



Elephant Healthcare and Welfare Workshop 23 -29 September, 2018 ~ Myanmar

“Yu Moe Yin Offers A Teachable Moment”

By Hollis Burbank-Hammarlund

Fifty-seven year-old Yu Moe Yin is one of eight elephants living in retirement at Green Hill Valley (GHV). Unlike her former decades-long ‘job’ as a logging elephant, her time is now spent leisurely exploring the wild forests, rivers, and hillsides surrounding Myanmar’s premier elephant sanctuary. GHV’s mahouts refer to Yu Moe Yin by her nickname, “Model,” because she has the perfect build for a logging elephant—muscular and strong. Her retirement came after she suffered a serious wound inflicted by a wild bull elephant.

The story of Yu Moe Yin and her ‘sulcus issue’ is a perfect example of the success of our ElephantCARE ASIA Workshop’s holistic approach, which blended veterinary healthcare information and positive reinforcement training (PRT) in order to better care for elephants in a non-stressful way. Elephants managed with PRT choose to participate in their care.



Yu Moe Yin.

Positive Reinforcement Training. As part of our comprehensive workshop curriculum, elephant behavior specialist Erin Ivory presented a wide variety of information in lecture and field formats regarding positive reinforcement training of captive elephants. Among many other presentations, her instruction included “The Science & Art of Teaching: How Elephants Become Willing Participants in their Own Care.”

Veterinary Care Instruction. Dr. Willem Schaftenaar (veterinarian) presented information about “Dental Disorders in Elephants,” including sulcus infections and their treatment. A sulcus is the socket in which an elephant’s tusk is embedded. Left untreated, sulcus infections can be fatal.

Dr. Susan Mikota (veterinarian) presented in lecture format and taught in field lab sessions “Health and Wellness Exam: Body Score, Signs of Health & Disease.” From eyes, to ears, to skin, to teeth, to feet, to body weight and more, she walked participants through proper elephant health examination protocols.



Dr. Willem Schaftenaar in the classroom at Green Hill Valley, Myanmar.

Elephant Care Field Training. Our workshop participants took what they learned in the classroom to the field using their new-found knowledge to perform health checks on GHV's eight elephants. During these exams, Yu Moe Tin was found to have a sulcus injury. Clearly a sensitive area, Yu Moe Yin did not want our team of veterinarians or her mahout to touch her mouth, thus making a complete examination of her sulcus impossible.



Health exam; discovering Yu Moe Yin's painful sulcus.

TRAIN TO TOUCH & TREAT: Yu Moe Yin's sulcus issue presented the perfect teachable moment for our workshop participants. She needed further evaluation immediately and our team of workshop instructors knew how to make that happen. It was all hands on deck!

First, GHV's mahouts made target poles from materials found on site. A target pole is a flexible stick with a tip wrapped in soft material that is used to shape elephant behavior through touch. It is used in conjunction with a whistle or a word, and a food treat, that tells the elephant "Yes, that's the behavior I'm seeking."



Making target poles.

Second, GHV’s mahouts built a training wall—a 3-sided, wooden fence-like structure to separate Yu Moe Yin from her mahout and Erin during positive reinforcement training sessions.



Building the training wall.

Then, over the course of just a few short days—and working with Yu Moe Yin’s mahout, Kyaw Zin Min, so he would learn PRT techniques—Erin trained Yu Moe Yin to allow our team of veterinarians to freely examine her sulcus and her teeth. Using the target pole, yummy treats, and a whistle, Erin demonstrated to our workshop participants how PRT inspires elephants to work *with* veterinarians not against them, thereby ensuring they receive the care and treatment they need when they need it.



Positive reinforcement training session with Erin Ivory.

Our team of veterinarians subsequently determined Yu Moe Yin's sulcus irritation was caused by food or dirt debris; it was cleaned and, since the workshop's conclusion, GHV's mahouts have continued to check and treat her condition on a regular basis.

Our workshop's serendipitous teachable moment was a happy, healthy ending for Yu Moe Yin and a successful demonstration of the power of holistic healthcare for elephants—*exactly* the knowledge our ElephantCARE ASIA team wished to impart to our workshop participants.



Yu Moe Yin allows her mahout to touch her sulcus and mouth after PRT training.



Sayar Ba (GHV's chief veterinarian), Dr. Susan Mikota, and Dr. Willem Schaffenaar consult on Yu Moe Yin's health evaluation.