

Asian elephants have different personality traits just like humans

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The researchers studied Asian timber elephants in Myanmar. Credit: John Jackson

Researchers of the University of Turku, Finland, have studied a timber elephant population in Myanmar and discovered that Asian elephant personality manifests through three factors. The personality factors identified by the researchers are attentiveness, sociability and

aggressiveness.

As is commonly known, people have different personalities, and the structure of human [personality](#) can be divided into five factors. Other species' [behaviour](#) also differs between individuals: Some are braver, more social, or more aggressive than others.

"These kinds of consistent differences in behaviour are called personality. Personality studies on species other than humans have so far focused on primates, pets and zoo populations, or on species that have a relatively short lifespan. Personality studies on other long-lived species living in their natural habitats are rare," says lead author Martin Seltmann from the Department of Biology at the University of Turku.

During the study, the researchers also identified that male and female [elephants](#) do not differ in these three personality factors. "Attentiveness is related to how an elephant acts in and perceives its environment. Sociability describes how an elephant seeks closeness to other elephants and humans, and how popular they are as social partners. Aggressiveness shows how aggressively an elephant acts towards other elephants and how much it interferes in their social interaction," says Dr Seltmann.

The researchers studied the personality of over 250 timber elephants living in their natural habitat in Myanmar. "The elephants work in the timber industry, pulling logs from one place to another. This is a very unique research environment and population, enabling us to study several hundreds of elephants," says Dr Seltmann.



The social relationship between an elephant and its mahout can last throughout the elephant's lifetime. Credit: John Jackson

All the elephants work with their own mahout, i.e., elephant rider. This social relationship can last throughout the elephant's lifetime. Therefore, the mahouts know the behaviour of their elephant very well and can give detailed information on their personalities. "We met elephants that were clearly more curious and braver than others. For example, they always tried to steal the watermelons that were meant as rewards," says Dr Steltmann.

The researchers collected data for the study with questionnaires on the elephants' personalities. The surveys were conducted in Myanmar from 2014 to 2017. The mahouts answered questions in which they assessed

their elephant's behaviour according to 28 traits. The mahouts assessed how often the elephant displayed a particular behaviour on a four-point scale.



The researchers studied Asian timber elephants in Myanmar. Credit: John Jackson

"Elephants and humans have many similar characteristics in their life history and behaviour. Among other things, elephants have a very long lifespan and give birth to a single calf at a time, who in turn needs the care of the mother and other females for a long time after birth. Living in complex social environments could be a reason why both species have developed such complex personality structures," says researcher Mirkka

Lahdenperä from the University of Turku, who participated in the study.

The study sheds more light on how personality develops in a long-lived, social species. This research on Asian elephants can also facilitate the protection of the [species](#) as well as improve the well-being and management of individuals in the timber elephant population in Myanmar.

More information: Martin W. Seltmann et al, Evaluating the personality structure of semi-captive Asian elephants living in their natural habitat, *Royal Society Open Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.172026](#)

Provided by University of Turku

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