

Government and WWF Brighten the Future of Lao Wild Elephants

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The wild elephant population of Laos has declined 60% within two decades from 1500 in 1988 to 600 in 2009. Illegal poaching, land conversion, infrastructure, and mining have been the main causes of the decline.

On June 29 –30th 2009, the Division of Forest Resources Conservation and WWF organized a workshop on wild elephants in Laos. Provincial and central representatives of the government, National University of Laos, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Agriculture and Forestry Institute, Water Resources and Environment Agency, Department of Forestry, Department of Forest Inspection, National Tourism Authority, Wildlife Conservation Society, IUCN, and UNDP participated in the workshop.

The workshop identified a priority landscape map for elephant conservation, which identified areas that can link the known populations, and areas where it may be possible to restore the species in the future.

The workshop identified a goal, objectives, and activities to be undertaken. The activities identified included patrolling (Fig. 1), local capacity building, and law enforcement, which will help maintain the number of wild elephants in the country.

“Elephants are one of the most important natural resources and a source of cultural pride for our people”, said Mr. Bouaphanh Phanthavong, the Head of Division of Forest Resources Conservation, Department of Forestry. “Our country used to be named *Lane Xang*, the land of a million elephants, therefore we have to ensure that elephants can survive in the wild”.

The out put from the workshop that hopefully brightens the future of wild elephants of Laos became an Elephant Action Plan, which

addressed the government and WWF’s efforts to reduce illegal poaching and conflict, to reduce the impacts from commercial plantation, infrastructure development and mining, and to identify the critical habitats and populations to develop and implement spatially based management and conservation measures.

“Still a heavily forested Southeast Asian nation, Laos is coming under increasing pressure to exploit its abundant natural resources, particularly the large forest areas on the borders with Cambodia, Thailand, China, and Vietnam. It is no surprise then, that species such as the elephants are facing a future where there is less habitat available and a greater chance of human conflict” said Khamkhoun Khounboline, manager of WWF’s species program in Laos,

WWF is working with local government authorities and communities in Xekong Province and Xe Pian National Park to raise awareness of the importance of elephants, patrolling in order to decrease poaching, and to increase understanding of the ‘Aquatic and Wildlife Law’.

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Figure 1. Rangers on patrol training in Xepian National Park.