



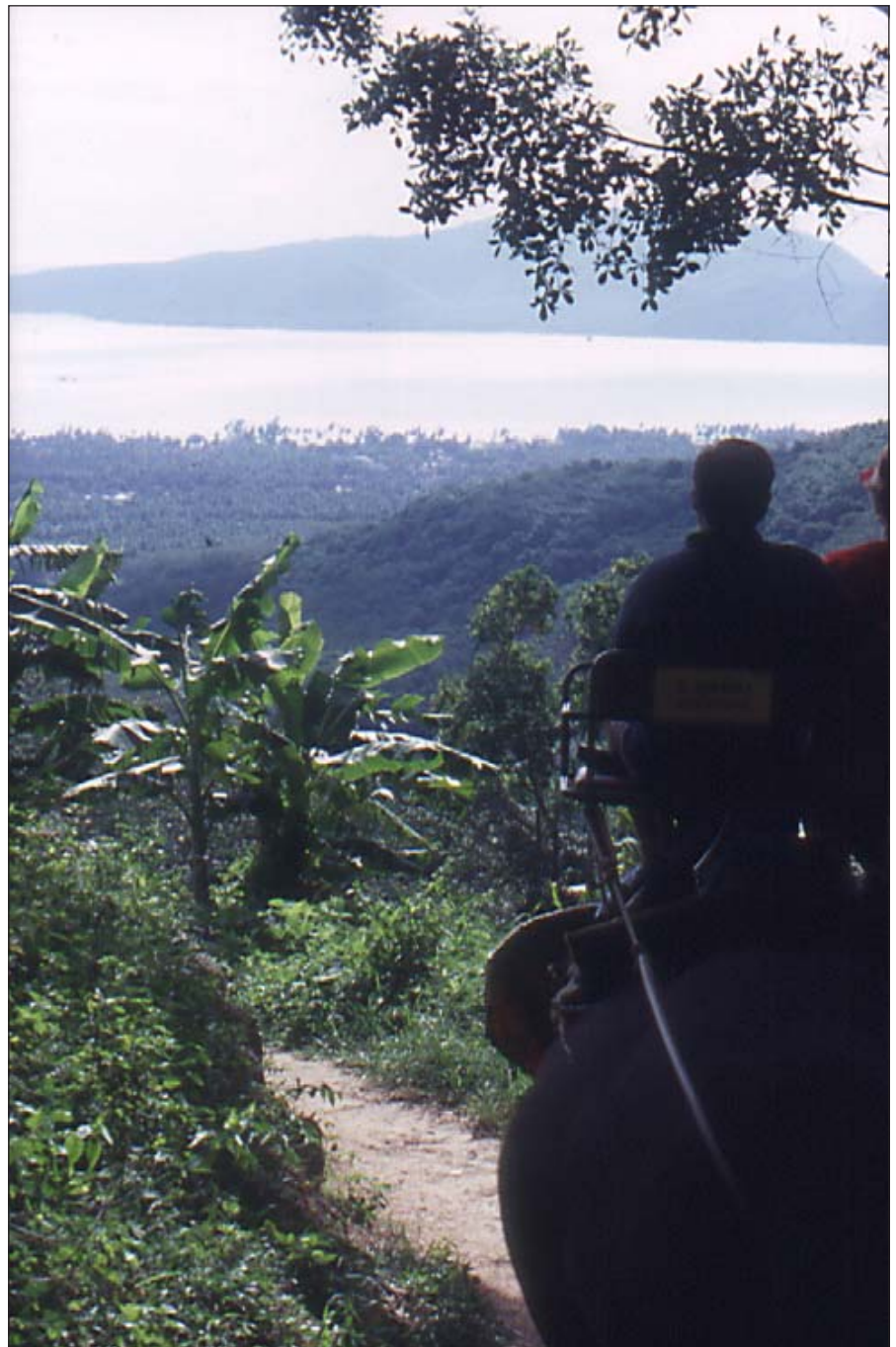
Protecting Thailand's **ELEPHANTS**

Text and Photographs by
Jane Iverson

The gentle giant lumbers along while I lounge in the massive chair on his back. As the elephant meanders through the rain forest, it is easy to imagine the days when his ancestors roamed these jungles freely. Suddenly, what feels like an earthquake shakes me from my daydream. As the vibrating continues, I question the guide sitting next to me. "No earthquake. Our elephant is just having a conversation with another elephant." The guide goes on to explain, "The elephant's low, guttural tone can be heard from miles away by the elephant he is conversing with. The pitch is so low that humans are unable to detect these conversations."

