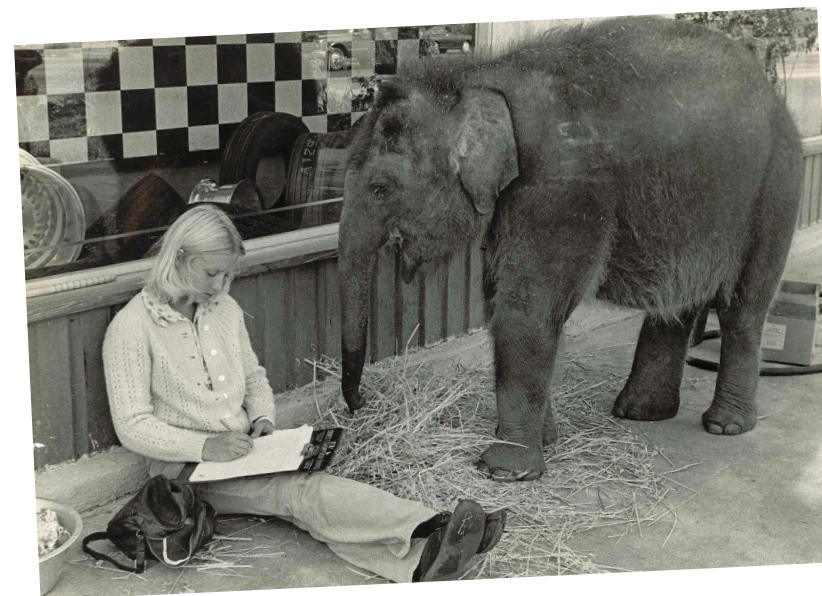




One woman's adoption of a baby elephant began a forty-two-year journey that has revolutionized the care and management of captive elephants worldwide.



She explains that her relationship evolved from being Tarra's caretaker to being "like her mom." Tarra went through the "terrible twos" and then quickly matured from age three through seven. "She was so smart and curious. Growing up with her was such an adventure. We did everything together. When traveling we shared the same trailer. At home we shared two acres, she having the majority of the space with me in her front yard."

When Tarra became a teenager she exhibited another shift. Instead of being cooperative she became grouchy and bored, and began to rebel, showing little to no interest in the things she used to enjoy.

It became clear that Tarra was changing, growing up, developing different emotional needs and desires. Finally Carol realized that it was hormones. "She was very much like a human at age thirteen." During this time their relationship became a bit strained. They were still traveling, and in order to protect Tarra from her rebellious self, Carol had to become stricter with her. It was around that time that Carol started re-evaluating their future together.

Gradually Carol began to believe that for Tarra to be healthy she needed to live as close to natural for an elephant as possible. Reintroduction into the wild was not possible for many reasons. So Carol began envisioning what Tarra's ideal captive-world would look like. She searched for an elephant refuge that might already exist but found none. Some who worked with elephants in zoos and circus did not understand the relationship Carol and Tarra shared. But many did, and encouraged Carol to pursue her dream of creating an elephant refuge. The place would have lots of room and not be open to the public. Tarra would have autonomy, be able to make her own choices, continue her relationship with Carol if she so desired, and develop close relationships with other elephants.

Over a ten-year time period, Carol developed a *pros and cons* list for a refuge for Tarra, which Carol knew would include other elephants. The *pros* included lots of

20-year-old Buckley sits with Fluffy outside her owner's tire store a few months before Carol purchased her and renamed her Tarra.

animal in captivity and growing fast—she already weighed more than eight hundred pounds. The man who owned her used a

pocket-full of jellybeans to control her. Carol had to find a better way to get her to cooperate.

"Our relationship shifted over the years," Carol shares. "Initially I was like her caretaker. I made sure she was warm enough and her truck was clean, and all of that. Within a year I was exclusively taking care of her and, as per my request, she was no longer on exhibit at the tire store." After two years, in order to have full responsibility over her wellbeing, Carol became her owner.

They became "permanent partners," and started performing together at a theme park in northern California. It was a new park and very progressive as far as amusement parks go. Tarra and Carol were the star attraction in the circus theme show for two seasons. Then Carol, twenty-three and a novice in circus, thought: wouldn't it be great to go on the road and work in a *real* circus? So she booked herself and Tarra in a circus, which led to eight years' traveling throughout the U.S., performing at different circuses as an independent contractor. "During that time, Tarra and I grew very close."

