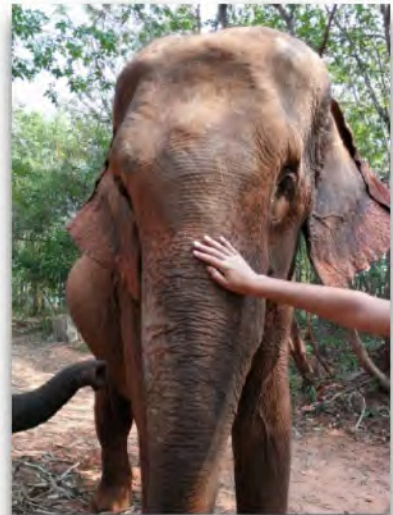


# Sustaining Thailand's Treasures



HAVE FUN.

HELP PEOPLE.



**This program, much more than any other, requires you to actively read all of the below information, for reasons that will become clear. It is urgent that you read the entire packet prior to going on the program.**

## Introduction to Thailand

Thailand's enchanting people, culture, and landscape have long beckoned travelers to Southeast Asia's most popular destination. There is much more to this ancient country than exotic beaches and the colorful chaos of Bangkok. Stepping outside of the beaten path will reveal the true charm of Thailand, and the warm people you will meet on your Globe Aware adventure will leave a lasting impression.

Buddhism reigns supreme in Thailand. The country is steeped with gorgeous temples and shrines. The monarchy is also extremely revered here, and the king's picture is displayed prominently throughout the country.

Thailand is not as poverty stricken as many of its surrounding countries. However, in rural areas, resources are much more limited than what the typical volunteer has. In fact, Buddhists usually take pride in living with less material needs.



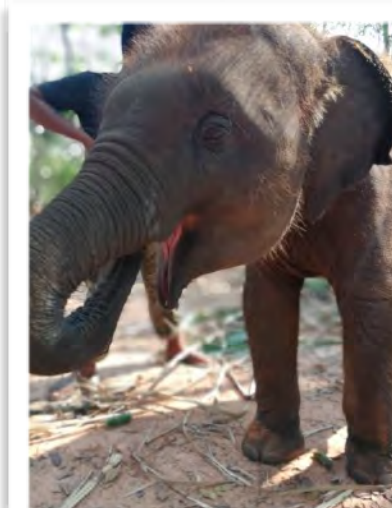
## Community

Surin City is located an approximate 7 hours drive North-East of Bangkok. This is part of the Isaan Region of North-Eastern Thailand, known for its spicy and delicious food, farming traditions, and rural culture. Most people of Isaan speak one of several dialects of the Laos language, as well as Standard Thai, and often a local tribal language.

Surin province was once covered with forests teeming with wild elephants, but deforestation throughout the 20th century has left most of the countryside dry and barren or converted to rice paddies.

Baan Tha Klang Village is approximately 1 hour's drive North-West of Surin City, located on the Moon River, which flows into the Mekong River. Your Globe Aware program is located in Surin Province, and you will be lodged in Baan Tha Klang Village. There are over 300 elephants registered in Surin Province, and the vast majority of them are trapped in the unfortunate trade of street begging. This is a terrible life for elephants that require literally hundreds of fresh kilos of vegetable and clean water daily.

The Surin Provincial Government has been working, for decades, to try to develop an interest in elephant tourism that would allow for a sanctuary for elephants that could be self-sufficient as well as stimulate economic growth for the community. The government has set aside 2,000 acres of land, enough to maintain a breeding population of 300 elephants. This is a complicated situation, as it means the elephants spend all day and night chained up on this 2000



acre land. In Surin, you have the chance to change history—to save the Asian elephant from extinction and give them a life worth living, while helping the locals find alternative sources of income other than street begging by getting them involved in helping to preserve their habitat and saving the elephants.

The project itself is currently focused on 10 permanent female elephants. Each elephant has a mahout (elephant owner) that is responsible for the care and nurturing of that elephant. Each elephant has an enclosure (that was built by previous volunteers), to provide them shade during the hot days. Elephants eat 500-600 pounds of food every day. In Surin, nothing grows naturally, so it is a full-time job for the mahouts to find food for the elephants. They have to get up in the middle of the night to feed their elephants, every night.

## Projects and Expectations

Weekly activities are subject to change and will depend on how many volunteers are there during the week, project availability, weather, previous progress, etc. This programs involves fairly hard physical work, in dry heat. Past volunteers built the new enclosure, platform, and sun shelters for the elephants. They made composts from elephant dung and weeded a dirty lake to give more room for the elephants to play. Volunteers plant elephant food and cut it; this process is a big part of the project.

This project would not exist if it weren't for the volunteers. Through your participation, volunteers provide employment and badly needed economic revenue that ensures that the mahouts and their families stay in Surin and do not return to the streets of Bangkok. Taking care of elephants is a demanding task that the mahouts handle day in and out. Most importantly, volunteers help create the opportunity for elephants to get o chains and behave naturally.

During the course of the week, volunteers will get to feed the elephants cucumbers, sugar cane and grass. They go for hour long walks down to the river with them daily and may get an opportunity to bathe with them. Most of the tasks at hand are simple but physical. Cutting sugar cane and hauling to the truck isn't terribly difficult or taxing, but doing so for an extended period of time in the heat can be. Please make sure to stay hydrated. Volunteers should expect to work roughly 6 hours a day. If you find the work too taxing, the locals and the coordinator will understand and will find less taxing work. It is VERY important to communicate with both. You will have about two hours of unstructured free time broken up throughout the day, and several cultural awareness exercises throughout the week. Plan to be done with dinner and have free time by 8pm daily.

There are several other small activities that the coordinators plan for volunteers such as teaching English to children at the local temple. We encourage volunteers to bring photos are simple English learning materials to help in this activity.

