

Laos' Elephants Take to the Road to Save Their Forest Home

An elephant caravan draws attention to the illegal logging that threatens the country's 900 remaining pachyderms.



A rare white elephant leads fellow elephants down a narrow side street in Luang Prabang, Laos. (Photo: Erica Gies)

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Erica Gies' work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, *The Economist*, and other outlets.

LUANG PRABANG, Laos – “They’re turning!” The frantic cry rippled through the crowd as the elephant caravan turned down a side street, away from the throngs of Laotians and tourists crowding the streets of this river town in northern Laos. It was the tail end of an epic parade to celebrate the temple-studded city’s 20th anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As the caravan took a detour, people started to run, cutting through the yard of the primary school and into a back alley between houses, bursting out onto the side street ahead of the adorned elephants and their riders, called mahouts. As the caravan passed, a rare white elephant and an adorable baby ambled by, and the crowd oohed and ahed, snapping photos like paparazzi, then fell in behind them. The love fest challenged the caravan support team, whose members linked hands across the street to create a space between the pachyderms and the admiring crowd.

Still, the response was more or less the reaction organizers had hoped for. For 45 days, three to 12 elephants and their mahouts had walked 273 miles across two major provinces of Lao People’s Democratic Republic—Sayaboury and Luang Prabang—to reacquaint Laotians with their cultural and natural heritage and to draw attention to the plight of the nation’s rapidly disappearing elephant population.

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The caravan was a joint project of the Elephant Conservation Center in Sayaboury and the French nonprofit Des Éléphants & des Hommes. Laos is known as “the land of a million elephants,” yet today fewer than 900 remain. Half of those are in captivity, working in logging or tourism. The problem is bigger than Laos. The Asian elephant is an endangered species, with fewer than 40,000 animals remaining worldwide. The primary culprit is habitat loss, as an expanding human population and demand for hardwoods and resources such as [palm oil](#) and [rubber](#) fragment the elephants’ forest home.

At each village along the route, the caravan visited schools, where the elephants distributed booklets about themselves to the children. In the evening, artists from Laos and France staged a lively play, depicting elephants’ happy lives in the forest now disrupted by poaching and logging. The sobering message was delivered via zany characters that inspired raucous comic relief in the standing-room-only crowd of about 1,000 who witnessed the show in the primary schoolyard in Luang Prabang.

Deforestation, particularly from illegal logging, is the main reason for the elephants’ decline in Laos. Between 1973 and 2009, Laos lost 24 percent of its forest cover, according to a [2013 World Wildlife Fund report](#). Today, only 40 percent of the country’s historical forest cover remains, as stated in a 2010 government estimate. Several reports indicate that the rate of loss has accelerated since then.

While Laotian law limits logging, especially for export, corruption is widespread. A [2014 report](#)



(Photo: Erica Gies)

from London-based nonprofit Chatham House estimated that bribes to government officials account for 35 percent to 40 percent of logging companies' overhead.

More than 90 percent of logging in Laos is illegal, according to a [WWF report](#) leaked last year that compared government export records for 2013 with nearby countries' import records. China and Vietnam were the primary destinations, importing two-thirds and one-third of Laotian timber, respectively, in 2014. The export value of Lao wood products increased eightfold from 2009 to 2014, with a 70 percent increase between 2013 and 2014 alone.

That study and [others](#) found that most illegal logging is covered up by legitimate infrastructure projects, such as dams, roads, mining, and plantations, with developers extracting wood from nearby areas that are supposed to remain untouched. The report attributed the timing of undocumented timber exports to “a dramatic increase in Chinese and Vietnamese investments in mining, agriculture, forestry, and hydropower in Laos.” In [many cases](#), promised agricultural projects—rubber, palm oil, sugar cane, coffee—never materialize. Developers just log the forest and move on to next project.