OPPOSITE: ALEXEY KUZNETSOV | DREAMSTIME.COM

REFUGE AND COMPASSIONATE CARE FOR ELEPHANTS

Pioneering a Humane Approach to Animal Care

WHEN CAROL BUCKLEY was nineteen she enrolled in an exotic animal training school in southern California. In that same city there was a baby elephant named Fluffy, less than a year old, who had just been imported from Thailand and was on display in the back of a truck at a tire store. When Carol discovered Fluffy she volunteered to take care of her. As she

reminisces, "We began our lives together from this very unusual place, for which I am very thankful. She started me on this forty-two-year journey."

Carol had done some dog training using positive reinforcement in high school. She adapted what she had learned to care for Tarra aka Fluffy. "I didn't realize that what I was doing was relationship building," she says, "but it was natural for me and comfortable, so that is what I used with Tarra." But Tarra was a wild



they do this is through continual dominance: brute force, intimidation and pain. Carol quickly realized that allowing these elephants to have autonomy, like she designed at her refuge in America, was impossible, because the elephants are viewed as money-generating beasts of burden.

Keeping elephants chained and controlled with negative reinforcement goes back thousands of years in Asia. Carol wanted to teach the mahouts a gentler way to manage elephants, but there were challenges. Initially the mahouts failed to comprehend the concept of kindness to an animal that could kill them at any moment. Additionally, being a male dominated occupation, the mahouts could not fathom that this woman

Keeping elephants chained and controlled with negative reinforcement goes back thousands of years in Asia. Carol wanted to teach the mahouts a gentler way to manage elephants, but there were challenges.

land, a water source, good vegetation, a species-suitable climate, a chain-free barn, and empathetic caregivers. "I so appreciate that in those first two decades with Tarra," she recalls, "I learned what was needed, a blue print of sorts, the best things to do for Tarra and other elephants." All the things that did not enhance their life or benefit them were on the *cons* list. This included not using chains, elephant bull hooks or any kind of control, not even voice control.

The main idea for the refuge was to design it in such a way that the elephants would never need to be told what to do. Because, as Carol explains, "Control is employed when facilities fail to meet the elephants' physical, psychological and emotional needs."

Carol's First Refuge Project

WHEN TARRA TURNED twenty-one, Carol founded an elephant sanctuary in Tennessee.

On March 3rd, 1995, Carol and Tarra drove to the property she had purchased for them: a hundred acres of private, pristine pastures, trees and ponds. This refuge, designed as a result of the relationship Carol

and Tarra shared, would become the gold standard for captive-held elephants. Over the next fifteen years the refuge rescued twenty-three elephants, each one bringing their unique personality to the family. "The sanctuary is such a holy place," Carol comments. "The land is amazing and the elephants there are blessed."

Compassionate Elephant Care

IN 2010 CAROL FOUNDED Elephant Aid International to further the outreach of compassionate care that she had designed at The Elephant Sanctuary. This protocol gives the elephants autonomy without dominating them. "It is a form of control," she admits, "but done in a passive way: to encourage elephants to cooperate with whatever caregivers need to do, such as giving supplements, doing foot trimming, and whatever is required for health checks or treatment." The elephants have the option to say yes or no with regard to their care. If an elephant says no, the caregiver says, "Okay, we will try again tomorrow." Elephants are extremely intelligent. Ultimately they cooperate with the request because of their relationship

Buckley is working to free Lambodhar Prasad from chains by creating Nepal's first steel pipe corral for bulls. He is one of the nine adult bull elephants owned by the Nepal government and has lived in chains for six decades. Opposite: Buckley instructs mahouts at Tiger Tops resort in Nepal on elephant welfare.

with the caregiver, and they clearly understand that the choice is theirs to make.

After founding Elephant Aid International, Carol went to Asia and discovered a completely different world when it comes to elephants. Asian elephants are captive-held, trained, housed and used exactly the same way they have been for decades and identical to how performing elephants in the United States are treated. This includes the tool used to control them, the ankus or bull hook, as well as the mentality and philosophy of the trainers. Carol found this very surprising because this was halfway around the planet. She wanted to bring a more compassionate approach to elephant care in Asia but realized it wasn't going to be easy.

Chain Free Means Pain Free

ELEPHANTS IN ASIA ARE kept on chains. If elephants are not chained it is because they are working under the control of their *mahout* (trainer in Asia). The mahout's main responsibility is to control the elephant. The way

from America had ever worked with elephants nor had knowledge that would benefit them.

