

Poachers kill another elephant for ivory

Phonesavanh Sangsomboun

A 41 year old male domesticated elephant has been slaughtered for its body parts in Vientiane, with the hunt continuing for those responsible.

The attack took place a short 40 minute drive from central Vientiane in Nanga village, Naxaithong district, at the end of last month and appeared to be the work of at least two poachers.

The elephant, known as Phu Thongkhoun, belonged to Mr Somyod Phimasas, who was left distraught by the death, saying this was the third elephant he has lost to illegal poachers, totalling a loss of about US\$40,000.

The two prior incidents occurred in Xieng Khuang province in 2007 and 2009, where he lived previously.

Poaching continues to be a major cause of death for both wild and domesticated elephant populations, with the chronic problem yet to be adequately resolved.

Elephant conservationists have expressed their concern about the illegal poaching, which they say is leading to a rapidly declining population.

This latest attack occurred at around 2am on February 26, when villagers who live near Mr Somyod's garden reportedly heard three gunshots, which they initially dismissed as hunters given the area's proximity to woodland.

Mr Somyod said it was a tragedy to find his elephant killed, after he bought it for breeding purposes from Pakxe district, Champassak province.

"We suspect people in the area are responsible, but we are still in the process of investigation," he said.

He added that one of the poachers appeared to have dropped his sim-card in the area, which police are using to help in their investigation.

Mr Somyod contacted conservation group ElephantAsia to inform them of the illegal poaching and to ask for assistance in ascertaining the cause of death.

The group's veterinarian, Dr Bertrand Bouchard, undertook an informal autopsy on the remaining body parts and concluded that Phu Thongkhoun died from at least three high-calibre bullets to the head and face.

The elephant's ivory, tail, face and tip of the trunk were all removed, presumably for sale on the black market.

The elephant had large tusks, which probably contributed to his appeal to poachers.

By studying the bullets it appears that the poachers had access to high-powered guns, indicating that this was a deliberate attack undertaken by professional poachers or people with access to military grade firearms.

Asian elephants are an

internationally recognised endangered species, and domesticated elephants in Laos face threats from many sources.

ElephantAsia know of at least three domesticated elephants that have been poached in the last two months, 10 since 2008, with not a single arrest in any of the cases.

Less than 500 domesticated elephants remain in Laos, with poaching a recurrent problem.

Local laws are clear regarding the killing of elephants. In 1989 the government declared a ban on the hunting and killing of protected, endangered species, and became signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in 2004.

However, poaching continues to be a major cause of death for both wild and domesticated elephant populations.

The mahout community feels vulnerable to poachers and is unable to independently help and protect their animals.



At least two professional poachers were responsible for the slaughter of domesticated elephant Phu Thongkhoun. — Photo ElephantAsia