

Thai Elephants

July 2010

Scott Coates

Take 1

For Traversing the Orient

A recent story that runs in a similar form once-per-year in Thailand, quoted Bangkok Deputy Governor Theerachon Manomaipiboon, saying the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) is imposing stiff measures against *mahouts* (elephant handlers) who bring elephants into the capital. This activity is common, with *mahouts* selling food for people to feed to their elephant. To date the BMA says they have confiscated 10 elephants and returned 80 to the forest this year. Those found violating the law will face a six-month jail term or a 10,000THB fine. This can also potentially be imposed against those buying food for elephants from their handlers.

The plight of elephants in Bangkok and Thai cities is a complicated one. While it might sound easy to relocate an elephant, there are much larger economic issues at stake. These beasts can eat more than 200kg of food per day, putting a large financial burden on a *mahout* and more importantly, these handlers have often spent their entire lives working with elephants, making it difficult to transition into another career. It's also not easy to simply return an elephant to the jungle as remaining forests are shrinking dramatically and domestic elephants don't integrate well back into the wild.

John Roberts, Director of Elephants with the Anantara Resort at the Golden Triangle, was kind enough to treat me to a day with their elephants some time ago and since then we've spoken on several occasions about his work and the plight of Thailand's elephants. This recent story led me to get his opinion on the issue.

Roberts, a native of England, first started working with elephants in Chitwan National Park, Nepal back in 1999 and they've been the focus of his work since moving to Thailand in 2003. He helped develop the Anantara's Mahout Program, which is very unique. Rather than buying elephants and bringing them to the resort, they approach a *mahout*, pay them a salary, and move them, their elephant and family to the resort, where they live and work. This provides an ongoing steady salary and ensures a good quality of life for everyone.

Back in his early days Roberts spent most of his time working hands-on with pachyderms, but nowadays finds most of his time occupied by administration like promoting ideas on elephant welfare, developing a rescue/rental model and working hard to influence others on the subject. He still thrives on meeting as many guests as possible and is extremely proud of the solid local team that has been assembled who run the day-to-day operations.

Roberts explains how the phenomenon of bringing elephants into cities began, “It started as a way for unemployed mahouts to make money by giving local folks a chance to make merit and while it’s still seen as a desperate measure for a traditional *mahout* trying to feed his elephant, it’s developed somewhat to suit the tourist trade and the elephants that find themselves in town nowadays are more likely to be babies that are cuter and easier to transport.”

While it seems obvious that cities are not a good place for elephants, he says there are many adverse, long term problems that can result from elephants living and working in such environments, “Elephants end up walking all night on the roads and traffic accidents, while not too common, are a risk. They have to try to rest during the day and are often sleep-deprived and stressed, passed out under underpasses.”

The temptation to bring babies into the city results in them too often being separated from their mothers too early and having to eat fodder that’s not traditional, possibly leading to physical and mental development problems as they grow older. “Making elephants cute is a major problem with long term downsides according,” says Roberts, “to earn a living they often have to do tricks that may end up damaging them later in life. We have two rescued babies who seem to have premature arthritis, possibly coincidentally; they were initially introduced to me by doing a headstand. We have one who is stunted from drinking whisky on the streets. Her mahout used to share a bottle with her so she could do the ‘drunken elephant dance’. Both have since given up drinking.”

A major challenge with moving elephants out of the city is where to take them and what to do with them. An elephant eats a lot of food, so without a good deal of money and/or access to fodder, one can quickly become financially strained. Roberts mentions that the BMA makes an

annual push to move elephants out of the cities, but to date their efforts have not been terribly effective yet remains optimistic that things can improve, “Under the current *Chang Yim* scheme (*Smiling Elephant*), the elephants and their mahouts are sent back to their villages in Surin province and paid a small wage per month to stay there, as well as being given one Rai of land to grow elephant fodder.”

Certain organizations including Royal Foundations and Elephant Nature Foundation’s Surin Project are working hard to build tourism according to Roberts, “However, at the moment these schemes have limited capacity so many of the elephants are still playing the old trick of moving to provincial cities while the heat is on in Bangkok and moving back when the heat comes off again. Lets hope the BMA can keep the heat on.”

A major challenge is that working city streets is more lucrative than being a part of any elephant relocation program. Some mahouts talk of making up to 10,000THB/night but more commonly they can take in about 3,000THB/night. The Anantara’s program, while earning less money than working the streets, is a good option with other benefits explains Roberts, “We feel that if we are to persuade our *mahouts* to bring their elephants from the streets we have to offer them a comfortable lifestyle with their families, a much better rent, plus opportunities for overtime and tips. All the elephant food and other intangible benefits such as human and elephant insurance, permanent veterinary presence, a silk producing business for their wives, as we can’t possibly compete with the streets on purely financial terms.”

Roberts has learned much during his tenure in Thailand and an original scheme of buying elephants from their handlers ended up not working, hence the Anantara’s current program. “Some operators seek to persuade *mahouts* to sell their elephants and change their lifestyles as this would certainly be the easiest option, but we found early on that a traditional *mahout* with money in his pocket and no elephant just goes and buys another elephant. Increasingly these days, it seems, one smuggled in from Burma or Laos and goes back to the city streets.” “Buying a street elephant to rescue it almost always immediately puts another elephant in danger, so that’s not an option we encourage.”

“Being a mahout isn’t just a job but a sense of cultural identity for many, following in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers. It’s their skill and career.”

During his more than 10 years working with elephants, Roberts and his team have tried many different methods for rescuing elephants and caring for their handlers' and families. While there's still much to be done, he says the Anantara's current efforts with 12 working elephants are yielding good results, "Our main activity is *Mahout Training* where over the course of one hour to three days, we give you a taster of what it's like to be a Mahout. We also have a foundation that looks after the remainder of the elephants, mainly babies, from the streets. While they are with us we work with the *mahouts* to develop handling methods and welfare regimes that will give the elephants as much freedom as possible and ensure the mahouts don't resort to some of the crueler traditional methods of control. We feel that if we are to help all of Thailand's elephants, not just those under our care, the methods we develop here not only have to be acceptable to us and our guests, they must be attractive enough to the mahouts to practice them should we not be around and to tell their friends about to practice elsewhere. In this way we hope we are able to help elephants everywhere and not just those we are directly responsible for."

A great way to help Thai elephants is to never buy food for them if on the streets. If you spot a 'rouge' elephant in the city you can call the BMA Hotline at 1555 who will then address the problem.

Sidebar

Learn More:

Elephant Nature Foundation's Surin Project:

<http://www.elephantnaturefoundation.org/go/surin>

Follow John's Elephant Tails Blog: <http://elephant-tails.anantara.com/archived.aspx>