So Carol decided to take a different approach. She offered her elephant pedicure services for free. In Asia there is little foot trimming tradition. In the past, elephants lived in the forest. Even when they were captive-held they would be released to wander the forest and forage for vegetation. They walked on natural substrate that kept their footpads and nails properly worn and healthy.

But in modern days, releasing elephants to forage unattended in the forest is no longer the practice. The lack of foot trimming tradition meant that Carol was not challenging mahout culture. The mahouts accepted her offer to provide pedicures for their elephants, which opened the door to better understanding. The mahouts soon began to trust and accept her.

Though they could not quite grasp why a woman would be working with elephants, they saw that she was getting around these elephants in a way that was safe. She was trimming their elephants' feet and showing them problems that they had no idea existed. Most importantly, Carol showed the mahouts respect and empathized with their problems and concerns. She continued to return to Nepal and Thailand twice a year to do foot trimming, and during that time she developed a rapport with the mahouts, the government, the local veterinarians and techs.



Carol designed and built Nepal's first chain-free corral and the result was an incredible success. And when the first family corral was done, "it was like a huge family reunion—they were screaming, hollering, crying and touching."

In 2013 Carol was working with the National Trust for Nature Conservation in Nepal, a non-profit conservation organization with six elephants. Kiran, a local vet tech was assigned by NTNC to accompany Carol on her foot trimming rounds for the local elephant owners. This arrangement further increased her credibility in the eyes of the locals and gave Kiran the opportunity to develop foot-trimming skills, at which he excelled.

An Elephant Family Reunion

DURING CAROL'S FIRST VISIT to Nepal she saw Sweetie Kali, a captive-born female elephant—less than ten years old—exhibiting non-stop stereotypical behavior. Stereotypic behavior is an indicator of poor welfare, a coping mechanism and response to stress. Many captive-held animals, including elephants, engage in stereotypical behavior—a repetitive

movement much like what severely autistic people engage in: rocking, bobbing, swaying, pacing and self mutilation. The repetitive movement triggers endorphins in the brain, so the elephant is self-medicating and at the same time normal brain function ceases. It is a very unhealthy state for an elephant to be in, and with this elephant it was non-stop.

Sweetie Kali was chained and living twenty feet away from her mother—they could see each other but they could not touch. If at any time the two elephants would speak to each other, the mahouts would yell at them to shut up. As Carol explains, "Elephants express many emotions including fear and happiness, which they express through vocalizations—but in this captive situation, such expression is denied them." The mahouts and upper management claimed to be unaware why Sweetie Kali engaged in the abnormal

LESTER WOODWARD | DREAMSTIME.COM

Buckley, Tarra and Bella the dog, Tarra's best friend, share a touching moment together at the sanctuary Buckley created for Tarra.

was punished for her effort to cope with her situation.

Carol met with upper management and asked to be allowed to create a chain-free corral for this elephant. She told them, "I guarantee that she will stop bobbing because the corral will provide natural behavior enrichment. She will have things to do, natural behavior to engage in." They agreed. Carol designed and built Nepal's first chain-free corral financed by EAI. The result was an incredible success.

Inside Sweetie Kali's forested corral they put piles of dirt, a water source, toys and things for her to do. Her bobbing stopped. Seeing the success NTNC said, "Let's do this for all the elephants in our stable." Elephant Aid International was a fledgling non-profit and did not have the funds for such a big project. But unwilling to miss the opportunity to unchain more elephants, Carol began letting people know about her

behavior. But they admitted to thinking it was not normal and being embarrassed by it. Instead of providing behavior enrichment to help with the situation, Sweetie Kali

Chain Free Means Pain Free project on Facebook and other platforms. Supporters stepped up to help. By the end of the year EAI had raised enough funds to convert NTNC's elephant stable, freeing a total of six elephants from chains.

Elephants are highly social and family-oriented, so to keep them isolated from each other is contrary to their nature. Everything about females is group oriented. As they were converting the NTNC *hattisar* (elephant stable), Carol spoke with the chief government veterinarian about letting some of the related elephants live together. Sweetie Kali had been off chains for a few months, her mother Male Kali lived right next door and had just had another baby named Hem Gaj. The veterinarian agreed that the family of three should be allowed to live together in a multi-acre corral. When the family corral was done, it couldn't have been more rewarding. Carol says, "it was like a huge family reunion—they were screaming, hollering, crying and touching." The mahouts started to jump up to stop what they misread as aggression. Carol was shocked at how little the mahouts appeared to understand and recognize about elephant emotions. She quickly calmed the mahouts down and explained

to them, “They’re loving each other. This is their display of over-the-top joy.”

