

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.

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.

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 trucks 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.

