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Saving Laos' elephants

by Peeyush Sekhsaria



Sitting at a friend's place in Paris, leafing through some old magazines, my eyes fell upon the cover of *Terre Sauvage* (Wild Earth), which had a stunning image of four elephants crossing a bridge, mountains in the background and eager children looking on. The accompanying article described a 1,300 km. long caravan on elephant back by Frenchmen Sébastien Duffillot and Gilles Maurer. The objective was to help the Laotian people recognise the endangered status of the elephant in their own country. After much web surfing, e-mails and phone calls, I managed to catch up with Sébastien in a noisy Parisian bistro.

The Asian elephant occupies a special place in all the countries in which it is found. It is not just a wild animal of exquisite beauty, grace, elegance and strength, but also a beloved God, a colleague, a mysterious wild spirit, a symbol of joy, of auspicious beginnings and of childhood. Despite its unique privileged position amongst humankind, however, it is rapidly disappearing from our midst. Today, there remain roughly 15,000 domestic and 35,000 wild elephants. Across their range in

South and Southeast Asia, they face overwhelming odds, triggered by loss of habitat, the disappearance of forest corridors, poaching, burgeoning human populations, slash-and-burn agriculture, dams, canals, train lines, highways and the other things our modern lifestyle demands.

The situation in Southeast Asia is especially precarious. Laos, once called *Lane Xang*, "the land of a million elephants", today has a mere 2,000 pachyderms, (more pessimistic figures place this at 1,200). But only 700 of these are wild, with most domestic elephants concentrated in the northern province of Sayaboury. Forestry operations are now close to an end and the elephants, with their *mahouts*, are among the unemployed. For wild elephants, the situation is particularly tragic, despite the fact that Laos is relatively well endowed with 40 per cent of its area under forest cover and a relatively low human population of five million. War, heavy poaching and the loss of habitat are to blame.

The situation is worse in neighbouring countries, with perhaps 200 left in Vietnam and 150 in Cambodia. The painful and lengthy

The elephants enjoy a pleasant river bath (below left). Villagers of Saybouathong rush to spray the elephants with water (below right) and to walk under the heads of the massive animals, considered sacred by most Laotians.





The caravan fords a river that will soon dry up with the coming of summer. Laos still has a large percentage of its area under forest cover, but the wild elephant population has been dwindling over the years.

Vietnam war that Laos was forced into took its toll as well. In Savannakhet, elephant herds were intentionally bombed by American B 52s. Those that survived fled to neighbouring countries. The justification? Elephant herds were suspected of being used by the Vietcong as transport convoys. Elephants have still not returned to this area.

In Laos and in other Asian cultures the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism ensured that Asian people continue to share an intimate relationship with the elephant. The exceptional intelligence, sensitivity and near human traits exhibited by elephants easily win people's hearts. In *mahout* communities, a young boy is given charge of a juvenile elephant, both being more or less the same age. Man and elephant then go on to develop a lifelong relationship.

Distressed by the grim reality facing the elephant, Sébastien and Gilles, who were living in Laos, established ElefantAsia (www.elefantasia.com), an association dedicated to the protection of Laos' elephants.

Both Frenchmen have been in Laos for over seven years. Gilles had set up an eco-tourism unit with tree houses in the rainforest. He bought an elephant for work on the site, but the project did not take off. He thus found himself out of work, with an out of work elephant to boot. This was the start of his passionate love for the gentle giants. At the same time, Sébastien too became fascinated by elephants, their rich and diverse graphical representations, religious, cultural and historical associations. Already immersed in the Laotian way of life, ElefantAsia was their way of doing something for the country and the animal they loved. Two years and much hard work later, they put in place their first expedition – an elephant-back caravan that travelled 1,300 km. across Laos. They had two main objectives: to warn communities living in elephant habitats that their last wild elephants would disappear forever if no action is taken and, secondly, to reawaken old cultural traditions, also on the brink of extinction, that revolved around the elephant. The caravan eventually took this message to 100 villages across Laos.

The caravan passes the Xieng Mouane pagoda (below left) at the city of Luang Prabang. Domestic elephants gather in Ban Phone Hine, Sayaboury (below right), to celebrate the caravan's passage.





