

## ElefantAsia in the Lao PDR – An Overview

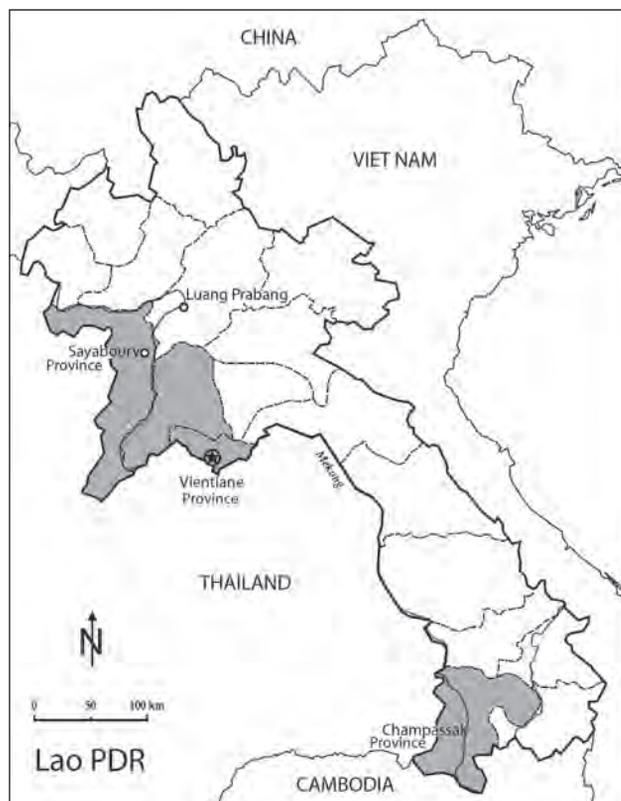
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The Lao PDR is an often forgotten range country of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). Despite having the largest remaining Asian elephant population in the Indochina region, little robust research on either wild or domesticated elephant populations has been undertaken in Laos. Any research that has occurred is either aging beyond relevance, or recent and ongoing. Population estimates range from 500-1000 wild, and 500 domesticated elephants remaining in the Lao PDR (Lair 1997; Blake & Hedges 2004; Sofranco 2006; ElefantAsia 2007).

One International Non-Government Organisation working in Laos since 2001 is ElefantAsia. A French-based INGO, ElefantAsia focuses efforts primarily on domesticated elephant registration, reproduction and veterinary care. Other projects include the creation of alternative income-generating activities for elephant owners, and



**Figure 1.** Map of Laos.

environmental education activities such as the annual Elephant Festival. All programs endeavour to conserve and protect the domesticated Asian elephant from regional extinction in Laos.

Of the estimated 500 remaining domesticated elephants in Laos, 80% reside in the northwest province of Sayaboury (ElefantAsia 2007, Fig. 1). Sayaboury is a mountainous region still lacking many access routes or the infrastructure to make broad-scale logging viable. While selective logging for village use with domesticated elephants (Fig. 2) has occurred in the Sayaboury province for centuries, it has only been during the past 20 years that organised logging companies have exploited domesticated elephants for professional timber extraction. Acknowledged as one of the poorest districts in Lao PDR by the United Nations Development Program (2009), elephant owners in this area have embraced this much-needed income-generating activity offered by the logging industry, despite the adverse and often disastrous results it can have on domesticated elephant populations.

With calves economically worthless in the logging industry until age 14, consultations with mahouts indicate that many are opting to work



**Figure 2.** Logging camp in Laos.

their cows intensively rather than allowing them time for reproduction (ElefantAsia 2008). Over a 20-year period this had resulted in an inverted age pyramid, with the mortality rate of domesticated elephants greatly outweighing the birth rate. Sadly, many deaths are either fully or partially caused by work in the logging industry. Severe exhaustion, lacerations, fractures, and other disorders are often left untreated as mahouts work for months in remote forested regions isolated from veterinary assistance (ElefantAsia 2008). These issues are the focus of ElefantAsia's primary projects: veterinary care, and alternative income-generating abilities.