**Please remember:** The concepts of scheduling and organization are not universal. It is best to keep an open mind and not be judgmental when visiting a foreign country. Remember that your way of doing things may not be the best way here – the locals usually also have a very good reason for completing a task in a certain way, and their priorities may be different than ours. Here is an example:



*“But Mario, why are we building the fence so close to the river? Surely erosion will cause the fence to fall o the edge!”*

*“Don’t worry, the foundation is very thick – it won’t fall. Besides, we can’t move it over any more because the boundary of the soccer eld is too close!” Ah ha!*

The following two itineraries tend to be the schedule must frequency followed:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
16.00 Arrive to Surin project	7.00 Breakfast	7.00 Breakfast	7.00 Breakfast	7.00 Breakfast	7.00 Breakfast	7.00 Leaving to Buriram
17.00 Welcome ceremony	8.00 Cut sugarcane/ clean enclosure	8.00 Cut sugar cane/ clean enclosure	8.00 Cut sugar cane/ clean enclosure	8.00 Cut sugar cane/ clean enclosure	8.00 Cut sugar cane/ clean enclosure	8.30 Departure to Bangkok
17.30 Orientation and rules	9.00 Feeding food to elephant/elephant walk/ visit poopaper factory	9.00 Elephant walk to the river and collect garbage	9.00 Elephant walk to the river and collect garbage	9.00 Elephant walk to the river and collect garbage	9.00 Elephant walk to the river and collect garbage	
18.00 Dinner	10.30 Return to meeting point	10.30 Clean area around river Etc.	10.30 Watering grass and planting or other activities	10.30 Clean area around river or other activities	10.30 Play games with mahouts	
	11.00 Visit local museum	12.00 Lunch	12.00 Lunch	12.00 Lunch	12.00 Lunch	
	12.00 Lunch	13.30 English lessons for kids at School	14.00 Thai cooking	13.30 English lessons for kids at School	14.00 Clean up temple/watering tree/ stay with elephants	
	13.30 Play game mahouts	16.00 Return to meeting point	16.00 Return to meeting point	16.00 Return to meeting point	16.00 Return to meeting point	
	14.00 Clean area around temple etc	16.30 Visit local market	18.00 Dinner	18.00 Dinner	18.00 Dinner	
	and elephant graveyard and stay with elephants	18.00 Dinner	19.00 Teaching English kids and play games at temple	19.00 Mahout BBQ”thank you party”		
	16.00 Return to meeting point	19.00 Teaching English to kids play games or teaching mahouts				
	18.00 Dinner					
	19.00 Learning Thai lessons					



## Teaching English

Most volunteers want to spend at least an hour or two meeting kids in a school setting. The coordinator usually has an hour scheduled at a school and an hour one evening at the temple. We have provided many materials, lesson plans, games and activities. However, we have noticed that most of the time the coordinator will only pass out to each volunteer a piece of paper with pictures of animals on it and send volunteers into a classroom to "go and teach English." Because the coordinators are rotated so frequently, usually without any notice, we feel it may be helpful for us to provide some activities below as ideas.

Look at the itinerary on the chalk board when you arrive. The night before the school day, go through these to pick a few activities to do with the kids. Most you meet will know numbers, most of the alphabet, animals, and colors, and that is the extent of it. You are not limited to these ideas. We recommend printing out the English Lessons Found at the Thailand Orientation Menu.

## Special Activities to Ask About

**Giving alms to monks** is a very normal part of Thai life. Every morning, except Buddhist day, several monks will walk by the corner in front of the Volunteer Meet up Point and receive any

gifts of food anyone gives them. Monks are not allowed to touch money. And they do not eat after noon. They will eat anything put in their alms bowls. Traditionally people will put cooked rice or give juices boxes. IF THIS INTERESTS YOU, LET OCHA KNOW. You can do this activity with him. It takes 5 to 10 minutes. THERE IS A PROPER etiquette. 1<sup>st</sup>, knees and shoulders should be covered. Second, you wait while kneeling; put your knees on your shoes. Third, women should never touch monks directly [Important side note: part of their philosophy to avoid suffering means avoiding direct contact with women. They imagine that some of the largest pain might be to have a child who dies or a romantic partner/spouse/wife who dies. To avoid this pain, they try and avoid having a romantic attachment or child attachment.] Therefore, women should place objects in their bowls or platters and NOT in their hands. When you are done, hold you hands in “wai” and the monks will chant a blessing for you.



### **Cooking lesson**

Your cook at the volunteer meet up point is amazing. If you like Thai cooking and want to learn some, just ask if you can help while she cooks.

### **Thai Massage**

Next to what locals call “the resort” is a hair salon/barber shop where a woman will give a traditional Thai massage for 200 baht. Highly recommended. Thai massage is unique in that you stay fully clothes. The masseuse uses their arms, legs to rhythmically apply pressure (rather than deep rubbing.) To book, walk by her place and ask if you can do “Thai massage” and hold up fingers to indicate what time.

### **Volunteer Show**

You will see the volunteer show listed on the chalk board, but likely never to be given an explanation until you arrive. If you attend, each participant is usually expected to share something, sort of in the vein of a talent show. It might be a song, a story, a party trick. We have heard some volunteers say this is a highlight and others that found it tortuous and awkward. Feel free to not attend.

### **Auction**

Toward the end of the program you will see an event called the auction. This is where mahouts have made prints of their elephants feet along with other small crafts. There is a bit of an auction to buy them, usually going for around \$10. Similar to the “show” above, some volunteers felt this was awkward like a forced donation, and others found it enjoyable. You are not required to attend. We have suggested they have a “shop” of these items for volunteers to buy if they want, though this suggestion has not been acted upon as of the writing of this orientation.

### **Elephant Dung Paper Project**

You will help collect and deliver elephant dung. Most are surprised there is no smell; it is essentially like wet grass. You will witness how this is made and what its used to sell.



## Age Requirements

The program is most appropriate for those over 18, though 16 to 18 year olds are admitted only with a parent or guardian participating as well.

## Packing Information

Remember that you are coming to volunteer not just with elephants, but to help the people in the village as well. Please respect their culture, which involves dressing conservatively. Do dress for the hot climate: loose light clothing that covers your skin that you don't mind getting dirty. Remember that modesty is essential. Short shorts or skirts and skimpy tank tops or spaghetti straps are never appropriate, particularly when visiting the village or any of the temples. Please do not expose your thighs or shoulders. If you get the opportunity to bathe with the elephants, please bring clothes that you can wear over your swimsuit that won't be see-through.

Make sure to pack enough clothes to be comfortable, considering that you may get dirty doing volunteer work. Volunteers can have their clothes washed by a local woman for a small fee. This should keep you from having to worry about bringing too many clothes, and is another way to support the community.

This packing list is meant as a guideline. There is no single item that you can't live without for one week. Pack what you think you will need to be comfortable, but do not get preoccupied about items that you didn't bring, weren't on the list, etc. Everyone has different opinions about essential items!