Intrigued, I focus on the only other pachyderm along the trail to see if they might be talking with each other. With no visible sign of a conversation between the two and the vibrating motion continuing, it does indeed appear our elephant is holding a conversation with a friend miles away.

Many tourists enjoy riding elephants in Thailand's jungles, and the proceeds help sustain the elephants and their mahouts.



Elephants have been used in the logging industry until recent years.



Elephants refresh themselves in the river's cool water.

The Thai elephant population has fallen from 100,000 a century ago to fewer than 5,000 today. Of these, approximately 2,000 still live in the wild.



At the Surin Elephant Roundup, pachyderms perform a variety of acts.

I have often heard the expression “One up-close and personal experience with an elephant and you are hooked for life.” Hooked or intrigued, I am spurred into learning more about this wonderful creature by the unique experience.

Centuries ago, large herds of wild elephants roamed the magnificent teak forests of Thailand. After men succeeded in taming them, the massive beasts provided the main means of transportation across this rough terrain. Using their large swinging trunks like machetes, they cleared the paths of obstacles as they carried their passengers through the forests.

Elephants were in great demand in those days, and elephant roundups took place on a regular basis. Because of the challenges involved in finding and capturing the wild elephants, the roundups were often treated like sporting events. Led by royalty, these hunts usually took place within Ayudhya, Lopburi or the Surin basin, where the ethnic Kuai villagers were well known for their skills in hunting and training elephants. The mammals were tracked, captured and herded into large kraals where they were later trained. One such stronghold still stands in the historic city of Ayudhya, where it serves as a vivid reminder of these historic events.

Elephants were a valuable commodity throughout the kingdom, not only as transport but also for use in trade and warfare. During combat the elephants and attending warriors were the first into battle and served as bulldozers, mowing down the advancing foot warriors. Often the army with the most elephants won the battle. One historic account tells of a Burmese king who coveted the prized elephants of the king of Ayudhya. He eventually attacked Ayudhya and won not just the elephants but the whole kingdom.

The elephant has been a part of Thai culture for centuries, as documented in folk tales, historic manuscripts, temple art and even religious

scriptures. Tales of Buddha's birth describe a white elephant that appeared before Buddha was born. Hindu mythology places Indra, one of the most prominent gods, on a three-headed white elephant called Erawan. Even today, any white elephant found within the Thai kingdom is sacred and automatically becomes the possession of the king.

In the early 1900s the glorious days of the elephant ended, and life changed dramatically. Encroachment into their natural habitat, the teak forests, turned elephants into giant work machines for logging. Employment for these animals and their mahouts was at an all-time high as the demand for lumberjacks increased. Working elephants were in great demand and the wild population dwindled noticeably. Deforestation continued in full swing until 1989, when Thailand realized the extent of the devastation and halted all logging. The damage was done, however, and the country is now left with less than 30 percent of its original pristine rain forests.

The cessation of logging caused unemployment for the elephants. No longer gainfully employed, the mahouts could not afford to feed their herbivorous companions, who sometimes ate as much as 250 kilograms of food a day. Many mahouts abandoned their charges, thinking the animals would be better off fending for themselves. But with their natural habitat gone, many starved. The Thai elephant population has fallen from one hundred thousand a century ago to an alarming count of fewer than five thousand today. Of these, approximately two thousand are left in the wild while the rest have been domesticated or are kept in captivity.

Sadly enough, the country is still losing elephants due to encroachment of farmers, poachers, illegal loggers as well as the dangers of begging in the cities. During the dry months when food is in short supply, the wild creatures come out of the forests to the lowlands to hunt for food, and subsequently damage the crops.



Elephants play an important role in the pageantry of historical presentations of Thai culture.



Today's elephants must depend on man for their bananas, sugarcane and grasses.

Elephants, herbivorous mammals, may eat as much as 250 kilograms of food a day.

Once magnificent wild creatures, captive elephants sometimes require restraints.





Under the watchful eye of the mahout, tourists feed a baby elephant.

Angered farmers take the law into their own hands and kill the scavengers, whose only sin is hunger.

