

Obituary

Memories of Richard Lair (25.9.1942 – 19.7.2024)

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Richard Lair, artist, award-winning filmmaker, and distinguished figure in the world of Asian elephant conservation, passed away peacefully on July 19, 2024, at his home in Lampang, Thailand. He was 81 years old.

I don't have a clear memory of when I first met Richard. Perhaps that is because he had such a big presence in Thailand long before my first trip in 2000 to study elephant sperm that I felt I knew him already. But, when we did finally meet, there was an instant familiarity, as if I had known him for decades. Known affectionately as Professor Chang, he became fluent in Thai and was deeply integrated into Thai culture. His life was a testament to the profound impact one person can have on the world when they follow their passion with unwavering dedication. And he had an impact on me. I still remember how thrilled I was to receive my copy of *Gone Astray* from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) office in Bangkok. People call it the elephant bible, and it taught me a lot about the challenges facing "captive" or "tamed" elephants - not "domesticated" as Richard would explain – throughout Asia. To me, he was always larger than life. Visiting him in Lampang during my frequent trips to Thailand to work with elephant veterinary colleagues was always insightful, and I so appreciated how a major focus of his life's work was on improving not just the lives of the elephants but their mahouts as well. He was a pragmatist and understood that the welfare of mahouts was directly related to the welfare of elephants. When he became ill earlier this year (an unresolved issue with an abdominal hernia that became inoperable), I was in Thailand. He knew his time was limited, but in true Richard

style, he didn't dwell on that. He had a scientific brain and so wanted to know about the biology of dying – what would happen when he could no longer take in solid food, should he take supplements and which ones, and how long would his already frail body last? He wanted a scientist's point of view. Curious to the end. He was clear, however, that he would not give up his whiskey and cigarettes. I miss those calls and texts.

Born in Lompoc, California, in 1942, he was among the many children who contracted polio before its eradication in the early 1950s. During his recovery, he became an avid reader, devouring a book a day on various topics. His fascination with elephants was apparent from early childhood as he filled countless notebooks with sketches and read as much as he could about them. Richard would later dedicate his life to preserving and understanding Asian elephants, but not until after a successful career in filmmaking. Some might not know it, but Richard had multifaceted talents and diverse interests that extended far beyond his renowned work with elephants, embodying the essence of a modern-day polymath. His wide-ranging expertise and accomplishments across various fields exemplified the spirit of a true Renaissance man.

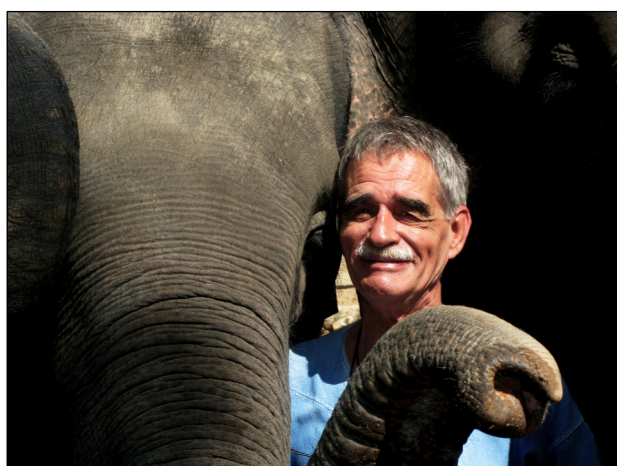
Richard started as an art major at San Francisco State College in the late 1960s but soon transferred to the film department, where he developed his filmmaking skills. Being a California girl, I found it interesting that he produced films for the psychedelic scene in San Francisco during the 1967 "Summer of Love." In the early 1970s, he produced the wildlife documentary "Where Will They Go?", addressing en-

dangered species in California with a foresighted message that is eerily relevant today (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry33Dg1NErI>). His filmmaking talents earned him accolades, including work on award-winning projects such as "The Taiwan Experience" for the 1974 World's Fair and "Welcome to Washington" for the National Park Service in 1976. His documentary "Alice Elliott," focusing on one of the last Pomo Indian basket makers (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54PMM-FChxw>), won the prestigious CINE Golden Eagle Award in 1975.

In 1973, he travelled to India to photograph and learn more about Asian elephants, and then in 1977, he spent a year working with elephants at Marine World in Redwood City, California. But then, seeking a change from the fast-paced American lifestyle and with an increasing fascination with elephants, Richard moved to Thailand, where he found his true calling. He initially spent years in the forest counting elephants before moving on to issues related to captive elephants. Logging had been the primary source of income for elephants and their keepers (i.e., mahouts) in Thailand, but after it was banned in 1989 due to environmental destruction caused by deforestation, the livelihood of elephants and mahouts was threatened. Many out-of-work elephants and their mahouts found their way into the tourist industry, where today, about 3,500 work by providing rides, participating in shows, or just being observed. Not surprisingly, the management of these animals was varied and inconsistent, and he recognised the need to improve their welfare. In 1991, he became a consultant to the

Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC) and quickly became a leading voice in elephant care and management. A skilled writer, Lair wrote the master plan for the TECC. He played a crucial role in establishing Thailand's first school for mahouts, bridging traditional wisdom and training skills from Burmese mahouts with modern veterinary and husbandry practices. Today, the TECC remains a beacon of hope for elephant conservation, veterinary medicine, and research.