### Suggested Items:

- Bug Repellent with at least 20% deet Sunscreen
- Your own water bottle. Large dispensers of bottled water are always set up at the volunteer meet up point for you to refill at any time. There is also a bucket next to it with ice from filtered water.
- Rain gear
- Ear plugs - chickens and dogs in the nearby area
- Towel
- Toiletries
- Electrical prong adapter
- Comfortable clothes that can get dirty (including long sleeved shirts and long pants, close toed shoes; knee-length shorts)
- Sleeping mat (optional) as some find the local mattress not soft enough
- Your camera, of course!

*\*\*\*Please check the schedule on the chalk board each day. If it says you will be planting or harvesting sugar cane or grass, wear close-toed shoes and long pants and sleeves. There are used work clothes at the meet up center, but you may prefer to bring your own.*

A note on swimsuits: while you may well find opportunity to wear one (it is hot!) and no one will tell you NOT to, you should consider the fact that locals consider wearing a bathing suit to be obscene unless at a beach. You will need clothes to cover your knees and shoulders to visit any temples or visit with monks. If it's raining you will probably want close toed shoes for elephant walks. If its dry, flip flops are fine

## Accommodations



At the request and recommendation of many returned volunteers, we have decided to include the price of upgraded accommodations in our program fee. You will be staying at the local “resort”. Resort is a term they use to describe it, but it is more of a simple cottage style villa where volunteers can reserve private accommodations with western style beds and bathrooms. Hot water is readily available. Breakfast is not served at the

resort so you will need to walk across the street every morning to the project site for breakfast and coffee. Please contact our office if you are interested in the upgrade and we can check on availability for you.

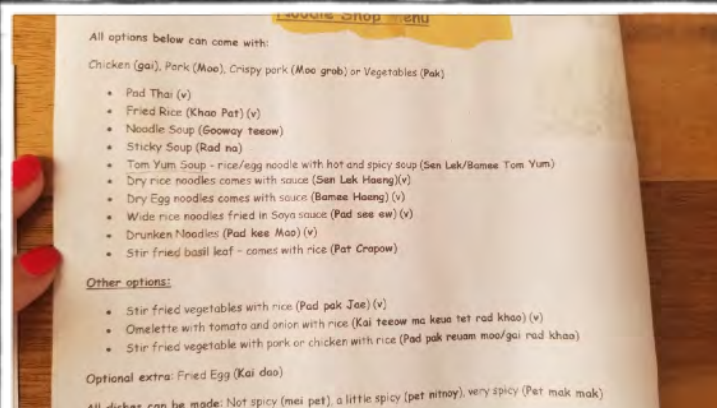
## Electricity

There is limited electricity: enough to recharge digital batteries, but not enough to do heavy-duty hair drying. Voltage is 220, and most chargers, etc. are equipped to deal with this. Read the label near the plug on your device to make sure it can handle this voltage. Electrical outlets will generally accept European plugs with two circular metal pins.



## Food and Water

Breakfast and dinner are at the Volunteer Meet up Point. Traditionally breakfast is pancakes, fruit, toast, eggs, with serve your own coffee and tea; Dinner is usually a variety of freshly made delicious Thai food. Lunches are at a nearby restaurant; you put your order in every morning choosing from the menu your coordinator will show you. Saturday night the cook is off so that meal is taken at a nearby restaurant together.





## Weather

The wet season starts in May and continues until early November. The wettest months are September and October. The rainy season is not necessarily the worst time to visit the country, as downpours are usually strong but short, with the sun returning within a few hours.

## Money

Unless you plan on buying a lot of souvenirs or extending your trip, you should not need an enormous amount of extra cash. Items such as phone calls, souvenirs, fare to get to the meet up point, alcohol, and departure tax are not covered by your program fee. Many people will take American dollars at the going exchange rate and give you change in their local currency, if requested (though this is not 100% reliable in every case). About \$200 should be ample to cover the above expenses during the program week.

**\*\*Also, a note for all program locations—it is a good idea that you call your bank and credit card companies before you depart and notify them of the country you will be traveling to and the dates of your travel so that they will allow charges and/or withdrawals internationally.\*\***

## Communication

You will be staying in a rural village and access to phone and internet is available in several locations though sometimes limited. In the case of an emergency the coordinator will help you to be able to find a phone or computer to use.

There is usually cell phone reception in Baan Tha Klang Village. If you plan on making frequent phone calls, you may want to purchase a Thai phone and/or SIM card in Bangkok before the project starts, or sign up for a special global plan with your home cell phone provider. There is wifi service at the local market from 7am-10pm every Monday through Saturday and at quite a variety of other locations within walking distance throughout the village.

## Special to know about your Coordinator

Ocha, <pronounced O-sha> is a smart, wonderful guy who seems to be overwhelmed with paperwork. You may well see him paying the mahouts their salaries and for the sugarcane and supplies we purchase. He is the most knowledgeable person about the program and project and has been with the program for many years. He reports to a Thai elephant foundation. If you have detailed questions or issues, he is the person with whom you should talk. However he is not with the volunteers for most of the project work. He lives at the Volunteer meet up point, where you will be spending a good portion of every day. Also know there is a first aid kit kept at the Volunteer meet up point. A medical clinic is 10 minutes away in the need of stitches, etc, and a major hospital is 40 min away at Tha Tun.

Every few weeks the foundation sends a new coordinator to work with the volunteers. Sometimes this person is very experienced, and sometimes they aren't. We have no control over this situation. The best we can do is arm volunteers for the possibility. With this in mind we wanted to include important information that the coordinator SHOULD give you, but may not. We have had meetings in person and over the phone with Ocha about hoping he could

facilitate making sure this information is conveyed to each and every new coordinator and volunteer, but we have found it often isn't. It is possible you will be dropped off at the sugarcane harvesting area with the coordinator and see the coordinator just jump to work without explaining what to do or how to harvest. Either emulate what they are doing or ask for help. This can be shy in showing foreigners what to do, afraid they will offend you by implying you do not know how to do something. SO PLEASE help by ASKING.

The foundation receives volunteers from several sources. There is a company called Kaya that charges around 1700 per week, so there is likely to be a difference in what volunteers have paid. As far as we know, Globe Aware is the only one which includes medical insurance, etc.

As this program is unique from other Globe Aware programs, and we have not selected, hired or trained the Coordinator, there are a few things you should know. First, you will readily see the issues with the elephants. We think you will also see how the financial contributions make the mahouts' jobs a little easier, and certainly the difference being made in the lives of those few elephants we are currently able to help. This program does spread positivity to schools and the community.

But we need you and your insights! We still feel there is so much more to be done, and we think that our volunteers are likely to actually be the best source of it, given that you are looking at the issues with fresh eyes.

