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The Art of Conservation

By Karen Catchpole

The future of most of Thailand's endangered Asian elephants is being threatened not by poaching or loss of habitat but by a very human problem: unemployment. Some are finding work—and hope—in the tourism industry. Others are breaking into the art world.
In 1990, to allay fears and heal wounds after a deadly landslide triggered by steep deforested hillsides killed 300 people and wiped out three entire villages, the Thai government outlawed all logging in the country. The ban has been good for the country’s beleaguered forests (Thailand had 60 percent forest coverage in 1950, but less than 20 percent forest cover remained when the law went into effect). It’s also been good for the handful of wild elephants still trying to live in these forests. However, it’s been disastrous for the much larger population of captive elephants. Once (ironically) employed to literally drag away the habitat of their wild cousins, the logging ban meant that Thailand’s 3,500 domesticated Asian elephants and their mahouts were faced with unemployment.

It costs 30,000 baht (US$800) a year to care for and feed an adult Asian elephant. Unemployed mahouts faced with such high feed bills, as well as their own families’ empty bellies, must now choose between a handful of bleak options.

Out of desperation, as many as 2,000 have taken jobs with the illegal loggers who sprang up almost immediately after the logging ban was announced nine years ago, and who continue to elude prosecution throughout Northern Thailand. However, mahouts working in these illegal camps are subject to prosecution if they are caught, and their elephants are routinely fed amphetamines. Procured easily and cheaply from neighboring Myanmar, the amphetamines ensure that the extraction of poached logs is done as quickly as possible. Full of speed, the addicted elephants work longer and harder until, of course, they die of exhaustion or injury.

Sompon Meepan, with Nam Chok
the elephant that was the
impetus behind the formation
of Ayutthaya Elephant Camp.
MAHOUT’S SECOND, almost as unsavory, option is to take his elephant and his family to Bangkok, where he and his elephant illegally prowl Sukhumvit Road looking to sell rides to tourists or good luck blessings to locals amidst choking fumes and lurching traffic in the Thai capital of eight million people.

And it’s not just the elephants who’ve been affected by the lost jobs. Each working elephant in Thailand supports his or her mahout (predominantly from the Kui and Karen tribes) and the mahout’s family – an estimated six humans for every elephant. Today the livelihood of more than 20,000 Thais is directly impacted by the fate of the country’s remaining domesticated Asian elephants.

“When these mahouts move their elephants to the city, they take their children out of school,” explains Dr Chisanu Tiyacharoensri, a Bangkok veterinarian and Secretary General of the Wild Animal Rescue Foundation of Thailand (WAR). “If the mahout can’t find work for his elephant, he has to sell it or he’s forced to kill it rather than watch it starve to death. Then he has no profession at all and his family starves.”

It was these urbanised elephants (and their mahouts and their families) that first alerted Dr Chisano to the severity of the problem facing Thailand’s domesticated Asian elephants. Every day he ministers to some of the estimated 20 elephants hit by vehicles in Bangkok each year, who can take months to recover. He is also called on to try to rescue elephants who get into other deadly dangers in the big city – like Pien, a nine-year-old female, whose well-meaning mahout gathered suburban grass for her to eat, ignorant of the fact that it had been sprayed with pesticide. She died after three agonising days.
‘If the mahout can’t find work for his elephant, he has to sell it or he’s forced to kill it rather than watch it starve to death. Then he has no profession at all and his family starves.’

On the outskirts of Bangkok a mahout prepares his elephant for a day in the city, touting for donations or rides for tourists.

‘When I see elephants in Bangkok, I feel pity,’ says Dr Chisanu. ‘Elephants in Thailand used to be warriors. Now they are beggars.’ He explains: ‘If the Thai people see an elephant begging in Bangkok, they feel bad, but they don’t understand the root problem. They think the mahout is lazy or greedy so they don’t give him money. If an animal conservation project is successful, they think it’s a business and are suspicious and don’t give money to it either. I want to create a job for the elephants so they don’t have to come to the city and beg anymore.’