The Thai people love their elephants, and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are working hard to help the magnificent beasts and increase awareness of their plight. One of the largest NGOs, Friends of the Elephants, was instrumental in building the first elephant hospital in Thailand and has since raised funds for several mobile units that go directly into villages to help the animals. Many camps and villages do not have medical personnel or the means to properly care for these gentle giants. Besides providing emergency aid, the mobile units practice preventive medicine by offering free vaccinations and checkups. But they are limited in their outreach by the donations they receive. In southern Thailand, the Elephant Self-Help Project, which just recently received foundation status, assists area elephants with a mobile medical unit.

The foundations and NGOs are now coordinating efforts to better serve the pachyderms and their lifelines, the mahouts. Educational information is being disseminated to the general public and tourists through news articles, brochures and the Internet.

One major problem facing Thailand is that the mahouts, who are unable to make a sustainable living in their home provinces, bring the elephants into Bangkok and other cities to beg for food from tourists. Because they then make a profit, the mahouts do not wish to return to their villages. Recently there has been an influx of baby elephants into Bangkok, as cute little babies can earn more money from tourists. Many of these babies have been taken away from their mothers and smuggled into Thailand from neighboring countries. The owners hire untrained mahouts who take the elephants into the cities. Unfortunately, the mahouts of-

Mahouts sometimes bring baby elephants into Thailand's cities to beg for food, often underfeeding them to keep the babies small and cute.

An elephant whose trunk was amputated due to a logging accident receives care at an elephant hospital.



Judie Fleming



Taken from its mother by smuggler, this baby elephant is one of the charges at the conservation center.

ten underfeed the babies to keep them small and cute. Many ideas have been suggested to solve this problem, but the elephants are still on the streets. More work needs to be done by the government to work out a solution.

Turning domesticated elephants back into the wild is no longer an option due to the deforestation that has occurred. So where does the future of the Thai elephants lie? Ironically, tourism is the key. Many domesticated pachyderms are already working in the tourist business, receiving proper care and shelter. In many countries people are unable to see elephants except in zoos, and a highlight for many visitors to Thailand is a chance to see the creatures in their natural environment. Thailand's tourist industry has capitalized on this, and there are now elephant safaris into the jungles, elephant shows that reenact life in early Siam, and elephant training camps where tourists can watch the pachyderms bathe and skillfully perform.

Under the auspices of the National Elephant Institute, the innovative Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang (northern Thailand) has taken the lead with new ideas on helping the elephants become more self-sustaining. Programs developed by the camp mastermind, Richard Lair, often called Mr. Elephant Man, include the world-renowned elephant paintings, music CDs from the up-



Some of Thailand's domesticated elephants live with their mahouts at camps such as this.



Some elephants have become quite adept as musicians; this one plays the xylophone with his trunk.



Paintings by elephants are sought after by tourists and collectors alike.



Saddled with howdahs, these elephants will carry riders on a trek through the jungle.

and-coming Lampang elephant orchestra and, more recently, elephant paper. Similar in characteristics to *saa* paper (which is made from the bark of mulberry trees), elephant paper is made from the fibrous waste of the elephant. Camps throughout the country look to the center for ideas to help support their own elephants.

Thai elephants have recently embarked on new careers as polo players. A successful international tournament in Hua Hin puts many unemployed elephants back to work. While polo might sound like an unnatural game for these warm-hearted creatures, they actually enjoy playing. One of the main problems of the game is that elephants love popping the balls. (See the related story on page 14 in this issue.) Hopefully, new ideas will continue to emerge from imaginative minds to help the elephants.

The Thai elephant needs to be protected. Many camps do not have the medical supplies or the proper nourishment that these animals require. Absentee owners hire unqualified handlers and cut corners to make a profit. Some means of protecting and finding gainful employment for the unemployed elephants and their mahouts needs to be established.

Dismounting from my elephant, I purchase some bananas to feed him. He stands patiently, his eyes following my every movement. When I hold out the bananas, his trunk lifts gracefully and he delicately places the treat in his mouth, the whole time keeping his quizzical, kind eyes locked onto mine. Waiting for his next treat, the elephant lowers his trunk and gently rests it on my shoulder. Now you tell me, where in the world but Thailand can you enjoy such an up-close and personal experience with such an elegant creature? ❖

Jane Iverson, a photojournalist based in Bangkok, hopes to raise awareness of the elephant's plight by depicting its intelligence and gentle qualities through her articles and her photography.

The Thai elephant needs to be protected and cherished if it is to continue to exist.



Mahout bathes his charge—a refreshing and enjoyable activity for both.

Elephants can sometimes be seen walking along the streets of busy cities and towns, such as this one in Phuket.



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