Culturally, your coordinator was conditioned to be a bit quiet and passive in many things. Be proactive with your coordinator asking about what activity is next so that you can be dressed appropriately. Thinking this way, planning in advance, seems somewhat foreign to the locals.



1. *Do not be afraid to ask questions. The coordinator can be quite shy. For example, you may find yourself not understanding much about the opening ceremony. The coordinator often feels it is insulting to explain, unless you ask. So, PLEASE ASK!!*
2. *Let the coordinator know you'd love to meet everyone in the group, or they may omit this step.*
3. *Let the coordinator know about additional projects you think could work. For example, past volunteers have mentioned cleaning trash, landscaping, helping the area around the temple, painting elephant gravestones. If you mention this directly to the coordinator, particularly as you express interest it is more likely to happen. We have shared these thoughts with the coordinator, but as we did not select or train him (the elephant sanctuary foundation did), he will take his inspiration more from you.*
4. *On one of the final nights with the mahouts, following a meal, you may be invited to attend a special event where they "auction" the foot prints of the elephants for around \$10. While we are not entirely opposed to this idea, and we believe it goes entirely to the mahouts, we do not like that it can make volunteers feel forced to participate. You do NOT need to. You*

*can express your interest ahead of time to the coordinator that you do not want to be present for that. Or you can express your thoughts about this. Attendance is not mandatory.*

5. *Sometimes the coordinator organizes a “Volunteer Show,” without explaining what this is. Really it is something of a talent show, with anyone who wants to getting up and sharing whatever they like – a song, a story, etc.*
6. *Our coordinator will also be spending time with volunteers who have come here from other places. For example, the elephant sanctuary organization that asked us to help send volunteers to Surin also will commonly find volunteers themselves. You are likely to come across a few long term (several weeks) volunteers from Australia. Because they came a different route, they are bound by different logistics. For example, they do not have medical insurance or liability insurance, etc. For this reason you may observe differences. If they get sick or hurt, they will be taking care of themselves. Globe Aware is required per IVPA rules to secure insurance that covers such things on behalf of our volunteers.*

## House Rules

- Wash your own dishes after meals when eating at the Volunteer Meet UP Center. You will see a designated area with tubs of soap, water, and drying racks set out for this purpose. If you are unsure how to do, just ask one of the onsite staff.
- Do not bring any of the property dogs into your room.
- At night, do not leave your shoes outside or dogs may take them.
- Please turn off your lights as you leave your room. Not only does it save electricity it keeps bugs away.
- When at the Volunteer Meet up Center, toilet paper needs to go in the trash can beside and NOT the toilet.
- Please do not walk up to elephants chained behind houses. They are under stress and more likely to show aggressive behavior.
- NEVER taunt an elephant with food. For example, do not hide food behind your back when working with elephants.
- There are local “house mums” in the area who will do your laundry for 100 to 200 baht per load (minimum 10 pieces.) Please ask Ocha if you need this service.



## Arrival and Transportation into Bangkok

There are several ways in which you can make your way from Suvarnabhumi Airport (pronounced ‘su wan na poom’) to Bangkok proper. Your first step is to exit Customs into the chaotic Arrivals Hall. Once here, you can change money into Thai Baht to be able to pay for your transportation.

**Taxi:** The Airport is a 30km drive from downtown Bangkok. There are two taxi stands; one on exiting the arrivals area and going down a level and the other at the Public Transport Center (to which you have to take the free shuttle bus that takes about 8 minutes.) Taxis should always use their meter. There is an airport surcharge on top of tollway fees, which depends on where your hotel is. The total cost can be around 250 Baht to the popular Sukhumvit area and 350-400 Baht (12 USD) to Bang Lamphu, where many hotels are located.



**Bus:** For the adventurous, 24 hour public bus service is available from the bus terminal at the Transport Center. Again, the transport center is available via a free shuttle bus.

**Limousine:** Limousine service into Bangkok is available for around 1000 Baht.

For more information on transportation options or to find quick facts on Suvarnabhumi Airport you can visit: <http://www.bangkokairportonline.com/>

For volunteers who want to stay at a hotel near the Northern Bus Terminal the night before departure, you might try G9 Hotel, which is very near the bus station. They even have a free room stay option if you attend a Thai boxing match (only available on Sundays). It is a modern hotel but in traditional Thai style with mattresses on the floor. You can find out more [here](#).

## Passports & Visas

U.S. citizen tourists staying for less than 30 days do not require a visa, but must possess a passport and onward/return ticket. A Passenger Service Charge, currently 500 baht must be paid in Thai baht when departing the country from any of Thailand 's international airports, though this may soon be built into airfares. Thailand 's Entry/Exit information is subject to change without notice.



When you enter into the country and fill out your Visa, please put down that you're there for tourism, and not volunteering (so you don't have to worry about paying taxes).

## Meet-Up

For this particular location it is advised that you arrive in Bangkok the day before your program starts as your bus for Surin Province leaves at **7:30 AM** the day the program begins.

You will be met by the project coordinator at Mo Chit Northern Bus Terminal on the 3rd floor in front of Dunkin' Donuts Café (NOT THE STAND/KIOSK). The cafe will more than likely be closed, but there is ample seating right across from it where you can wait.

The Coordinator will travel with you in the bus for the approximately 7 hour journey to the program site. The volunteer vacation program ends at 8 am the following Sunday and it takes approximately 6 hours to get you back to Bangkok. Click [HERE](#) for more information on the bus terminal.



*Dunkin' Donuts Cafe*

The bus is quite nice and a meal and snacks are served on board. There is no vegetarian option however, so make sure to plan accordingly for the long journey.