That job, as Dr Chisanu and a growing number of Asian conservationists see it, is in the booming tourism industry in Thailand, where foreign currency and a Western sense of conservation make the job much easier. Even before the Asian economic crisis, the Thai government wasn’t exactly pumping cash into animal conservation projects. And contributions from individual Thai citizens are few and far between. In fact, WAR and most other Thai conservation groups are almost entirely funded by gifts from individual overseas donors and large overseas environmental and animal conservation groups.

But despite the lack of logistical and financial support, today there are dozens of private sector tour companies offering elephant rides and elephant trekking (with wildly varying degrees of responsibility) to tourists throughout Thailand, from the Golden Triangle in the north to the golden beaches of Phuket in the south.

These tourism and entertainment businesses in Thailand currently employ about 10 percent of the country’s domesticated elephants, saving nearly 400 animals from illegal logging camps, amphetamine addiction, death by overwork, begging in Bangkok, or worse. Thai mahouts are also benefiting. Typically they earn about 7,000 baht (US$180) a month transporting illegal logs. They can make between 10,000-30,000 baht (US$260-US$770) a month transporting legal tourists.

UNTIL 1996, Sompase Meepan didn’t care about conservation. He was a successful business tycoon who treated his degree in zoology more
like a hobby and concentrated his real efforts on expanding his commercial empire. His businesses (from snooker parlours to restaurants to prawn farms) made him millions. ‘I have a Mercedes,’ he explains. ‘I have a yacht. I have a big house. I have money. Lots of money.’ Now, thanks to his 11-year-old daughter and a 1,700-pound baby elephant named Nam Chok, Sompast also has something more meaningful to spend it on.

Three years ago Sompast, who lives with his family in the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya, about 60 kilometres north of Bangkok, was contacted by a mahout anxious to sell an obviously sick three-month-old orphaned male Asian elephant. When Sompast and his daughter Pray laid eyes on the emaciated animal, his daughter asked him why he didn’t help protect this animal the same way he looked after the family’s other, more traditional, pets.

Unable to come up with a good answer, Sompast agreed to nurse the baby elephant back to health. Within a few months the baby bull was healthy and the mahout no longer wanted to sell the now valuable animal. But by this time Sompast was in love. ‘I think of Nam Chok (which means ‘lucky’ in Thai) as my son,’ he explains (his own son is in New Zealand studying). ‘I began to think, when I die, who will take care of him?’ So, with Pray’s fateful question still ringing in his ears, Sompast put his money where his heart was and shelled out far too much to buy the baby elephant. That took care of Nam Chok’s present. But, like any father, Sompast was still worried about his future.

From that moment on, Sompast vowed to help ensure every Asian elephant’s future in Thailand by promoting education and compassion for the animal. The best way to do that, he figured, was to give as many people – Thais and foreign tourists – the kind of up-close contact with the animals that had won him over in the first place.

So, in February 1997, Sompast opened the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp on the fringes of the world-famous ruins of the ancient capital of Ayutthaya. Word quickly got round that there was a man in Ayutthaya willing to buy healthy, unemployed domesticated elephants and hire their mahouts to give rides to the local and foreign tourists who come to the camp. Today Sompast owns 26 Asian elephants – including one of his latest additions, the first elephant calf to be born in Ayutthaya in more than 100 years.

But all this costs money. A lot of money. To date, Sompast has poured more than four million baht (US$100,000) of his own money into the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp, the purchase of unemployed elephants, mahout salaries, and the rent on 1,300 rai (225 acres) of nearby farmland which he leases to grow grass, rice and bananas to feed his elephants and their mahouts.

And that doesn’t even include the cash Sompast recently spent to bring five Thai Asian elephants back home from neighbouring Indonesia. The animals had been stranded in Indonesia since 1998, when the Asian economic crisis hit and the Indonesian Forestry Department failed to pay the ‘rent’ on the animals they had leased from Thailand. They also failed to fund their return to Thailand.