ElefantAsia has two Mobile Veterinary Units (MVUs) that travel throughout the provinces of Laos where domesticated elephants reside. The MVUs are all-terrain vehicles equipped with veterinary supplies suited to the Lao climate, context, and local availability (Fig. 3). International volunteer veterinarians participate in all MVU trips, along with Department of Livestock and Fisheries government officials, and other specialised ElefantAsia staff. With most domesticated elephants located in Sayaboury Province, the majority of MVU time is spent travelling throughout this large province. Scheduling meetings with elephant owners and their elephants takes approximately two weeks in advance to prepare from ElefantAsia's head office in Vientiane. This includes consultations with district and provincial Department of Livestock and Fisheries staff; attempts to contact mahouts working in areas with poor mobile phone reception, and purchasing veterinary products from the National Animal Health



**Figure 3.** Mobile Veterinary Unit.



**Figure 4.** ElefantAsia vet at work.

Centre supply unit. Once in the field, veterinary care is undertaken at either pre-arranged meeting areas, or simply by the roadside where elephant owners come out of the forest to meet the MVU (Fig. 4). The most commonly treated disorders observed by MVU veterinarians are abscesses; parasitic abscesses; eye disorders; cracked nails and superficial wounds (Labatut & Suter 2010).

ElefantAsia does more than just attend to injured elephants, then leave. The MVU supplies all elephant owners, who bring their elephant to the MVU for treatment and registration, with an Elephant First Aid Kit (Fig. 5). The kit is a waterproof plastic container full of basic yet effective veterinary items that mahouts can administer to their elephants as required. Such products include eye cleansers, broad-spectrum antibiotics, vitamins, de-worming medications, iodine, gauze pads, and prophylactic materials. A new addition to the Elephant First Aid Kit is a translated version of the *Elephant Care Manual for Mahouts and Camps Managers*, co-published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and ElefantAsia. This is the first and only book written in the Lao language specifically relevant for elephant ownership, and includes chapters about how to assess the weight of an elephant for medical dosage requirements; how to treat common diseases; dietary requirements; life cycles; and control techniques.

ElefantAsia also spends a significant amount of time and resources providing product training and education to elephant owners and mahouts (Fig. 6). As the daily care-givers to this endangered species, ElefantAsia believe it



**Figure 5.** Elephant First Aid Kits.

is imperative that owners and mahouts have the skills and knowledge required to independently and effectively administer treatment to their elephants when immediately required. The application of all products in the Elephant First Aid Kit is comprehensively explained to mahouts by ElefantAsia staff members, with all supplies available for purchase at district pharmacies or veterinary centres. Feedback regarding the Elephant First Aid Kits has been extremely positive, with all elephant owners and mahouts enthusiastic to learn about product usage and how to provide better care in remote situations. Funding for Elephant First Aid Kits is provided by private sponsors, and ElefantAsia intends to continue ongoing first aid kit distribution, as it is an incentive to owners and mahouts to seek assistance from ElefantAsia's MVUs.

Another project undertaken by ElefantAsia is the ongoing "Baby Bonus" incentive. With ElefantAsia's registration records showing domesticated elephant births occurring at an exceedingly low rate, ElefantAsia has implemented a motivational program aimed at encouraging elephant owners to breed their cows. Through a binding agreement between ElefantAsia and an elephant owner, ElefantAsia agrees to provide a tak-tak (a motorised rotary hoe used for agricultural use); pre and post pregnancy veterinary care; and elephant life insurance to owners willing to stop working their cows in the logging industry and actively attempt to breed them. To date, ElefantAsia has four cows signed to the Baby Bonus program with more owners interested. Once the calf is

born, ElefantAsia will attempt to place mother and calf in a quality tourist camp where they can undertake light trekking work. Laos does not currently have an elephant ultrasound machine, so it will be some time before veterinarians and the owners' experience tells whether or not their cow is pregnant.

There are various approaches through which domesticated elephant cows in Laos can become impregnated. In the north-west district of Thongmixay, cows are often impregnated by wild bulls from the neighbouring Nam Phui Protected Area. Nam Phui is believed to have a wild elephant population of approximately 130 individuals, although only rudimentary population counts have been undertaken (National Elephant Management Action Plan 2009). Nevertheless the Nam Phui Protected Area is believed to contain the second largest wild population of elephants in Laos (National Elephant Management Action Plan 2009).