### **Alternative Options:**

Another option would be to fly into and out of is the Buriram Airport. This airport will typically entail a layover in BKK but will get you within 40 minutes drive of the worksite. The pickup time at 2:00 PM on Monday at the Buriram Bus Station. Airport code: BFV



### **If You Miss the Pick-Up**

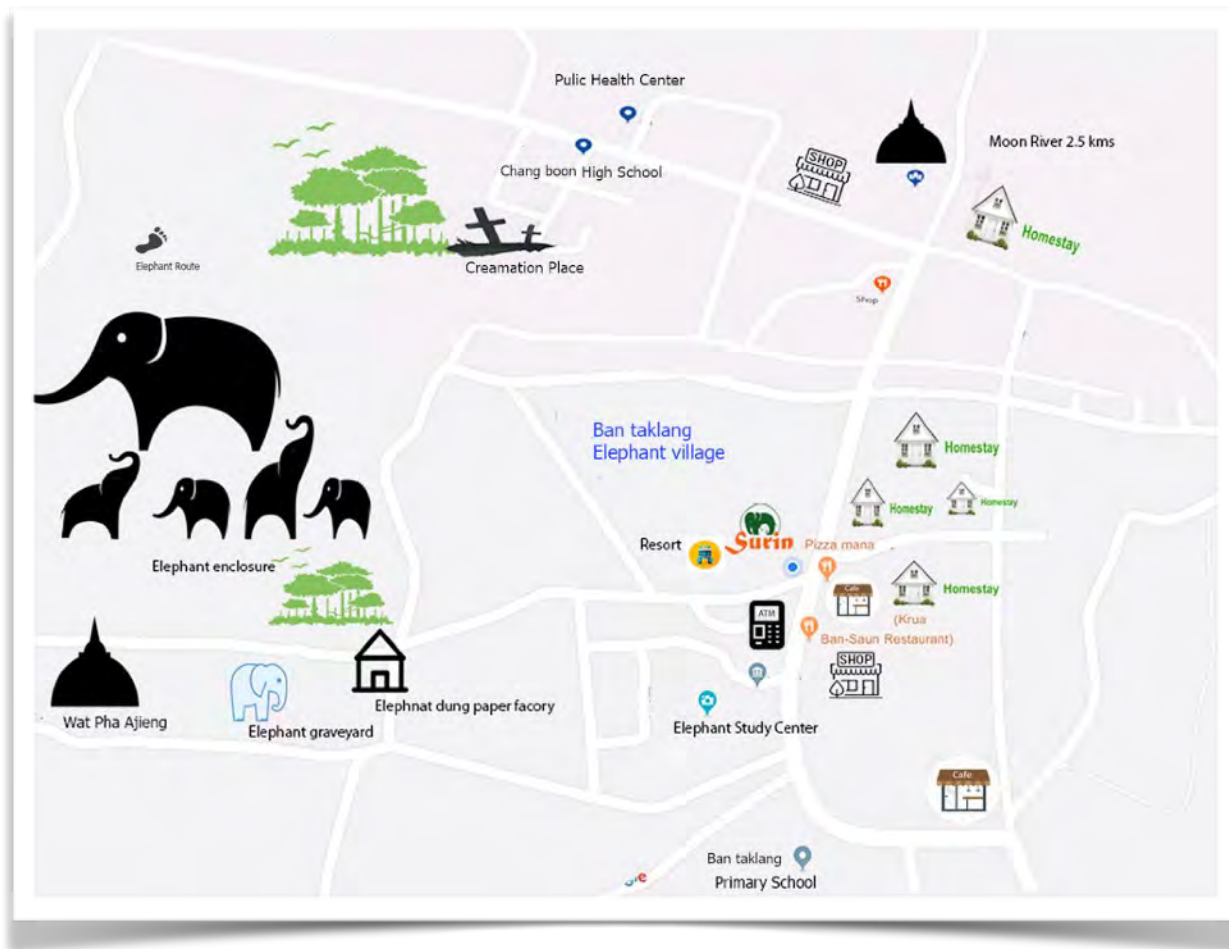
If we do not see you at the meet up point, the coordinator's first step is to check with the airline to see if your flight was delayed. If it was not, our next call is to your emergency contact. Therefore if you have any sort of change in your arrival, please make sure to inform your emergency contact, as this is the first person we will be contacting.

We will do our best to contact you, however if we cannot contact you in about an hour's time the group will continue on without you. Once you have made contact with either your emergency contact or our headquarters, we will try and work out arrangements to get you to location, but it may be at your extra expense, as this cost is not estimated into the program budget.

If you feel there is a problem with these arrangements, or you cannot meet the time schedule, please contact us prior to your departure if possible, and we will try to resolve this best we can. Because of certain limitations, and strains on other volunteers, such requests should be made within a fair amount of time (at least one and a half weeks before the program date) and will be remedied at our discretion.

The phone number you have provided as your emergency contact will be used in case of an emergency. This may be if something happens to you while participating in the program, or if you are not at the meet up location on time. Please let your emergency contact know this. If you are lost prior to meeting with the group, or your plane has arrived late, please attempt to contact us at the numbers below or your emergency contact. In addition to the 24-hour emergency US office # 214-824-GLOBE (4562), here is a list of local contacts, which you may use in case of an emergency.





## Safety, Security and Health

The area where the Globe Aware program is located is not near any areas of suspected risk. Please review the United States Department of State travel website for more information about safety and security while traveling in Thailand. [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1040.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1040.html)

United States Embassy  
95 Wireless Road Bangkok 10330, Thailand  
Tel: [66](2) 205-4049

There are no required vaccinations for travel to Thailand. Please defer to the CDC's [Thailand Travel website](#) for official recommendations.

## Further Background

There are currently over 300 elephants registered in Surin province. The lack of employment opportunities and the deterioration of their natural habitat have forced many mahouts to take their elephants to large cities and beg on the streets. The lack of high quality food and clean water, paired with the stressful environment of the work, seriously impacts the elephants' health, both physically and psychologically.



In 2009, a local organization approached a major elephant conservation foundation in the United States asking for help in developing responsible elephant-based tourism in an Elephant Study Center. Together our goal is to establish sustainably managed elephant tourism as an alternative to street begging, circuses and elephant rides.

The Surin government has already set aside over 2000 acres of land for elephants and their mahouts and we are working with local partners to reforest this area providing, with time, a rich and varied source of food for captive elephants in Surin. Elephant husbandry is a reality in Thailand and deeply engrained in the cultural lifestyle. We therefore need to work in close collaboration with the local community in order to implement any positive and long lasting changes in traditional elephant management.

The destruction of elephant habitat and the alteration of the hydrological systems over the last 50 years have made the situation in Surin increasingly dire, resulting in a severe lack of food for elephants and more importantly water to grow this food.

## Challenges to Overcome

The mahouts in Surin are elephant owners, and they are free to leave the project at any time. In order to prevent this, we must provide rewarding, financially stable, and sustainable employment for the mahouts and their elephants. This can be supported with both tourism, and with donations. We must also demonstrate that our style of free ranging, natural elephant tourism is the BEST alternative to street begging and other forms of elephant tourism.

