

Elephant conservation 2007
TAT Newsroom
Karen Emmons, 10 Feb 2007

Compared to the current population of a half million African elephants, the number of *elephas maximus*, or Asian elephants, is startling at less than 50,000. In Thailand – a country that long has revered the creature for its royal and religious significance – lives only some 4,000.

The dwindling population became so severe that in 1988 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature classified Asian elephants as an endangered wild animal with high risk of extinction. A year later, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned the commercial trade in Thai elephants.

But unlike the African variety that has been drastically affected by ivory poaching, Asian elephants, among which only the males have tusks and small ones at that, have been more affected by the loss of their habitat.

Although proper data is sorely lacking in Thailand, the wild population is estimated at between 1,000 and 1,500. Mapping information on the state of wild elephants' habitat makes the picture most gloomy: In 1950, some 60 percent of Thailand was covered with forest; today it is less than 15 percent, and declining.

The latest government statistics (2003) of domesticated elephants (those living in captivity) put the current population at 2,874, which is up from a low of 2,118 in 1998. However, this is still significantly down from the 4,874 domesticated elephants in 1980 – let alone the hundred thousand roaming freely a century earlier.

A steady increase of conservation efforts, animal-rights campaigns, funding, veterinarian training and ecologically minded tourists indeed have been shaping the life of Thai elephants and hopefully their preservation.

“My feeling is the population of elephants has stabilized,” says Richard Lair, an Asian elephant expert who has lived in Thailand more than 25 years and works with the government to establish what has become a role model in eco-tourism and conservation. The Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC), that he helped build in northern Lampang, currently houses 48 elephants and takes care of another 70 in other rehabilitation areas.

Not everyone among the herd of elephant activists in the country is as optimistic. Soraida Salwala, Secretary-General of the Friends of the Asian Elephant, finds the regeneration rate alarmingly low. She estimates females in captivity give birth to only one calf in their lifetime rather than the more typical eight for wild females.

While Lair sees a stabilizing of the population, he also admits that there is a lot of guesswork going on due to the lack of facts on both the domesticated and wild elephant populations in terms of their true numbers, their breeding patterns, where they or what work they do. Lair and other conservationists see a need for an updating of the 1939 law that protects Thailand's elephants in order to more closely monitor and understand the dynamics of those in captivity and in the wild and thus ensure their preservation.

Lair believes that as long as tourism thrives in Thailand, so will the prospects for its Asian elephants. "As long as there are tourists coming here, there will be elephants," he says.

Domesticated elephants

According to Thailand's Livestock Development Department, domesticated elephants reside in some 73 tourist camps and, increasingly in the past few years, in private sanctuaries.

While conditions and treatment of elephants is said to be good on average in these camps (with some remaining negligent toward the animal's well-being), conservationists are now alarmed by a disturbing new trend. In the past few years, there has been a visible increase of 1- and 2-year-olds on their own circulating the country, some used for begging, others being offered for sale to sanctuaries or camps at prices as high as a million baht (US\$28,000). (On average, they sell for a half million baht.) For nutritional and emotional reasons, a young elephant should not be separated from its mother until age 3 or 4.

What has yet to be proven but is widely feared is that many of the calves have been taken from the wild, particularly Burma's wild (and illegally shipped across the border). According to Dr. Preecha Puangkam, a veterinarian based in Lampang, to take a calf from the wild usually means poachers have killed the mother.

The types of captivity homes available to elephants range from small sanctuaries that feed and care for four elephants to camps providing shows and treks to eco-tourism camps with mahout training and to hotels with elephant projects.

For instance, the Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary, or BLES, offers a home to elephants without requiring them to work or perform, especially old and mistreated elephants. The founder, Katherine Connor hopes the natural, secure surroundings will encourage easier breeding. The sanctuary is building an on-site hospital with a mobile clinic and offering training opportunities to veterinary students.

The TECC offers performances and homestay lodgings with locals cooking for tourists who come to learn to be a mahout for a few days. The performances are kept to three a day and include elephants demonstrating their logging techniques, painting abstract works of art and performing in what is considered the world's first elephant orchestra (its third CD is due for release soon). The TECC also provides training for veterinary students, a mobile clinic and a hospital to treat injured elephants.

The Anantara Golden Triangle and the Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle resorts work with the TECC in providing short mahout-training courses and trekking trips. The Anantara hotel also runs a project to take elephants off the city streets by offering their owners accommodations and food for the elephant and a monthly "rental" fee as a kind of livelihood income. Owners can live on the 160-acre forest with their wife and children. The Four Seasons Elephant Camp have taken in rescued baby elephants.

