brian rewards Nicholas by dropping treats into the tip of his trunk.



“working” with us.

In situations where an elephant refuses to cooperate with a trainer or veterinarian, there are other options that may be used depending on how urgent or critical is the need for the procedure. All of the PAWS’ elephant barns are equipped with either a restraint chute (a narrow area where an elephant can be confined comfortably) or a hallway where an elephant can be temporarily held while being examined or treated. That said, the restraint chutes are seldom used or necessary. Sedation or anesthesia is a last resort and is usually reserved for surgery or invasive dental work. The vast majority of veterinary procedures go very smoothly with fully cooperative and enthusiastic elephants. ❖