Currently at Surin, there is a daily elephant show and a small amount of elephant riding. We must effectively provide an alternative that is more enjoyable for visitors, more financially appealing to mahouts, and is in the long-term best interest for the elephants. Most importantly, our project must appear as a viable business alternative. The Surin government is already interested in what we have to offer. Our job is to show them how sustainable elephant tourism can attract tourism, and bring money into the region.

You are going to be in the village of Ban Ta Klang , Kra Pho Sub-District, Thatoom District at the confluence of the Mun <pronounced MOON> and Chi <pronounced CHEE> rivers. The majority of people who live here are Kuy or Kui, the local ethnic group. They have expertise in catching wild elephants and breaking them for performance use. The village raises the largest number of these kinds of elephants in the world. Some mahouts bring their elephants to wander Bangkok and tourist attractions to beg for money to be able to buy food for the elephants. You will visit the museum set up by the Surin provincial government in coordination with the Thai federal government to create the project “Elephant Return Home to Promote Surin, the Original place.” His program pays 8000 baht per month for the elephant to participate : Most stores and restaurants close between 7 and 8 in the evenings. There is an ATM next to the Volunteer Meet up Point, several “fancy” coffee shops and restaurants within walking distance from where you will be staying and a few small “mini-mart\_” type of stores.

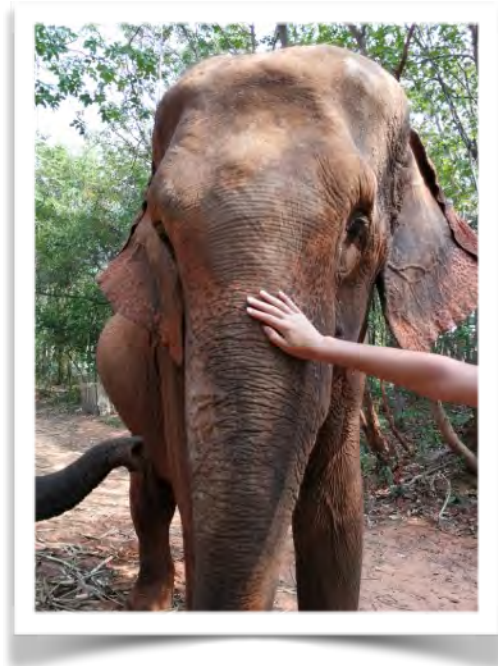


## The Focus

A typical street begging mahout can make up to 30,000 THB in a month (\$1000). We cannot compete with this salary. What we can do however is provide a community-based approach as an incentive to come back to live and work in Baan Tha Klang Village. Revenue from the volunteer program is invested directly into the local community, and will supplement the mahout salaries. By doing this, we will show the mahouts that by bringing their elephants home to Surin, they are not only finding secure jobs for themselves, they are also helping their entire community.

The Gwi people are traditionally known for working with elephants. Centuries ago, they were employed by the kings of Siam to capture and train elephants, care for them, and keep them in the royal stables. This relationship between humans and elephants stretches back for generations, and thus the Gwi people share a lot of traditional knowledge relating to elephant care, herbal medicines, etc.

This unique ethnic culture has evolved from the retraction of the mighty Khmer Empire, one thousand years ago, famous for creating the temple complex of Angkor Wat. Although there are now Khmer speaking people also living in Surin province, the Gwi speak a distinctly different dialect. In many Gwi communities the ancient practices of spirit worship and Animism can still be found. During our volunteer stay with the Gwi, we will take steps to honor these beliefs, and show respect to their revered elders, the elephant Shamen.



### **More on the elephant situation**

Facing terrible deforestation, Thailand banned logging in 1989. Up to that point, elephants were used to help transport logs. Prior, they were used for everything from kingly processions to animals ridden in warfare. Asian elephants with good care have lifespans similar to that of humans. The amount of food they require to eat is expensive for locals. In order to have enough income to feed them, many elephant owners turn to using them for circus style performing or to give rides. Let us explore this.

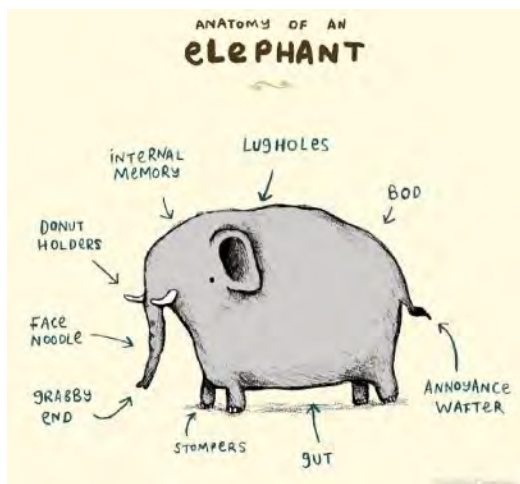
First, all elephants that are used to perform tricks or give saddle back rides are first “broken,” through a very cruel process where they are corralled for about 48 hours and have their heads beaten until they do not recognize their mother or herd. A quick google search will reveal photos that would haunt you forever. Elephants are incredibly sensitive and intelligent animals.

Elephants that are ridden by saddle (as opposed to bare back around the neck) are subjected to terrible injury and degradation.

To understand why that is, look at the photo below and see how the spine has relatively delicate vertically oriented vertebrae (#5 above) that get crushed by the saddle.

Therefore this program is an effort at creating a unique and innovative concept aimed at improving the living conditions of captive Asian elephants by removing elephant rides/performing in exchange for a different economic sustainability for their owners through responsible volunteer tourism. We work along the Gwi <pronounced GWHY – rhymes with GUY> community in a government run study center. There are about 500 elephants in the village. You will see most chained on a very short chain behind their owner's house, pacing nervously, in very poor condition. They will sway back and forth or bob their heads. These are clear signs of elephant distress. They long to be with their herd and fellow elephants. The elephants and mahouts that participate in the program allow us to put these amazing creatures in more natural surroundings where volunteer walk alongside them, allow them to swim in the river, plant sugar cane and grass and harvest and feed them. For mothers with newborns, we erect and maintain enclosures (better than a chain); volunteers are not allowed to get too close to them as these Moms are very protective at the newborn stage. The mahouts are each paid to participate in this program with us, and your participation funds are the source of that income. Happy elephants swish their tails back and forth to swat flies and have relaxed eyes that are half closed (versus wider open.) They also flat their ears against the wind to stay cool. You may also be lucky enough to hear the low rumbling like purr they use to communicate with one another.

