

## Report on the Workshop Open House Elephant Reintroduction project Thailand

Chatchote Thitaram<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Taweepoke Angkawanish<sup>1,3</sup>, Chaleamchat Somgird<sup>1,2</sup>, Wasan Klomchinda<sup>4</sup> and Sivaporn Dardarananda<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Elephant Reintroduction Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>Center of Excellence in Elephant and Wildlife Research, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

<sup>3</sup>National Elephant Institute, Forest Industry Organization, Lampang, Thailand

<sup>4</sup>Sublungka Wildlife Sanctuary, Wildlife Conservation Division, Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, Lopburi, Thailand

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: cthitaram@gmail.com

### Background

Since 1957, the number of wild and domestic Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Thailand has dramatically declined from about 100,000 to 5,000. This situation has raised awareness of the plight of elephants in Thailand, among the general public and non-governmental organizations. As a result a reintroduction program to preserve and increase elephant numbers in the wild was initiated.

The program was started in January 1997 when the HRH Queen Sirikit of Thailand released three female elephants to the Doi Phamuang Wildlife Sanctuary. To date (2020), 108 elephants have been released into 3 protected areas, the Sublungka Wildlife Sanctuary (Lopburi Province, central Thailand), Doi Phamuang Wildlife Sanctuary (Lampang-Lamphun Province, northern Thailand) and Phu Phan National Park (Sakon Nakorn Province, northeastern Thailand) (Angkawanish & Thitaram 2012; Thitaram *et al.* 2018). Thirty-six calves have been produced through natural mating by released bulls. The aim of the project was to restore and conserve the natural habitat through the released elephants, as well as to create self-sustaining wild elephant populations in the protected areas.

Releasing captive elephants back to the wild has been suggested in Lao PDR (Sims K & Pinto C 2019; Elephant Conservation Center 2020) and Myanmar (Hedges *et al.* 2018).

### Workshop

Having more than 20 years of experience in releasing captive elephants back to the wild, the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation, in cooperation with the Department of National Park, Plant and Wildlife Conservation, the IUCN-SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group, the IUCN-SSC Conservation Translocation Specialist Group, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Chiang Mai University and the National Elephant Institute, conducted the Workshop on Open House Elephant Reintroduction Project Thailand. It was held from 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> February 2020 at the Miracle Grand Hotel in Bangkok (Fig. 1) and in the Sublungka Wildlife Sanctuary, Lopburi, Thailand. The objectives of this workshop were to share and exchange the knowledge of elephant reintroduction, as well as evaluate and improve elephant reintroduction methods. There were 70 participants from 8 countries, representing various organizations and roles (scientists, veterinarians, governmental and non-governmental staff, elephant camp owners etc.), attending the workshop.



**Figure 1.** The speakers and the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation committee.

The program comprised of lectures on Asian elephant conservation status, animal reintroduction, behavioural consideration in elephant reintroduction, releasing both orphaned wild elephants and captive elephants back to the wild in India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as re-wilding programs in Laos, Myanmar and Sabah, Malaysia.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day, a field visit was conducted to search for released elephants at the Sublanka Wildlife Sanctuary (Fig. 2). After a briefing on the geography of the sanctuary, the participants travelled by truck to the forest and trekked to find the elephants. After 3 hours of searching, two adult females with their two wild born female calves were found. Their behaviour was different to that prior to release as they were not tame like captive elephants but avoided humans. However, aggression towards people was not as much as by wild elephants, and the mahouts were able to get close to them.

Discussions were held on the demography, rehabilitation, the releasing process, consequences of release, and the future of these elephants on day 3 of the workshop. Opinions were expressed from both wild and captive elephant perspectives. The necessity of rehabilitating and releasing captive elephants to the wild was the first issue debated, as it depends on the area available for release and situations in each country. Several issues such as the number of captive and wild elephants, health and behaviour of elephants, ecology, attitudes of people, possible human-elephant conflict, budget, and socio-economics were identified as important. The methods of reintroduction included planning and management of recipient areas, recruitment and rehabilitation of elephants, suitable age and number of elephants and



**Figure 2.** Visit to Sublanka Wildlife Sanctuary.

monitoring of released elephants. In the long term, planning of management, regulation of the activity, assessing the ecology of released elephants, social engagement and communication were identified as being important.

The participants got knowledge that elephants raised under human care could survive in the wild. Both Thai and international participants shared their knowledge and experiences with the participants who may consider undertaking similar work in their own countries.

## References

Angkawanish T & Thitaram C (2012) Behavioral study and monitoring of Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) reintroduction under the Queen's initiative. In: *Elephants: Ecology, Behavior and Conservation*. Aranovich M & Dufresne O (eds) Nova Science Publishers. pp 133-144.

Elephant Conservation Center (2020) *Herding and Rewilding*. Available from <<https://www.elephantconservationcenter.com/herding-rewilding/>>

Hedges S, Leimgruber P, Lynam A, Mar DKU, Riddle H, Thaw UWN & Tyson M (2018) *Myanmar Elephant Conservation Action Plan (MECAP): 2018–2027*. Available from <[https://www.asesg.org/PDFfiles/2017/Myanmar%20Elephant%20Conservation%20Plan%20\(MECAP\)%202018-2027.pdf](https://www.asesg.org/PDFfiles/2017/Myanmar%20Elephant%20Conservation%20Plan%20(MECAP)%202018-2027.pdf)>

Sims K & Pinto C (2019) Can the land of a million elephants survive the belt and road? *The Diplomat* **3.1.2019**. Available from <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/can-the-land-of-a-million-elephants-survive-the-belt-and-road/>>

Thitaram C, Angkawanish T, Somgird C, Klomchinda W, Mather R, Pratiprasen C & Dardarananda S (2018) Reintroduction of Asian elephants to restore forest ecology in Thailand. In: *Global Re-Introduction Perspectives: Case Studies from Around the Globe*. Soorae PS (ed) IUCN/SSC Reintroduction Specialist Group, Gland, Switzerland and Environment Agency, Abu Dhabi, UAE. pp 174-177.