Frustrated by the Thai government’s apparent lack of action and spurred on by the Thai public who wanted ‘their’ elephants back, Sompast organised an elephant march on the Parliament building in Bangkok last November to demand the return of the stranded animals.

Following the march and blockade of the Parliament building, Sompast finally met with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs and managed to get the necessary extradition documents signed – Thai government officials told him they ‘forgot’ about it. When the government balked at the cost of transporting the four-tonne animals from Medan in Indonesia to Phuket in Thailand, Sompast agreed to organise and pay for the boat that would finally ferry the elephants back home.

Employed in a traditional transport role in a National Park in India, the Asian elephant's fate may be tied to "employment". In Phuket a growing number of tour companies offer jungle trekking. The irony is that the elephant is very easily rehabilitated for re-entry into the wild.
At this rate, Sompast realises that someday even his money will run out. So when Alex Melamid and Vitaly Komar, two celebrated Russian artists living in Brooklyn, New York, approached him at the end of 1998 with a creative idea for raising some funds, Sompast was all ears. The idea was simple: If humans can paint, then elephants – being at least as smart as you and me – probably can, too.

'This whole elephant experiment was an accident,' admits Sompast, who likes to picture himself as a conservation cowboy astride an elephant instead of a horse. 'My other businesses make me money, but this makes me happy.'

At the other end of Thailand is perhaps the fastest growing area of employment for Asian elephants in the tourism industry. In 1994, a tour company called Siam Safari started the first elephant trekking tour company on the island of Phuket off Thailand’s southern peninsula. There were only 15 elephants on the entire island. Today there are more than 20 tour operators and almost 200 elephants giving tourists rides around the hilly jungles of the island.

To help look after the sky-rocketing population of Asian elephants on Phuket, Siam Safari, in conjunction with some big-name hotel chains and private Thai businesses, started the Elephant Help Project. Designed to raise funds to create a mobile veterinarian unit, the project has so far raised 250,000 baht (US$6,500). A large chunk of that, over 150,000 baht, came directly from a single tourist.

Last January, 52-year-old Barbara Reed visited Thailand from her home in London. She fell in love with the elephants, but her vertigo kept her from climbing onboard to go elephant trekking. Determined to help save the giants from the ground, Reed started soliciting funds for the Elephant Help Project from her friends back home. When her friends offered to double their donations if Reed would face her fear of heights and get on an elephant, Reed couldn’t resist. In fact, she did them one better, agreeing to go parasailing for the funds, which
"Thailand's Asian elephant can really go back to the wild quite easily. If they have been working in the logging industry or in tourist trekking, they are used to the forest already" – Dr. Richard Mather, WWF Thailand.

Wild elephants roaming free in India's Corbett National Park.

Nirmal Ghosh

have helped set up one of the country's first mobile medical units treating and inoculating Asian elephants.

But even those actively promoting tourism as a way to help save Thailand's endangered Asian elephants concede that it's not the perfect solution. Some animal rights activists allege widespread cruelty. Certainly Thailand has no laws governing who is allowed to own or work an elephant and the concept of criminal cruelty to animals is reserved for dogs and cats. Then there's the side-show factor and general disgust inspired by the sight of the dignified animals performing often dangerous and always ludicrous tricks for an audience - like those attending performances at Fantasea, a massive new entertainment complex in Phuket which features more than 30 Asian elephants in its flashy nightly show.

Baby elephants, now prized for their temporary cuteness, are also increasingly being weaned prematurely - taken from their mothers (who are sometimes killed in the effort) after only six months (instead of the recommended two to three years) so that they can be put to work greeting tourists (including Michael Jackson) at the country's luxury hotels and resorts.

'Employing elephants in the tourism industry is really just a band aid,' agrees Duncan Worthington, a British conservationist and Assistant Marketing Manager of Phuket-based Siam Safari and its Elephant Help Project. 'But it's better than nothing.'