The land we use for the elephant care is government owned, and fairly limited. The program does not own or buy the elephants. How they are treated is ultimately not our decision. Any participants agree to not use the cruel bullhooks you will see many locals using, and the reason many have tattered ears.



Studies show that 85% of people think that tourism companies should avoid activities that cause suffering for wild animals. But most tourists sign up for experiences with elephants because they love them, and don't know about the cruelty behind the rides and tricks. If people knew the facts, then they wouldn't do it. This program is a start at changing awareness, perception and possibilities, even giving an example to other mahouts in the same village. This is a HUGE part of what you accomplish in being here. Foreigners taking part in this process shines a big light for other mahouts an alternate reality. If they don't see these benefits they will only keep doing what they know. Hopefully in time we can show local mahouts on a larger scale that people are willing to see elephants in



a more natural environment and will adapt their mindset to be more considerate of the elephant's welfare and expand our ability to support more elephants and mahouts in the area.

### **The "Step-Back Approach"**

We know you want some good photos of and with the elephants. Two things to keep in mind:

- The further away you stand from them, the further away the mahouts will stand, as they will be less worried about anyone getting harmed. The elephants with whom we work are not aggressive. However, if a volunteer decided to taunt an elephant, this can change (behaviors like humans hiding food to tease).
- The more space and freedom the elephants will have to forage and feel they are with their herd. They really enjoy this, as it is their natural instinct. SO try and balance these elements.
- When they feel they are more in their natural element, it means you will have greater opportunity to witness incredible natural behaviors, such as rumbling purrs, to spewing dirt on their backs, etc.

### **Use of Funds**

This program was taken on, somewhat uniquely by Globe Aware, at the request of the locally organized foundation. The project's goal is to increase awareness about the plight of the endangered Asian elephant, educate locals on the humane treatment of their elephants, and to provide sanctuary for rescued elephants. They are working within a government run facility which does not have the same welfare standards as we do. This makes our work here all the more important but it also exposes us to a certain amount of suffering. The project provides a more natural, less stressful, and more sustainable alternative for these elephants rather than being used for street begging and circus shows.

Funds sent to Surin are spread out as such:

32% mahout salaries

8% for elephant food

1% for the welcome ceremony with the locals 8% for accommodations

11% for meals

1% for breakfast cook

As you can see, over 60% of the fee Globe Aware pays the Surin Project goes directly to the local community.

The rest is distributed:

12% for volunteer coordinators

2% fuel for the truck (this can vary depending on fuel cost)

2% t-shirt and water bottle

20% transport. A part of the transport cost also goes to the local community since we pay the driver.

Per the volunteer handbook, there are additional fees for which Globe Aware pays such as medical insurance, liability insurance, credit card processing fees, our own outreach program and administrative costs.

## Community Transportation

You are picked up and dropped off from the airport using a modern van with seatbelts and air-conditioning. We are obliged by the onsite Thai elephant foundation to use their vehicle to travel to and from the work sites, however, roughly 1 mile each way, usually going below 10 miles an hour with only motorbikes on the road. They use a pickup truck with attached trailer.



Volunteers and the coordinator are in the back without seatbelts and helmets. You will note that the majority of the population are on motorbikes without helmets (and feel lucky to have a motorized vehicle! You will see a fair share of locals riding their elephants as well) You need to understand and be ok with this risk going onto the program.

## Cultural Nuances

- Feet are considered the dirtiest part of the body and it is deemed extremely rude to touch anyone with your feet or to use your feet to point.
- Thais regard the head as the highest part of

the body, literally and figuratively. Therefore, avoid touching people on the head and try not to point your feet at people or an object. It is considered very rude.

- Shoes should be removed when entering a home and at many Buddhist monuments. At the village you're volunteering in, shoes are removed when entering the platform, the eating area, and the local market.
- Ask permission to take photos. Most people won't mind, but it is common courtesy.
- Thai people have a deep, traditional reverence for the Royal Family, and as volunteers, you should be careful to show respect for the King, the Queen and the Royal Children.
- Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch or be touched by a woman, or to accept anything from the hand of one. If a woman has to give anything to a monk, she first hands it to a man, who then presents it, or sets it on a table. (The explanation behind this takes quite some time, but the idea is that the relationship between a man and a woman is one of the largest pleasures in the physical world, therefore those who have decided to focus on the non material world do what they can to avoid physical attachments.)
- Public displays of affection between men and women are frowned upon.
- Do not lose your temper. To Thais, angry displays simply denote poor manners. Demands and even protests are best presented with a smile, as if a disagreement on anything, including prices, was just a misunderstanding.
- Never step over or across people or things that are on the ground. Always walk around them. This is particularly important for people or food seated or laid out on the ground.
- Do not show affection in public with acts like kissing. This is something Thais feel should be done in private.

## Further Readings

**So You're really serious about knowing as much as you can about helping elephants? Read on . . .**

# Asian Elephants: Threats and Solutions

The Asian elephant once roamed from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in western Asia as far east as China's Yangtze River. No longer. Now a highly endangered species, it has been eliminated from western Asia completely, from substantial parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and almost entirely from China. Exceedingly adaptable in diet and behavior, elephants can survive anywhere from grasslands to rain forests, but they must migrate across large areas to find water and suitable food at different times of the year. Such vast ranges have become extremely rare in densely populated, rapidly developing Asia.

Though it's difficult to count elephants in the wild, it's estimated that the wild Asian population, which numbered in the hundreds of thousands at the turn of the 20th century, is now only 37,000 to 48,000 animals. Yet thanks to ancient cultural tradition, about 16,000 Asian elephants are kept in captivity in 11 Asian countries. This situation makes the Asian elephant unique among endangered large mammals. In Thailand there are nearly three times as many elephants in domesticity as in the wild.

## Threats to Wild Elephants

- **No room to roam:** The greatest threat to wild Asian elephants is habitat loss and fragmentation. The average home range of an elephant is 1500 square miles. Throughout the tropics, humans have cleared large areas of forest and have rapidly populated river valleys and plains. Elephants have been pushed into hilly landscapes and less suitable remnants of forest, but even these less accessible habitats are being assaulted by poachers, loggers, and developers.

Once-continuous habitat has become increasingly broken up by dams, tea and coffee plantations, roads, and railway lines. These developments obstruct the seasonal migrations of elephant clans. Habitat fragmentation also divides elephant populations into small, isolated groups, which are then at risk of inbreeding. Some biologists believe that there are no longer any wild Asian elephant populations large enough to avoid genetic deterioration over the long term.