Richard was an innovator and jumped at opportunities to highlight the uniqueness and intelligence of elephants. He consulted and trained elephants for "Operation Dumbo Drop" in 1995, a movie based on an attempt to transport an elephant through the jungle to a south Vietnamese village to help American forces monitor Viet Cong activity. It dealt broadly with the themes of war and politics, as well as animal welfare. During production of the 1984 film, "The Killing Fields," Richard crossed paths with storyteller Spalding Gray, which left an impression that was memorialised in the book and film, "Swimming to Cambodia." Gray wrote "I was so bored that I began talking to the driver – an extra. He was an expatriate from San Francisco, an elephant expert, who was spending his time counting elephants in the Thai jungle because he thought, 'America is going crazy. Going nuts, going to the dogs. Going to the wow-wows.' He went to Thailand to get his sanity back, and in Thailand he only trusted elephants. So they were all he was interested in. He slept in the bush at night and in the morning he got up, grabbed his elephant counter and just counted elephants." That sums up Richard.



Richard Lair (photo credit Galen Garwood)

In 1997, he teamed with Russian-American artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid to start an "Elephant Art Academy" at the TECC, providing opportunities for elephants to paint while increasing awareness of the plight of elephants in Asia. Partnering with the World Wildlife Fund and prestigious auction houses like Christie's, the effort raised funds for elephant conservation. However, perhaps Richard's most endearing contribution was co-creating the Thai Elephant Orchestra in 2000 at the TECC with American musician and Columbia University neuroscientist Dave Soldier. Together, they de-

veloped over twenty elephant-ergonomic instruments tailored to the musical styles of northern Thailand, resulting in three CDs of improvised music recorded at the TECC. The elephants often played spontaneously and used the activity as a social event. Importantly, the orchestra demonstrated that a non-human species could create beautiful instrumental music. Orchestral improvisations by the elephants have even been arranged for human musicians, including Steven Beck and the Composer's Concordance Orchestra. While the Thai Elephant Orchestra no longer performs, it was the subject of a documentary by the British Thai filmmaker Paul Spurrier and profiled by many press outlets, including the BBC, The Economist, the New York Times, and the Bangkok Post. The orchestra's performances touched the hearts of audiences globally, changing perceptions about elephant intelligence and creativity.

As an author, Richard's books have become essential reading for anyone working in elephant conservation. As I said, his seminal work, "Gone Astray: The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity," published in 1997, is regarded as the definitive book on elephant care and conservation, carrying the imprimatur of the United Nations FAO. Richard's dedication to elephant welfare also led to his conception and co-authorship of the "Elephant Care Manual for Mahouts and Camp Managers," published in 2005 in Thai and English. The book, written for mahouts and camp managers, provides information on elephant diseases, hygiene, and biology and has been widely distributed throughout Thailand. His writing style, both informative and engaging, made complex elephant biology and conservation issues accessible to a broader audience. As a translator, he also brought important cultural works to the English-speaking world, including Nikom Rayawa's, "High Banks, Heavy Logs," a poignant tale of cultural change involving elephants, and "Sihanouk Reminisces," along with many Thailand travel guides. Richard was a perfectionist, especially in his writing. As Dave Soldier recalled, 'he would take months fretting about commas, and it took him over a year to edit one page of the introduction to the orchestra piece.' I suspect he would find many flaws in this eulogy – sorry Richard.

Richard's contributions to research conducted at the TECC were notable. For example, the "running index" describes the mechanics of running, and while it was known that elephants could be extraordinarily fast, their manner of locomotion was unknown. In a 2003 paper in *Nature*, Lair and coauthor John Hutchinson reported that for short periods of time, their speed reached 15.5 miles per hour, and they exhibited a gait that qualified as running. Joshua Plotnik, a comparative psychologist, collaborated with Richard on the first experimental study of elephant cooperation, finding that elephants not only understand how cooperation works, but that partner behaviour contributes to its success. In 2016, Veterinarians International president Scarlett Magda bestowed upon Richard a Lifetime Achievement Award in acknowledgment of his commitment to enhancing our understanding of Asian elephants and their welfare. Richard's final and unfinished project is "EyeD," a deep learning software application that would allow individual elephants to be identified by photos of the distinctive wrinkle patterns around their eyes: if and when completed, using his voluminous photos of elephant eyes for training, it will provide a fitting completion to the circle of his life's passion. Richard's legacy lives on in the countless lives he touched – human and elephant. He mentored mahouts, researchers, and conservationists, sharing his vast knowledge and infectious passion for elephants. While to the uninitiated, he could appear gruff and even curmudgeonly at times, he is most remembered as a patient teacher to those who want to learn, always ready with a witty remark or a fascinating anecdote. He was known for bridging cultural gaps and earning the respect of local Thai communities and international conservationists alike. His work inspired a new generation of conservationists and changed how we understand and interact with elephants. As we bid farewell to Richard, we celebrate a life of purpose and passion. His impact on elephant conservation will be felt for generations to come, a fitting tribute to a man who dedicated his life to these magnificent creatures. Richard is survived by his brothers Jim and Mike, and his longtime partner Boonpeng Khantong (Noi). He will be deeply missed by the global elephant community and all who knew him, including me.