



Elephants carry hopes of Lao eco-tourism

Frank Zeller | Hongsa, Laos AFP

12 March 2007 10:17

The elephant population of Laos is shrinking fast, a decline ecologists blame on habitat loss and a trend all too familiar to many humans -- too much work, not enough play.

Ancient Laos was known as Lan Xang, the "Land of One Million Elephants", but today fewer than 2 000 of the animals survive and about half of them are driving the problem by helping log the country's last virgin forests.

Birth rates have plummeted as wild populations have been isolated, and domesticated elephants often spend eight hours a day in remote logging camps, leaving them exhausted and far from potential mates.

Environmentalists in the poor South-East Asian country are trying to reverse the trend before it is too late, pinning their hopes on eco-tourism and revitalising the elephant's ancient sacred role in Lao culture.

To raise awareness about the plight of the majestic

animals, France-based non-profit group ElefantAsia last month organised modern Laos's first elephant festival in the remote north-western district of Hongsa.

The event featured colourful elephant parades, skills demonstrations and religious rituals in which Buddhist monks performed rites for the pachyderms traditionally honoured for their strength, spirit and intelligence.

But as more than 50 richly decorated elephants walked down a dusty village road in Hongsa, Xayabouri province, the country's traditional centre of elephant raising, there were few infants among them.

"While there are 50 elephants in Hongsa, there is only one birth every two years, which is not sustainable," said ElefantAsia co-founder Sebastien Duffillot, who has worked in Lao elephant conservation for seven years.

"In the past, elephants were employed two or three hours a day to bring in the rice from the harvest, to carry firewood, to help build the houses.

"Now they are employed in logging camps for three, four months, and during that time they work eight hours a day. They are exhausted and don't reproduce well, and the birth rates are plummeting.

"The population is aging and there will come a time when it's all over."

Across Asia, about 50 000 wild and domesticated elephants remain, but they are under pressure everywhere as poaching and demand for farm land is reducing habitats, bringing in poachers and fuelling animal-human conflicts.

Modern life has reversed the economic use of the animals, with fewer adult elephants working on farms and in forests and more of the young being sold into mass tourism, said Richard Lair, a Thailand-based veteran elephant expert.

"Baby elephants from Laos and Burma are getting sold into Thailand, where they are now as valuable as a very strong healthy adult elephant used to be, because of the tourism business," said Lair.

Meanwhile, Asia's mahouts, or elephant handlers, can no longer capture wild elephants for domestic use due

to bans on elephant hunting. They are also reluctant to breed them in captivity, a lengthy and expensive process.

In Laos -- a mountainous, poor and sparsely populated country long hailed for its rugged natural beauty -- forest cover has been reduced to 40% by commercial logging, ElefantAsia says, citing government figures.

Timber companies from Laos, China, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia hold vast areas for clear-cutting.

The communist government has started to address the issue. Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh told a recent forestry meeting that "logging is a big concern in our country", according to the Vientiane Times daily.

He cautioned that Lao forests were "under attack" and said that "if we don't protect the trees, water in rivers will dry up".

Duffillot said Laos has to develop to reduce poverty and that, with no sea access and little industry, it must rely on logging and hydro-electricity.

But he suggested that more selective logging combined with nature-based tourism could prove more sustainable in the long term.

"Cutting only the most valuable timber and adding value to it would bring more income than clearing whole areas of forest," he said. "Elephants can help by selecting precious logs without cutting down everything around."

ElefantAsia has set up a mobile veterinary service, published booklets and radio programmes, and screened a film about a 1 300km cross-country elephant caravan they organised in 2002.

Now Duffillot and ElefantAsia co-founder Gilles Maurer are hoping to build up eco-tourism in the Hongsa region, with plans to rotate logging elephants for use in multi-day jungle treks.

"Tourism is now being accepted as a main source of income for the country, and elephants definitely have a role to play, even if it's only a seductive role in attracting tourism," Duffillot said.

The animals certainly proved attractive at the festival,

which is slated to become an annual event, drawing hundreds of foreigners and about 10 000 Lao villagers to the remote mountain town near the Thai border.

A popular event was the Elephant of the Year contest, won by 32-year-old tusker Sinouan for its strong physique, rich decoration and the elegant swing of its tail, the tip of which, the jury noted, was lotus-shaped.

Proud owner Noy Pek, whose late father raised the animal, said the festival and the award had boosted the spirit of both the town and the elephant.

"He was a big beast with a small heart -- he used to be scared by large crowds," he said. "But not any more. Now he is a big elephant with a big heart."

Like most of Hongsa's elephants, Sinouan spends his days in a nearby logging camp, but Noy predicted the animal's new fame might make him a more eligible bachelor with a role to play in boosting the local birth rate.

"Come back in two years," he said. "There'll be baby elephants." -- AFP