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These trends are exacerbated by weak land-use policies that invite corruption,

said Linda Walker, director of the WWF Global Forest and Trade Network in North America. The resulting deforestation “is a huge issue for tigers and elephants that depend on intact forests and corridors for their survival,” she said. Habitat fragmentation makes it difficult for the animals to migrate to find food or in response to disease or climate change.

Some logged wood from Laotian forests is made into products sold to Europeans and North Americans, said Walker. “U.S. and EU consumers can unknowingly be part of the problem,” she said, advising them to only buy wood that has been certified as sustainably harvested.

Ironically, both the elephants and the local people who rely on the forests for subsistence help to destroy them. “Sometimes communities are paid to move out of a region,” said Walker, “or they are paid to cut the trees down and be part of this supply chain.”

Elephants are used to access remote, steep areas, said Sébastien Duffillot, a longtime Laos resident from France who directs the Elephant Conservation Center. “About 70 to 80 percent of captive elephants in Laos are still employed in logging,” he said, including most of the elephants that walked in the caravan. Their mahouts were paid a per diem of about \$28 plus food, lodging, and transportation to participate in the caravan.

Logging, particularly illegal logging, is physically devastating for elephants, said Patricia Sims, a Canadian filmmaker who has made documentaries about elephants. “They work the elephants to death: give them amphetamines, force them to work long hours in dangerous circumstances, on slopes that are too steep,” she said.

While people have had semidomesticated Asian elephants for more than 4,000 years, less was requested of elephants in the past, said Duffillot. “As recently as 40 years ago, villagers would work an elephant perhaps two hours a day to haul harvested rice or firewood, and maybe the occasional log to build a house,” he said. But the explosion of global demand for hardwood has led to elephants being used more like machinery to maximize profits.

People who care about elephants must be pragmatic about mahouts' need to earn a living and care for their elephants, said Duffillot. To that end, he and other elephant activists are trying to transition logging elephants to another booming industry: tourism.



(Photo: Erica Gies)

That move becomes more attractive to mahouts as areas become logged out, said Anabel Lopez Perez, a biologist with the Elephant Conservation Center. “Logging is beginning to be perceived as a less stable industry than tourism,” she explained. Several mahouts who participated in the caravan told her they would like to move into tourism.

But elephant tourism is also controversial to people concerned with the animal's welfare because it often features tricks, such as elephants I saw in Thailand in

2001 kicking soccer balls and painting, and giving tourists rides, as I recently witnessed in Cambodia at Angkor Wat and in Kerala, India, in 2011. Near Luang Prabang there are “mahout schools” where tourists can bathe, feed, and ride elephants.

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The long working hours and interaction with lots of people is hard on elephants, said Sims.

Riding them is especially problematic. “An elephant has a convex shape and is not designed to carry weight over 120 kilograms [265 pounds] on its back,” said Duffillot. The howdah, or chair, weighs about 66 pounds itself, and usually two to four tourists ride at a time. A mahout, by contrast, is just one person, and he rides on the elephant’s neck, which is a stronger part of the body, Duffillot added.

The Elephant Conservation Center has developed an alternative in which tourists observe elephants searching for food in the forest, socializing with other elephants, and nursing their babies.

“At our place, you won’t interact with them but just observe and learn, because elephants are not asking for interaction with humans,” said Duffillot.

Sims said that approach is also becoming successful across Thailand, where she has done most of her filming. “People learn more about elephants because they’re not being forced to do tricks. The elephants just do their thing,” she said.

Old-school tourism can also be dangerous for people, Sims continued. Captive elephants are often mistreated, fed a poor diet, and kept from socializing with other elephants. They can suffer long-term depression, have shortened life spans, and experience an inability to reproduce. Discontent might also lead them to be unpredictable.

“There have been a whole bunch of accidents,” Sims said. A few months ago in

Thailand, an elephant went berserk, killed its mahout, and ran into the forest with a Chinese family on its back, she said. “People are falling off, getting killed,” she said. “I’m hoping there will be a big shift in how these tourist camps are operated.”

