

Declaration of Brett Mitchell

I, Brett Mitchell, declare as follows:

Introduction and Purpose

1. I submit this declaration in support of the Nonhuman Rights Project, Inc.'s petition for a writ of habeas corpus concerning the elephants held in captivity at the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium ("Pittsburgh Zoo"). I have professional knowledge of the facts stated herein and am not a party to this proceeding.

Qualification and Experience

2. My name is Brett Stuart Mitchell. I am an African elephant expert for both captive and wild elephants, and a specialist in the "rewilding" of captive elephants to live autonomously as wild elephants.
3. I have extensive experience in training, husbandry, and management of captive elephants.
4. I developed an ethical solution for captive held elephants to be reintegrated and fully rewilded back into wild or extensive systems.
5. I have rewilded 17 African elephants back into wild, extensive ecosystems (10000ha +). All adult elephants I have rewilded had been held in captivity for a minimum of 25 yrs since their capture between the age of 2-3yrs.

Professional Background

6. 1995 – 2001: Guide and Elephant Manager at Wild Horizons, Zimbabwe. Responsible for training, management, and care of 15 captive elephants used in tourism.
2001 – 2002: Elephant manager at Knysna Elephant Park, South Africa. Responsible for training and management of captive elephants used in tourism.
2002 – 2016: Employed at Pilanesberg Elephant-Back Safaris, South Africa.
2016 – Present: Founder of Loxodonta Management (Pty) Ltd, specializing in rewilding trained, captive elephants into wild or extensive systems.
2017 – Present: Founder and Chairman of the Elephant Reintegration Trust, a registered South African trust dedicated to improving the livelihoods of African elephants within South Africa and abroad.

2021 – Present: Founder and Director of WildChoices NPC, registered non-profit company in South Africa dedicated to improving the state of the captive wildlife tourism industry.

7. I am a co-author on the following published peer-reviewed articles:

African elephant reintegration from captivity to wild living: quantifying the detailed behavioural changes | Pachyderm 2024-11-25 | DOI: [10.69649/pachyderm.v65i.1291](https://doi.org/10.69649/pachyderm.v65i.1291);
*Movement patterns of two reintegrated African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) herds: transitioning from captivity to free-living* | PeerJ 2024-06-06 | DOI: [10.7717/peerj.17535](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.17535);
Twisting collars on male elephants in shrub terrain: animal welfare considerations for researchers, managers and manufacturers | Pachyderm 2023-11-21 | DOI: [10.69649/pachyderm.v64i.534](https://doi.org/10.69649/pachyderm.v64i.534).

Articles being prepared related to rewilding:

Investigating the adaptive coping mechanisms of rewilded elephants: A comparison of behavioural and physiological variables with wild elephants;
Studying the spatial integration of rewilded, ex-captive elephant bulls, following the introduction of wild bulls in a large, fenced reserve in South Africa.

8. My full Curriculum Vitae is attached as Appendix 1.

The Elephant Reintegration Trust

9. The Elephant Reintegration Trust (the “Trust”), which I founded in 2017, was established to provide a secure wild environment for previously captive elephants, where their well-being could be closely monitored as they live freely and autonomously. The Trust facilitates the rewilding, translocation, and reintegration of elephants, while conducting scientific research into their biological and social needs. It also includes educating stakeholders to improve elephant management practices. Since its inception, the Trust has successfully rewilded 17 elephants, monitored more than 200 wild elephants across nine reserves, and supported multiple translocation and collaring operations, while contributing peer-reviewed research to the field of elephant science.

The Concept of Rewilding

10. Rewilding is currently used in two contexts: (1) To transition a captive animal back into a wild system, and (2) to restore land and biodiversity.

