

Guest Lecture: Palani Mohan
VANISHING GIANTS
Elephants of Asia

March 10 & 11, 2008



Palani Mohan / Reportage by Getty Images



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Photographer's Biography

“Documentary photography’s aim is to evoke emotion. When you get it right it will reach out, grab your soul and make you feel. It jolts you out of your world and forces you to question” - Palani Mohan

Palani Mohan was born in Chennai, India, and moved to Australia as a child. His photographic career began 20 years ago at the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper and since then he has been based in London, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and now Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Mohan’s work is regularly featured in many of the world’s leading magazines and newspapers, and he has published three photographic books.

The first photographic book “Hong Kong Lives: An Intimate Portrait”, is a black-and-white reportage-style look at daily life in Hong Kong. The second, “Hidden Faces of India”, is a collection of nine photographic essays taken from the length and breadth of India. His third and recently published book is called “Vanishing Giants: Elephants of Asia”. This book documents these great animals and the people who care for them. The photographs have been taken over six years, in 11 Asian nations – from the streets of Bangkok to the logging camps of the Andaman Islands. The book stands as a record of an amazing species which is ever more imperiled by the loss of habitat and by human neglect.

He is a winner of many international awards. As recent as January 2006, the Asian elephant series earned Palani a second prize in the World Press Photo, Amsterdam. His work is also in the collection of the Portrait Gallery of London and he has exhibited in the prestigious Perpignan’s Photojournalism Festival in France. The current show at Fovea (*Vanishing Giants*) on Asian elephants will be his debut exhibition in the United States

Asian Elephants

Elephas maximus - General Information

Asian elephants mostly inhabit Asian tropical forests and use their gray coloration to conceal themselves in their shady habitat. Female Asian elephants usually lack visible tusks, as do males in some populations, such as those in northeast India. Wide, padded feet enable them to walk quietly. Large, flappable ears help these huge animals cool off, although elephants often must retreat to the shade or water during the hottest part of the day. