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Treatment of Foot Disease in Captive Asian Elephants in Northern Thailand

Foot disease is a major concern in captive elephants in the United States and a significant cause of disability and death. It is estimated that half of all captive elephants in North America and Europe have had foot disease at some time in their lives (Csuti 9). The causes of many foot ailments are not well understood, but the most common etiologies cited for foot disease include lack of exercise, improper nutrition, inadequate trimming and grooming of feet or hard, rough or damp enclosure substrates (Csuti 1). Though many traditional Western medical and surgical treatments are used to manage different forms of foot disease, mahouts in Thailand and other native range countries, have used traditional Eastern medicine consisting local plants for centuries (Csuti 81-4). There has been a lack of detailed published information on current elephant foot veterinary medicine treatments in Thailand or other countries in the region (Fowler 447). The aim of this study was to document methods of preventing and treating foot disease in captive Asian elephants currently being employed in northern Thailand to inform future research. A qualitative approach was taken using the standpoint of descriptive phenomenology and direct observation to examine current methods of prevention and treatment of foot disease in captive Asian elephants in Northern Thailand. Three veterinarians experienced in elephant health care were interviewed to determine current standards of elephant foot disease management in Northern Thailand. Direct observation of elephant care by veterinarians, mahouts, and keepers was carried out at two elephant facilities in Chiang Mai province, and focused on specific quantitative and qualitative variables implicated in elephant foot health including: diet nutritional composition, total housing area, and housing substrate. From the responses of veterinarians in this study, foot disease is not a major health concern, there appears to be a difference in the prevalence of foot disease in captive Asian elephants in northern Thailand and those previously reported in the United States and Europe (Csuti 9), there is not an emphasis on prevention of foot disease, and when foot diseases are seen by veterinarians, there is a strong presence of both traditional and herbal medicine in elephant health care.