- (1) Rewilding is the process of preparing and reintegrating a captive (intensively human-managed) animal into a natural environment where they can live independently. This includes developing survival skills, re-establishing natural behaviours, and gradually reducing reliance on human care for the animal to gain full autonomy, enabling the animal to thrive and interact as part of a wild population.
 - (2) Rewilding is a conservation approach that focuses on restoring natural processes, ecosystems, and biodiversity by allowing land and habitats to return to a more self-regulating state. It often involves re-establishing indigenous species, removing human barriers, and reducing intensive management allowing ecosystems to function without human intervention.
11. Regarding elephants, rewilding can be described as an ethical management strategy that offers freedom and dignity to captive elephants by allowing them to roam expansive natural habitats, live without human exploitation, and contribute to ecological resilience by providing ecosystem services as they are a keystone species. Elephants have never, and will never, thrive in captivity, as they are not suited to such a lifestyle because, among other attributes, they have evolved to move great distances. By rewilding elephants and affording them the freedom to choose how they live (i.e., live autonomously), their individual well-being is improved and they contribute positively to the conservation of the species, something that captive elephants cannot achieve.
12. Rewilding captive elephants into their historic ranges have yielded encouraging results, as documented in Africa (Garaï et al., 2004; Millspaugh et al., 2007; Pinter-Wollman et al., 2009; Pretorius et al., 2023) and Asia (Thitaram et al., 2015; Baker & Winkler, 2020). These initiatives demonstrate that elephants, when freed from direct human control, and following proven, successful protocols, can adapt to natural habitats, form essential social bonds, and recover from their captive trauma (Pretorius et al., 2023). Research further demonstrates the importance of preserving social groups during reintegration to foster stable networks, reduce stress, and benefit from juvenile presence for herd bonding (Jachowski et al., 2013; Thitaram et al., 2015).

13. Rewilding goes beyond traditional welfare standards that focus on individual animal welfare like the Five Freedoms, aimed at minimising negative states, and the Five Domains, which include positive welfare states. Instead, it is a comprehensive strategy that considers the well-being of both individual animals and entire populations (Van de Water et al., 2024). This integrated approach aims to restore their wildness and natural behaviour and acknowledges the interconnectedness within populations, crucial for a social species like elephants, as the well-being of one individual can affect the entire group (Van de Water et al., 2024).
14. Rewilding has three components: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Rewilding.
- Rehabilitation is the treatment and care of an injured, orphaned, or sick elephant who requires veterinary care to be physically fit for the reintegration process and eventual rewilding.
 - Reintegration is the process of humans disengaging intensive management of previously captive elephants, reinstating autonomy with full freedom of choice whilst correcting unwanted behaviours to allow for transitioning back into a completely wild system (rewilding).
 - Rewilding is the release of reintegrated elephants into a wild system without any interference by humans, in which the elephant has full autonomy.
15. There are two reintegration methods:
- (1) Soft reintegration/rewilding: Elephant(s) acclimatize with familiar figures during a phased transition, allowing recovery from trauma and rebuilding social integrity. This process is overseen by a specialist support team.
 - (2) Hard reintegration/rewilding: Immediate disconnection from current environments with no transition. This creates additional trauma and reduces the likelihood of success.
This method is not used by the Trust.
16. Any elephant, regardless of background, can be rewilded given sufficient time. While some with physical injuries may require permanent sanctuary, they should still be given the opportunity to make the choice to live wild. Elephants often recover significantly when

living in natural habitats and accessing their correct diet, which promotes rehabilitation and well-being.

17. Rewilding provides elephants with the dignity, autonomy, and well-being that captivity cannot offer. Rewilding is a scientifically supported, ethical, and practical solution for elephants currently living under human control and should be strongly considered for Angeline, Savanna, Tasha, Victoria, and Zuri.

Rewilding the Pittsburgh Zoo Elephants

18. In my expert opinion, rewilding the Pittsburgh Zoo elephants would be the most ethical option available to them, a second best option would be transfer to a bona-fide elephant sanctuary, specifically an elephant sanctuary accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.
19. Based on my experience and knowledge, I expect these elephants to be good candidates for rewilding. As with any rewilding process, the first stage of rehabilitation and reintegration is what will determine the success of the entire program. This is achieved by tailoring a specific plan for each elephant or group which is managed by specialist support. All elephants deserve this opportunity; elephants are amongst the most resilient and intelligent species on the planet, they can accomplish amazing feats if given a chance.
20. As this group of elephants is made up of females, and are a bonded group, they have an excellent structure for rewilding as wild elephant herds are matriarchal in nature. Angeline, Savanna, Tasha, Victoria, and Zuri will support each other through the transition from captivity to a fully rewilded state, and likely share lifelong bonds even in the wild.