Young bonze (Buddhist monk) initiates accompany the caravan along the trail to Ban Lavang, Saravane. Spreading awareness about the plight of the Laotian elephant was a key objective of the entire exercise.

The elephant caravan with its 22-member team started on January 28, 2002, the annual festival of Vat Phu at Champassak in southern Laos. Passing through the rice field-dominated animist regions of Attopeu, Sekong and Saravane, they rejoined the famed Ho Chi Minh trail to the province of Savannakhet. From there they continued through Borikhamxay, halting at Buddhist pagodas to reach the capital, Vientiane. Here they were joined by the 'white elephant', the sacred animal of Laos, considered an incarnation of the future Buddha and a symbol of the country's power. The celebration attracted over 6,000 participants. After three months and 1,300 km., mostly on elephant back, but also by boat and truck, they arrived at their destination, the ancient royal city of Luang Prabang. At this spiritual and cultural capital of the country, the caravan participated in the Laotian New Year celebrations of Pi May. It was the first time since 1975, when the Phatet Lao communists came to power, that the national animal, the elephant, participated in the festivities.

The caravan was supported by the Laotian government, UNESCO's Asia-Pacific office, the French Museum of Natural History and the National Tourism Authority of Laos. It was covered by the

local, regional, national and international media. A team of young Laotian teachers conducted puppet shows in schools along the route to involve children. Sébastien and Gilles used their experience to the fullest and the caravan turned into a national cultural event.

Subsequently, two important developments took place. The Laotian government organised a large event with the white elephant in the lead, reviving the strong cultural associations locals had for the elephant. The FAO, WWF and the government of Laos have also put in place a national programme for the Laotian elephant.

There is virtually no educational material on the elephant available in local languages. ElefantAsia plans to fill this void, publishing material for the benefit of vets and *mabouts* (from the Lao Loum and the Tai Leu ethnic groups in Laos). They also wish to establish an Elephant Centre in Sayaboury where most domestic elephants are concentrated. The centre would function as an elephant hospital and old age home, as well as a resource centre with scientific documents, ancient texts and audiovisuals. To fund this and other projects, ElefantAsia is setting up a series of seven 10-day caravans each year, through the forest on elephant back. This would also generate employment for elephants and their

The four-elephant caravan (below) is surrounded by a horde of children while crossing dried-out rice paddies at Khammouane.



mahouts. The larger goal is to demonstrate for the benefit of government and locals that forests can generate money and employment in ways other than hacking them down. In partnership with the government they hope to establish a system of compensation for damages suffered by local populations during wild elephant raids or accidents, set up elephant-*mahout* mobile squads to patrol Protected Areas and participate in human-elephant conflict mitigation.

Their efforts have found appreciation around the world, especially in France. A book, a film, articles and exhibitions have ensued.

Indo-Bhutan caravan

ElefantAsia is now planning a caravan from Assam in India to neighbouring Bhutan, to stress that elephants and other wild species, like rivers and environmental problems, recognise no national borders.

Though the domestic elephant and its cultural significance was what inspired Gilles and Sébastien, they are now working for the conservation of both wild and domestic elephants. And as Sébastien points out: "Cultures like animals can also face extinction." They believe that the domestic elephant can help the wild elephant. The love and respect that man has for both is unique. The elephant is a flagship species and saving it requires saving not only an entire ecosystem, but also an ancient culture. The elephant was always considered a powerful wild spirit of the forest. It must have been a truly astonishing epoch when man started to domesticate the elephant. And it is important to remember that the domestic elephant continues to be wild at heart. The day the Asian elephant disappears will be a tragic one.

The approach taken by ElefantAsia is refreshing and original and has been put in place with élan and conviction. It is too early to conclude whether ElefantAsia will succeed or not, but there is reason to be optimistic. 🐘



Laos is relatively well-endowed with thick forests (above), which cover as much as 40 per cent of its area. The caravan moves along the banks of the mighty Mekong river (below left) and fords a river by the ruins of a bridge bombed during the Vietnam war (centre). Decades of conflict, in particular the carpet bombing tactics by the USA, have taken their toll on the forests and wildlife of Vietnam.