The Thai government doesn't seem to agree. Even in the face of proven success stories like the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp, the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project and Siam Safari's Elephant Help Project, the Thai government has taken a 'wait and see' approach to funding and implementing tourism-based Asian elephant conservation efforts nationwide.

'When we started Ayutthaya Elephant Camp and the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project, we went to the government for help,' Dr Chisanu explains. 'They told us no, but asked us to give them our program in five years as a model for them to use to develop tourism as a way to save the elephants later.'

But with the already feeble Asian elephant population in Thailand shrinking by an estimated three percent each year, there's not a lot of later left.
The first student, of course, was Nam Chok, whose paintings are much like a human three-year-old's: energetic, but not particularly structured or complex. Then came Bird, a 12-year-old male tusker. "We've observed him when he paints and it's as if he's thinking before he begins," says Dr Chisanu, who has become convinced that elephants are able to see colour and even have a favorite colour. "He holds the paint brush up in the air and looks at the canvas for a while before he begins." Then came Kumala, a 16-year-old female whose advanced pregnancy is subtly changing her work. "She used to paint very good ones," says Dr Chisanu, "but I think she's gotten a little moody because she's pregnant. Some days she just refuses to paint."

ELEPHANT ART
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC MOHL

"IT'S EVERY CHILD'S DREAM" to touch an elephant," enthuses Alex Melamid, painter, author and accidental conservationist. Unfortunately, growing up in Russia didn't afford him much chance to fulfill that dream. In fact, it wasn't until four years ago, long after he'd moved to Brooklyn, NY, that Melamid touched a pachyderm for the first time. Her name was Ruby and she was an African elephant at the Toledo Zoo in Ohio. "It was really fantastic," Melamid says of this event. "I even got to kiss her."

In 1997, Melamid went to Thailand, where he witnessed the sorry state of that country's once-venerated national symbol. Melamid remembered his beloved Ruby. Apart from being a pretty good kisser, Ruby, like many captive elephants in American zoos, was a pretty good painter. Unfortunately, Ruby died in November 1998, but not before her art netted a whopping US$500,000.

With Ruby's artistic success in mind, Melamid
and his partner, fellow Russian artist Vitaly Komar, eventually convinced the World Wildlife Fund to give them a grant to start up an elephant painting school in Lampang in Northern Thailand, with the patronage of world-famous Asian elephant expert Richard Lair. Since then, the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project has opened similar schools in Ayutthaya and Surin, with plans to expand to Bali and Jakarta.

'There are two approaches to conserving the Thai Asian elephant,' explains Melamid. 'Let them be wild, or integrate them into human culture.' Unfortunately, despite the 1990 ban on all logging in Thailand, which resulted in the mass unemployment of captive Asian elephants in the first place, Thailand's forests have yet to recover. That leaves integration. 'Art is part of human culture,' says Melamid. 'If we make elephants part of art, they too become part of our culture.'

Local and international tourists visiting the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp are treated to daily painting demonstrations by their three artists in residence. Each elephant's mahout props a blank canvas up in front of his elephant, then places a brush dipped in paint into the excited animal's trunk. The result is not unlike a Jackson Pollock. Only cheaper.

However, Melamid hopes to change that. He has had talks with Starbucks and Gap Kids about a line of elephant merchandise and Melamid himself appeared on a recent episode of MTV's 'Road Rules' to promote and explain elephant painting in Madras, India. In March 2000, Christies plans to auction off some of Melamid's elephant paintings and hopes are high — similar works auctioned at Sotheby's in England fetched over US$1,300 each.

'Elephants are not as smart as humans,' admits Melamid. 'But I'm not sure you have to be smart to paint. In fact, some of the greatest painters were dumb.'

So far the paintings produced at the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp have only raised around 20,000 baht (US$500). But that's been enough to keep the pachyderms in gouache and that, in itself, is a success.