I declare under the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that the foregoing is true and correct.

Signed on the 8th day of September 2025, at Port Alfred, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Signature: /s/ Brett Mitchell

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brett Mitchell', with a stylized, cursive script.

References

- Baker, L., & Winkler, R. (2020). Asian elephant rescue, rehabilitation and rewilding. *Animal Sentience*, 5(28). <https://animalstudiesrepository.org/animalsent/vol5/iss28/1>.
- Garaï, M. E., Slotow, R., Carr, R. D., & Reilly, B. (2004). Elephant reintroductions to small fenced reserves in South Africa. *Pachyderm*, 37, 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.69649/pachyderm.v37i1.1199>.
- Jachowski, D. S., Slotow, R., & Millspaugh, J. J. (2013). Delayed physiological acclimatization by African elephants following reintroduction. *Animal Conservation*, 16(5), 575–583. <https://doi.org/10.1111/acv.12031>.
- Pretorius, Y., Eggeling, T., & Ganswindt, A. (2023). Identifying potential measures of stress and disturbance during a captive to wild African elephant reintegration. *PLOS ONE*, 18(10), e0291293. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291293>.
- Thitaram, C., Dejchaisri, S., Somgird, C., Angkawanish, T., Brown, J., Phumphuay, R., Chomdech, S., & Kangwanpong, D. (2015). Social group formation and genetic relatedness in reintroduced Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Thailand. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 172, 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2015.09.002>.
- Van de Water, A., M. E. Garaï, M. M. Burnett, M. D. Henley, E. Di Minin, J. P. Streicher, L. A. Bates, and R. Slotow. 2024. Integrating a “One Well-being” approach in elephant conservation: evaluating consequences of management interventions. *Ecology and Society* 29(3):15. [online] URL: <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol29/iss3/art15>.

EXHIBIT A

CURRICULUM VITAE - Brett Stuart Mitchell

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Web: www.elephantreintegrationtrust.co.za // www.wildchoices.org

Personal

Id number: 7410275829186

Birth Date: 27.10.1974

Marital Status: Widow

Sex: Male

Education & Qualifications

Attended Khumalo Junior School & Whitestone Junior School 1979 – 1986

Attended Christian Brother College & St John's High School 1987 – 1991

General Certificate of Education

English

Mathematics

Art

Science (Physics & Chemistry)

Geography

Certificate of 4x4 Off Road Basic Driving & Maintenance Course

Certificate of Basic Rangers Training Course

Certificate of Paramedic Training – Advanced First Aider

FGASA – Local Guide NQF2

Certificate - 10750: Use of Rifle

Elephant Behavioural Expert by 30yrs experience

Captive Elephant Expert – Training, Management & Husbandry

Specialist in the Rewilding of Captive Elephants:

Reintegrated seven elephants from Pilanesberg Elephant Back Safaris into an extensive wildlife system. I have successfully reintegrated the above highly trained adult elephants that were in captivity for close to 30 years. The elephants were reintegrated by utilizing a soft release method which I developed.

Reintegrated ten elephants from Shambala Game Reserve: The above trained elephants have been fully reintegrated into a large wildlife system. The elephants were reintegrated by utilizing a soft release method.

Reintegrated two elephants from Abu Camp, Botswana.

Certain of the elephant cows from all the above reintegration's have all breed successfully in the wild contributing to the conservation of the African Elephant.