John Roberts, the Anantara project director, says he aims to create an environment that will be of value to elephants in general rather than a few individuals.

The Treasure Our Elephants Foundation maintains a "hotline" for reports of elephants that are injured, ill, mistreated or need some other assistance.

To maintain the ban on elephants on city streets, the TECC manages a government rescue team that has authority to confiscate elephants found in any of the country's major urban centres. Unfortunately, explains Lair, the elephants don't stay confiscated for too long; due to low fines or other penalties are released, allowing them back on the streets again. In recent years there has been an increase in young calves found begging in the cities, largely due to the ease of moving them around in a pick-up truck and thus escaping confiscation.

Wild elephants

The biggest wild populations are found in the Thung Yai and Huai Kha Wildlife Sanctuaries and the Khao Yai and Kaeng Krachan National Parks.

Despite the protected wildlife areas, the expansion of human settlements (and the corresponding loss of forest land to logging and agriculture) is squeezing wild elephants into “green islands”. In time, the isolated populations would be at risk of inbreeding if there are no connecting corridors between the islands.

The food supply for wild Thai elephants is constantly diminishing thanks to illegal logging, agricultural expansion, commercial harvesting of forest resources such as bamboo (a staple in the elephant diet) and forest conversion by fire. This is forcing wild elephants to forage for food outside the forest because nutritious crops such as sugar cane, mango and maize are increasingly being grown around the edge of protected areas. Sometimes, these crop raiders are shot, poisoned or electrocuted.

Although the Thai government banned logging in 1989, the poaching of bulls for their ivory, and the capture of young calves to be sold into the tourism industry (including street-begging) or to would-be rescuers, has exacerbated the pressure brought on by habitat destruction.

Troubled by the growing threat of crop-raiding to people and elephants alike, the Elephant Conservation Network (ECN), a community-based conservation initiative, was set up in Kanchanaburi in 1998 to seek a collaborative long-term solution based on a thorough understanding of the problem. Working with local people and forest rangers, this small team of dedicated researchers has been studying the ways in which elephants and people make use of the forest in the Salakpra and Tham Thanlod protected areas at different times of year. Outside the forest, the ECN team is also recording every crop-raiding incident while also mapping land-use around the forest and conducting a socio-economic survey.

The ECN team includes fifteen local villagers who volunteer to monitor the crop raiding in their area and make sure every incident is reported. “Our aim is to collaborate - with villagers, with protected-area personnel, with local leaders - to find sustainable solutions. Ultimately, nothing will work unless we all work together,” explains Belinda Stewart-Cox, a British researcher who started ECN with Jittin Ritthirat who used to be a journalist. Eventually they aim to develop a raft of integrated projects that will provide help restore and protect the forest area for local people and elephants so that elephants raid crops less frequently because they have enough natural food year-round.

A few other organisations are also tackling the problem of human-elephant conflict in Thailand, including the Royal Project in Kuiburi National Park, the Wildlife Conservation Society in Kaeng Krachan National park, and WWF-Thailand, also in Kuiburi National Park.

Elephant organizations, networks, foundations and camps in Thailand:

NORTHERN THAILAND:

- The National Elephant Institute & Thai Elephant Conservation Center
Forest Industry Organization
www.thailandelephant.org
- Elephant Nature Foundation
www.elephantnaturefoundation.org
www.elephantkingdom.com
- Treasure Our Elephants-
Foundation for the Conservation of Northern Elephants
www.treasurethai elephants.org
- Asian Elephant Foundation of Thailand
www.aeft.org
- Friends of the Asian Elephant
www.elephants-soraida.com
- Elephant Help Project
www.elephanthelp.org
- Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary, or BLES
www.blesele.com
- Anantara Golden Triangle
www.slh.com/thailand/chiang_saen/photographs1_chiana.html
- Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle
www.fourseasons.com/goldentriangle

NORTHEASTERN THAILAND:

- Elephant Home-coming Project
Ban Ta Klang elephant village, Surin
http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7153/surin_1.htm

CENTRAL/WESTERN THAILAND:

- Elephant Conservation Network

- Kuiburi National Park
World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)
www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/asia_pacific/where/thailand/index.cfm
- Kaeng Krachan Elephant Conservation Project
Wildlife Conservation Society
www.wcs.org/international/Asia/thailand/thailandelegants

THAILAND

- Elephant Reintroduction Foundation
www.elephantreintroduction.org