While working in remote forested regions, mahouts may see a wild elephant and tether their cow at night close to where the bull was observed. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, two calves were born on the same day to domesticated cows, with the male believed to be a bull from the Nam Phui Protected Area. ElefantAsia staff are aware of at least another six cows that are pregnant by wild bulls in Thongmixay. In southern Laos, the breeding of domesticated elephants is currently poor. With approximately 30 domesticated elephants residing in the Patoumphone District



**Figure 6.** ElefantAsia staff train mahouts in product usage.

of the Champassak Province, cows and bulls are generally not kept together, making reproduction an unlikely occurrence. Unlike northern Laos where domesticated elephant owners can earn a good income through logging, this does not occur in Patoumphone, a flat, previously logged region. Consultations with elephant owners in southern Laos have indicated that breeding is viewed as an unnecessary, expensive, and unsafe practice to undertake. Poor reproductive knowledge and a lack of financial incentives were other major explanations as to why owners are not breeding their elephants in southern Laos (Maurer 2009).

Despite elephant domestication occurring for centuries, many domesticated elephant owners in Laos do not necessarily have reproductive knowledge and techniques. Until the 1980's it was legal to capture calves from wild elephant populations as required, hence reproductive knowledge has never been required. Since the Government of Laos banned the taking of elephants from the wild, domesticated elephant population numbers have declined significantly (Lair 1997; Norachuck 2002). ElefantAsia's mahout training includes how to visually observe and assess a cow's oestrus cycle, and how to chart oestrus cycles on a calendar.

Poaching of domesticated elephants is another problem ElefantAsia is trying to tackle. The latest poaching occurred in the Vientiane Province of Laos in March 2010. ElefantAsia is aware of 10 domesticated elephants poached since 2008, with no arrests for any of the crimes. Laos has been recognised as a nation that lacks both capacity and transparency to enforce laws relating to the illegal trafficking of ivory (Norachuck 2002; Dublin *et al.* 2006). Within Southeast Asia, Laos has been singled out as a major source of ivory, and as a well-used channel to smuggle African and Asian elephant ivory products to neighbouring nations (Nooren & Claridge 2001). With the risk of arrest for killing or smuggling elephant parts throughout Laos extremely low, the motivation by poachers to kill Asian elephants for ivory remains high.

Laws in the Lao PDR are clear regarding the killing of elephants. In 1989 the Government of Laos declared a ban on the hunting and

killing of protected, endangered species; and the country became signatory to the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)* in 2004 (CITES 2009). However, poaching continues to be a major cause of death for both domesticated and wild elephants.

ElefantAsia has several environmental outreach programs aimed at teaching local Lao communities about the need to protect and conserve their national icon. These include posters and children's books distributed to schools and libraries in areas of Laos where domesticated and wild elephants reside. Mobile Book Parties to remote villages via elephant is another novel way ElefantAsia teaches young generations about the need to protect, not poach elephants. ElefantAsia's annual Elephant Festival is also a major drawing card in raising awareness about elephant conservation.

Held annually in the Sayaboury Province, the Elephant Festival has attracted over 80,000 attendees, mainly Lao nationals (Fig. 7). With up to 60 domesticated elephants attending each year, visitors to the two-day event learn about ancient domesticated elephant culture, logging techniques, and the life of an elephant owner. Consultations with elephant owners indicate that they enjoy attending the festivals as their profession is shown a high status and is respected by Lao nationals and foreigners alike. Now one of Laos' major festivals, many national and international television crews and journalists travel to Laos purely to attend ElefantAsia's Elephant Festival.



**Figure 7.** Elephant Festival in Laos.

While ElefantAsia has many ongoing projects, the main focus is to increase domesticated elephant populations for future generations to use. Tourism in Laos is a growing industry (Lao National Tourism Administration 2009), with approximately six elephant tourist camps in the Luang Prabang municipality. Private hotels and guesthouses throughout Laos also own elephants and offer elephant treks to visitors. Tourism in the form of elephant trekking may be the domesticated elephant's saving grace in Laos. Once logging quotas are filled, elephants will become unemployed and ownership will be financially unsustainable. ElefantAsia is endeavouring to create Laos' first breeding sanctuary for domesticated elephants, enabling pregnant cows to do light treks while pregnant or with a calf. As a change from working in the intensive logging industry, quality elephant trekking can be a viable way to continue Laos' ancient, traditional, domesticated elephant ownership.

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