

# ELEPHANT'S DEATH COULD CHANGE CAMBODIA TOURISM



Cambodia tourism industry faces a worldwide criticism of animal rights groups. Last week, Sambo, a 40-year-old Asian female elephant died outside Angkor Wat after it gave rides in the scorching heat. The elephant that has been carrying tourists around the temple for the last 15 years died because of overworking in temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Critics point out that this is one more reason as to why the elephant riding tours should be regulated.

The owner of the Angkor Elephant Company, Oam Kiri, said that he has reduced the working hours of his other elephants by an hour following Sambo's death. His elephants would now work for 2 hours 30 minutes in the morning and 2 hours late afternoon. **Concerned travelers and conservationists are of the opinion that the reduction is not enough and that Cambodia tourism authorities should introduce stricter regulation.**

A Change.org petition for ending the Angkor Wat archaeological park elephant rides had mustered almost 100,000 signatures. According to the petition, there is nothing like cruelty-free elephant rides.

After Sambo's death, the Angkor Elephant Company with 13 elephants has the largest concentration of captive elephants in the country. Many of the 2 million tourists who visited Angkor Wat, the main attraction of Cambodia tourism offer, last year enjoyed a ride on an elephant.

Since 1986, Asian elephants are listed as an endangered species after its population declined by 50 percent in the preceding 60 to 75 years because of habitat loss and poaching. Though Asian elephants are there in 12 other South Asian and South-east Asian countries, their population in Cambodia continues to decline.

While it is difficult to ascertain the exact numbers of Asian elephants as they live in dense forests and rough terrain, it is estimated to be around 40,000 to 52,300. Cambodia has less than one percent of the total population.

In Cambodia, the main habitat of Asian elephants is in the southwest mountainous region in Mondulkiri province. The place belongs to the people of Bunong who used to capture elephants and domesticate them. However, there has been substantial decline in this practice over the last 20 years because of the rarity of the species and Cambodian government's efforts to bring down the number of elephants in captivity.

In a report published in 2011 by Matthew Maltby and Gavin Bouchier from Fauna and Flora International and Perth Zoo, Australia, respectively, it was explained that under the Cambodian law, illegal killing of Asian elephants and trading in elephant parts are punishable and attract lengthy jail sentence. However, the capacity of law enforcement officials to counter wildlife crime is limited and the weak penal system seldom prosecutes offenders.

Maltby and Bouchier feel that the Cambodia's captive Asian elephant population would die out in about 10 to 20 years from now because of inadequate care. According to Phnom Penh Post, **tourists pay about \$30 for an elephant ride, the iconic attraction of Cambodia tourism. Increasing the resting period of elephants could cause financial hardships for people working in the**

**booming ecotourism segment.**

On the other hand, opponents of keeping elephants in captivity are of the opinion that adequate rest and better living conditions would prolong the life expectancy of the elephants and therefore offer greater financial rewards to their owners.

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