A few lucky elephants may get a chance to return to the wild in Laos. In Thailand, that’s already happened thanks to an initiative by Queen Sirikit. Founded in 2002, the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation, in collaboration with the Royal Forestry Department, released captive elephants into three parks in Thailand. The parks are now home to 110 reintroduced elephants, and 12 babies have been born to released elephants that mated in the wild.

Laos may follow suit. “Recently the vice governor of Sayaboury province, Mrs. Bounphak Inthapanya, contacted my two partners and me and asked us if we would be interested in managing a portion of the Nam Pouy National Protected Area,” said Duffillot, adding that the goal is to release captive elephants. But before that can happen, “we need guarantees of safety and security in the park,” he said, citing concerns about illegal logging and poaching.

In fact, Nam Pouy, which borders a protected area in Thailand, is home to about 60 wild elephants. WWF is already working with park officials on protocols to decrease wildlife crime, helping to train rangers and working to reduce human-elephant conflict in adjacent villages by teaching people how to safely drive elephants away from crops, said Nilanga Jayasinghe, a WWF program officer for species conservation.

Rangers are key to protecting elephants from humans. The Elephant Reintroduction Foundation has a team of 28 field staff in the three forest sanctuaries, said Sims. Many of them are former mahouts.

Duffillot would
also like to employ
mahouts as
rangers so they
can earn a living
while giving

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elephants a better life. “We would retrain elephants

and mahouts to become the protectors of the forest instead of the more traditional employment of using them to destroy the forest,” he said.

While conventional wisdom holds that captive animals rarely survive if returned to the wild, many elephants can manage it. “Elephants’ extreme intelligence, long memory, and social skills allow them to adapt,” said Sims.

In Laos, said Perez, captive elephants are still somewhat wild. “They are kept in the forest every night, and they feed by themselves. They know what to eat and not eat. This is a strong point on our side,” she said.

Duffillot said the request from the province’s vice governor was “the first time that authorities at this level contacted us and asked us for support.”

“Our goal is to bring up a sense of pride in the Lao people for their elephants, which I consider to be an important prerequisite to implementing conservation actions,” he added

It’s been a long journey, one symbolically acted out by the elephant caravan. The Lao believe that both elephants and humans have 32 *kwan*, or life spirits. One can accidentally drop a *kwan* or two on such journeys. The *baci* ceremony, derived from Lao animist traditions, calls the *kwan* back to the body, restoring its equilibrium. When the elephant caravan arrived in Luang Prabang, five elephants made their way to the grounds of the Hotel Amantaka for a *baci* ceremony to bless the mahouts.

Mahouts and a survivor of the Luang Prabang royal family, Prince Somsanith, threw tent-size red capes with gold embroidery over the elephants’ backs and pulled them into place, draping their foreheads. The mahouts, honored guests, and other observers sat on bamboo mats around a large, tiered golden dish known as a *pha kwan*, decorated with marigolds, bananas, rice cakes, and candles. White cotton threads radiating from the center were given to each

mahout to hold between pressed hands. An elder dressed in white, the *mohkwan*, led the ceremony. In turn, he gave each mahout an egg and a banana leaf cone filled with flowers. He then pulled a small length of the string across the mahout's right wrist, away from his body, quietly exhorting bad luck and bad health to leave the body. Then, reversing the motion, he called the *kwan* back from their wanderings, inviting in good health and luck, and then tied the string to the mahout's right wrist. The string must be worn for at least three days, ideally until it falls off on its own.

As musicians played traditional instruments, observers took turns blessing one another and the mahouts blessed their elephants, draping giant lengths of white string over their ears. Throughout the ceremony, the elephants munched steadily, consuming fingerling bananas and bamboo. Handlers rushed to keep them supplied, the loads of bamboo dwarfing their human frames, until they deposited them by the elephants, suddenly turning the massive offering into a little snack.

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