- **Conflicts with humans:** When elephants stray out of the forest into settled areas, they sometimes destroy property, trample crops, and even kill people. Not infrequently, farmers respond with gunfire or poison.

- **Ivory poaching:** The international ivory trade has contributed far more to the decline of African elephants than Asian ones over the last few decades. Still, the people of Asia have a 500-year tradition of ivory carving and often hunt males for their tusks.

- **Capture of young elephants:** Many young elephants are removed from the wild to supply tourist and entertainment industries. In the process, mothers and other females attempting to



protect the young are killed. Many calves captured for such purposes are prematurely weaned, socially isolated or otherwise cruelly treated, and die before they reach age five.

### **Threats to Domestic Elephants**

For thousands of years the elephant was part of the fabric of daily life in Asia. They served primarily to transport goods and people. When the 20th century began, elephants were put to use by the timber industry, destroying their own habitat in the process. Except in less-developed Myanmar, the need for elephant labor has steadily declined since World War II, and so has the domesticated Asian elephant population.

With domestic elephants becoming obsolete, the occupation of mahout, or elephant handler, no longer commands the respect it once did. The profession, its specialized knowledge, and the time-honored relationship between man and animal are dying out. Children have little interest in learning the trade. "The skill level of elephant-keeping, the ability to control bulls, is going down very, very rapidly," says Thai elephant expert Richard Lair. "Ten, twenty, fifty years from now, what are we going to be doing with our bull elephants?"

As roles for captive animals dry up, impoverished elephants and their mahouts are a common sight in Thailand's urban landscape.

The biggest problem facing *domesticated elephants is unemployment. The situation is perhaps most dire in Thailand, where a complete ban on logging in 1989 put several thousand elephants and mahouts out of work. An elephant typically eats about 200 kilograms of food a day, "so unless you're a very wealthy person who likes to keep expensive pets, or unless your elephant is actually working for you and generating some income, it's not easy to keep an elephant in captivity," explains Robert Mather, the country representative for the World Wildlife Fund in Thailand.*

And while one person can watch a whole herd of cattle or sheep, each elephant needs one person and sometimes two people to look after it. But with the decline in skilled mahouts, many elephants are now handled by inexperienced people. This leads to elephants that at best are poorly cared for and at worst severely abused. Human keepers are being harmed by elephants more often as well.

### **New Jobs for Beasts of Burden?**

Although well protected from international trade, Asian elephants have little protection under domestic laws. Generally, national wildlife agencies in Asia consider the domesticated elephant to be just another domestic animal (and allow their tusks to be sold), while livestock departments consider it wild and not under their jurisdiction. "So it's in a very curious, halfway position that makes conservation very difficult," explains Lair. Caring for privately owned domesticated Asian elephants often turns out to be the job of an impoverished mahout—or nobody's job at all.

Elephants are now competing for fewer jobs at lower pay, which has forced mahouts to accept undesirable jobs or to overwork their animals. In Thailand, some owners have even started selling their elephants to be slaughtered for meat. Less than 10 years ago, such an act would still have been unthinkable. "Captive elephants in Thailand at the moment would seem to have rather limited options," says Mather bluntly. Possibilities include:

- **The tourist industry:** Ecotourism is a booming market in many developing countries, and often it's the only viable solution for elephants. In addition to offering protection to some wild herds so that tourists can observe them in their natural habitat, ecotourism has given many domesticated elephants better work opportunities. The elephants that carry tourists safely on treks through the jungle are not only at health risk but are often not well cared for. And not all elephants are temperamentally suited for toting tourists—especially not the large, aggressive male elephants once valued by loggers.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of elephants are also being used in less benign forms of tourism. Performing in shows or serving as special attractions in hotels and tourist centers, they often suffer from lack of social contact with fellow elephants or risk injury doing dangerous and unnatural tricks.

- **Logging:** Selective logging—in which only certain trees are cut, leaving the forest habitat as a whole intact—would be an optimal choice. Elephants could work in a traditional and legitimate manner, and their use would protect the forest by reducing the need for roads and heavy machinery. Selective logging is rarely employed, however. It is an option only in places where sufficient healthy forest remains, which is not the case in many parts of Asia. And in Thailand, the 1989 ban has made all forms of logging illegal.

The Thai ban sparked a jump in lumber prices, which led to a boom in illegal woodcutting. Elephant labor is essential to this illicit trade, which is thought to employ between 1,000 and 2,000 animals, in northern Thailand in particular. But these animals are poorly cared for.

- **Begging in the streets:** More and more elephants can be found with their destitute mahouts begging for money in the streets of large Asian cities like Bangkok. These elephants suffer respiratory infections, damage property, and get hit by cars.

Fortunately, the elephant has become a flagship species of wildlife conservation in all 13 countries of Asia where it is still found. Efforts are being made on many fronts:

- **Reducing the hunting and capture of** wild elephants for ivory and tourism.

- **Curbing habitat destruction:** One solution is to create vegetated corridors between separated habitats. This can be as simple as building a bridge across a canal, but the bridge must be wide, as only bulls are bold enough to cross a narrow bridge. Other ways to improve the quantity or quality of remaining habitat include maintaining a buffer zone of secondary-growth forest and creating waterholes.

- **Improving protection of wild herds:** This is complicated. Populations must be large enough offset inbreeding and environmental dangers such as droughts and floods. Yet herd size must be controlled to minimize encroachment on human habitats and to foster local support for elephant conservation.

Trenches, electric fences, spotlights, and noisy rockets have all been used to deter elephants from straying onto planted fields, but with varying degrees of success. Other tactics include persuading farmers to grow crops that aren't attractive to elephants and removing troublesome bull elephants. However, the males disproportionately responsible for crop damage and attacks on humans tend to be the most successful breeders, so eliminating them from the population isn't

a desirable solution. If existing habitat is inadequate, sometimes elephants are relocated to roomier ones.

- **Better care for captive elephants:** Another initiative is to establish centers to accommodate unwanted, abused, and confiscated elephants. For example, the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang provides a home, work, food, and veterinary care to more than 100 elephants. Dangerous animals are confined in a secure area; young working elephants are trained; and the rest roam free and breed, producing young elephants that will be reintroduced to the wild.

- **Reintroduction to the wild:** "If elephants can't find gainful employment, then instead of having them wandering the streets of Bangkok begging for money from tourists or Thais, let's just put them back in the wild," says Mather. "Send them back into the forest. That's their home." Thailand's Elephant Reintroduction Foundation does such work, releasing domesticated elephants into the wild to generate wild herds.