Soon afterward, Kamal Kunwar, Chief Warden of Nepal’s Chitwan National Park, approached Carol saying, “I want to get all of our elephants off chains.” The government had almost a hundred elephants and 165 mahouts. These elephants are used for anti-pouching patrol. This was a dream come true for Carol so she immediately accepted the challenge. Over the next eighteen months Elephant Aid International raised funds while Carol designed sixty-four corrals in fifteen different remote *hattisar* locations in the wilds of Chitwan National Park. Materials were ordered from India, as well as a crew to build them. The new corrals were completed in June 2015. To date, EAI has built corrals for 106 elephants in India, Thailand and Nepal.

A New Elephant Refuge

ELEPHANT AID INTERNATIONAL’S newest project is Elephant Refuge North America. Using the same criterion as her original elephant sanctuary, Carol began searching for a perfect environment for a new refuge, including the climate, substrate, trees, vegetation and waterways. Learning from past experiences, Carol added two items to the list of requirements; the property needed to be no more than one hour from an international airport, and within a thirty minutes drive of a tractor supply store. After almost two years of searching throughout the southeastern United States, the perfect parcel of land was located in Decatur County, GA. Escrow closed December 14, 2016.

Elephant Refuge North America is in a rural location with no road frontage and privacy galore. The land is perfect for elephants: gently rolling hills interspersed with pastures and trees; numerous springs, creeks and streams throughout the property; and three spring-fed lakes, ideal for elephants who love to spend time in the water. Although elephants can swim, submerging in shallow water is what they prefer. In addition to being both fun and relaxing, wallowing in shallow waters helps to reduce their body temperature during hot weather.

The winter average low temperature is forty degrees, which means the elephants can be outside all the time. They will have a barn, as nights will sometimes get lower than forty, but they will be able to be out on natural substrate and moving most of the time, important for their wellbeing.

The time frame for elephants moving to Elephant Refuge North America depends upon donations. “The

sooner we raise the funds,” Carol comments, “the sooner we can build the facilities and bring the elephants. And, the first elephant to come will be Tarra.” In order to give the elephants true autonomy, Elephant Refuge North America will not be open to the public. However there will be volunteer and internship programs and other ways to feel connected and get involved. The first internship program will be for mahouts. In a collaborative effort with Asian governments, mahouts will spend a minimum of one year learning Compassionate Elephant Care through hands-on experience. They will take these skills, knowledge and confidence back to their home country and teach fellow mahouts. Carol offers, “I believe this is how we are going to completely change how elephants are cared for in Asia.”

Elephant Aid International has conducted volunteer programs in Nepal and Thailand building chain-free corrals. In September 2016 EAI conducted its first foot care workshop in Nepal. This workshop was so successful—attracting participation from around the world—it will be offered again in 2017. The workshop provides foot care training for foreigners, benefits the elephants and mahouts who participate, and provides much appreciated revenue for EAI. Most of the workshop participants were veterinarians, vet techs, and those doing elephant related NGO projects in Asia. “I’m only one person,” Carol comments, “but if I can teach many people how to do this, more elephants will benefit.”

At Elephant Refuge North America there will be cameras with live feed video streaming on Elephant Aid International’s website. People will be able to click on various cameras to see the elephants in real time. It will be a non-invasive window into the elephant’s world, “I want people everywhere to actually *see* the elephants in a natural environment, without disrupting or interfering in their lives.” So there will be cameras throughout the refuge and we humans will be welcome to share the elephants’ daily lives! 🌸

© 2017 by Truth Consciousness. Photographs on pages 23-25 and 27 © Carol Buckley. This article is based upon an interview with Carol Buckley and *Light of Consciousness* Editor, Sita Stuhlmiller, in October 2016. Carol is the Founder of Elephant Aid International and Elephant Refuge North America. She was honored for her innovative work by the 2001 Genesis Awards; as A Hero for The Planet by *Time* magazine; and named One of Nine Women saving the Planet by *Care2* in 2016. She is a well-known speaker on the subject of compassionate elephant care and captive-held elephant rehabilitation. For more information, including how you can support this nonprofit, visit elephantaidinternational.org.