Peer-reviewed Publications (Published)

African elephant reintegration from captivity to wild living: quantifying the detailed behavioural changes

Pachyderm

2024-11-25 | Journal article

DOI: [10.69649/pachyderm.v65i.1291](https://doi.org/10.69649/pachyderm.v65i.1291)

Movement patterns of two reintegrated African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) herds: transitioning from captivity to free-living

PeerJ

2024-06-06 | Journal article

DOI: [10.7717/peerj.17535](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.17535)

Twisting collars on male elephants in shrub terrain: animal welfare considerations for researchers, managers and manufacturers

Pachyderm

2023-11-21 | Journal article

DOI: [10.69649/pachyderm.v64i.534](https://doi.org/10.69649/pachyderm.v64i.534)

Peer-reviewed Publications (in prep)

Investigating the adaptive coping mechanisms of rewilded elephants: A comparison of behavioural and physiological variables with wild elephants

Evaluating Strategic Bull Introductions as a Management Strategy: Effects on Movement, Behaviour, and Physiological Responses in Two African Elephant Bulls with Histories of Trauma

Studying the spatial integration of rewilded, ex-captive elephant bulls, following the introduction of wild bulls in a large, fenced reserve in South Africa.

Too close for comfort - Understanding the effect of vehicle distance on elephant behaviour

Lockdown Lessons: Comparing Elephant Physiological Responses in the Absence and Return of Tourism due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Employment History

March 2016 - ongoing

Chairman & Founder of the Elephant Reintegration Trust (2017)

2016 to date

Continued with the Reintegration of seven elephants into an extensive wildlife system.

Consulting with Shambala Game Reserve on their elephant rehabilitation project. Reintegration of 10 captive elephants at Shambala Game Reserve into an extensive wildlife system.

Consultation currently ongoing of the status of their elephants.

Consulting to Jabulani on their captive elephant management.

One of the five committee members who developed the ethical framework for the SATSA

Captive Wildlife Attractions & Activities Decision Tool published in 2019

Oct 2021 – launched a company named WildChoices.

WildChoices identifies the captive wildlife facilities in South Africa that offer tourist attractions and activities including interactions and volunteer programs and assesses them by applying the publicly available SATSA Captive Wildlife Attractions & Activities Decision Tool published in 2019, to publicly available online information about the facilities and their activities.

<https://www.wildchoices.org/>

June 2002 – March 2016

Pilanesberg Elephant-Back Safaris

Position: General Manager

Responsibilities: Management of the operation including

Elephant Training and Husbandry of Captive Adult Elephants,

Staff training for Elephant Back Safaris & Captive Elephant Management

Reintegration of seven elephants back to the wild

Guest Relations

Booking Office

Accounts

Human Resources – management of 25+ staff members

During my employment with the above, I managed seven elephants at Abu Camp, Botswana from June 2011 until March 2014 as a joint venture with the two companies. Advised on the reintegration of two captive female elephants.

Jan 2001 – June 2002

Knysna Elephant Park

Position: Manager

Responsibilities: Management of the captive Elephants used for tourism and the Park management

Reason for leaving: Took up employment with Pilanesberg Elephant Back Safaris

Nov 1995 – Jan 2001

Wild Horizons

Position: Guide and Elephant Manger

Responsibilities: Management of the 15 captive Elephants used for Elephant Back Safari tourism

Reason for leaving: Took up employment with Knysna Elephant Park to further my knowledge on elephants in a different captive environment.

April 1995 – Oct 1995

Back Packing around Australia

August 1994 – April 1995

Mwanga Lodge/Bally Vaughan Game Park

Position: Guide

Responsibilities: Guiding of Tourists staying at the Lodge

Reason for leaving: Decided to travel for 6 months.

December 1992 - Aug 1994

Bike Centre

Position: Front Sales & Accounts

Responsibilities: Attending to customers for spares sales, booking in repairs and attending to debtors/creditors

Reason for leaving: Got an opportunity to start my intended career in Wildlife.

Jan 1992 - July 1992

Aerotech

Position: Started apprentice for Fixed Wing Aircraft

Responsibilities: Maintenance of various aircraft

Reason for leaving: Moved to Bike Centre.
