

GOOD CAPTIVE ELEPHANT CARE IS ALIVE AND WELL

[Home](#) > [NAIA Library](#) > [NAIA Articles](#) > GOOD CAPTIVE ELEPHANT CARE IS ALIVE AND WELL

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Dreams come in all shapes and sizes, and mine came in the rather large size of 13,500 pounds. That seems like a weighty dream, but it finally came true when I got to spend the week with Cora, a 46-year-old Asian elephant weighing 9000 pounds, and Shannon a 22-year-old African elephant weighing about 4500 pounds.



I have dreamed about working with elephants my entire life. I have read everything I could get my hands on about their history, their care in confinement and their plight in the wild. My research showed me that there is a big debate going on between animal rights activists and animal welfare proponents. I have been finding my own path through all the information available.

Since my background is in public relations and marketing, I was amazed at how talented some organizations were at providing bits and pieces of information to make their point – even if their point was wrong. I had to dig deeper on my own to get the true picture. I wish these groups would use the money that is put into these sometimes-manipulative campaigns into supporting animal care and education.

I found out how manipulative some groups could be after meeting Bill and Cindy Morris and their magnificent elephants and spending a week with them. I met Bill and Cindy at the Muskingum County Fair demonstrating their unique elephant education program. I was amazed at the calmness and apparent excellent health of their elephants. I have a lot of experience with animal care and rehabilitation and wanted to add experience with captive elephants.

Cora and Shannon had their own shaded area under a canopy and an additional area outside the canopy to wander around in. They didn't have leg chains on; an electric wire that Bill turned on only if the girls pushed on the wire reminded them to stay within the designated area. Usually,

however, Bill and Cindy would just use “authoritative” voices to tell them to behave, and like good girls, they would obey.

The elephants appeared very content and relaxed. I had never seen such laid back, relaxed elephants. I think they are like this because of the close bond of trust, respect and companionship that the Morrises and Cora and Shannon share. Elephants form close family units and I could see first hand that Cora and Shannon felt that they were part of Bill and Cindy’s family.

I liked the educational program because it allowed audiences to learn about elephants, including the differences between Asian and African elephants, and demonstrated the intelligence of these gentle giants. Asian elephants have a long history of service to humans much like the horse.

Bill and Cindy told me about some of their experiences with animal rights groups. They have had their trailer broken into and had calls made to the media and to places that had booked their program. Bill told me about a website that is supported by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I found the information on that website to be misleading. For example, it includes a statement that Shannon broke out of the ring and ran through a crowd, a message that was communicated by phone to a fair board member. I found out it wasn’t Shannon. In fact, neither of Bill’s elephants has ever become out of control or threatened anyone.

The site also noted that Bill was cited by the US Department of Agriculture for failure to supply the required itinerary and that USDA was unable to conduct an inspection because the Morrises took the animals on the road. But instead of noting that it was just a missed appointment, the website made it sound like the Morrises were running from the USDA.

They also said he was cited for failure to store food in a manner that prevents contamination because the lid wasn’t replaced on the food container after an earlier feeding. What really surprised me was that the information was old and outdated and that only pieces of the reports appeared.

A USDA inspector showed up at the fair and gave the Morrises a clean report with no non-compliances. I was really happy to find out from Bill how supportive he is of the USDA’s efforts. He said he believes in providing guidelines for proper animal care to provide a better life for all captive animals.

He showed me a letter that accused him of being cruel to his elephants and that all elephants in captivity were beaten with whips and bull hooks. The women who wrote the letter had never met Bill and Cindy nor seen their show. I think it is wrong to put everyone associated with elephants into one category. I can only speak to what I saw and experienced while with the Morrises, and I can tell you those elephants are loved and spoiled. Their every need is seen to – fresh hay, treats of cookies and watermelon, fresh water and a clean environment. They go to the bathroom about every hour and the Morrises make sure the waste is removed promptly so their area is kept clean.

I personally got to check every inch of Cora and her skin is very healthy. Scratching an elephant is about a four hour job – I don’t know who enjoyed is more me or Cora. The hooks they use are an extension of the Morrises hands used as to guide the elephants. I know first hand that they are

not sharp as I used them for a back scratch on several occasions. Cora and Shannon picked them up and played with them, so that is evidence that they have no fear of them. I also toured Cora and Shannon's trailer and found it to be clean and big enough for them to lie down or move around in.

A veterinarian visited them while they were at the fair, and gave them a clean bill of health, and remarked at the wonderful care they received.

My experience with the Morris' furthered my education about elephants in captivity. I am very concerned about how elephants and all animals are treated. I have seen both bad and good treatment of elephants in captivity and in the wild. The Morrises are a good example of elephants in captivity receiving exceptional care. Their elephants are ambassadors for the education and support of elephants throughout the world. By reaching out to people around the country they open doors for new supporters of elephants. These new supporters can further help save the elephants wild habitat, which is quickly diminishing, and further support better standards for care of captive elephants.

When you decide to fight for the welfare of animals you have to commit yourself to becoming well educated about the animals you are fighting for and the rules that govern owners of animals. There are a lot of groups that supply information; some of it is good and some misleading. You have to be able to sort through the information and do some further investigation to get a clear picture of what is really happening. I think these groups have their hearts in the right place, but I don't think you can condemn everyone in a certain field because of the actions of some. We need to support individuals who pride themselves in taking good care of their animals and in providing educational opportunities.

We have to find the balance with what we have to work with in our current environment – we have elephants that don't have anywhere to go except to exist in a captive environment.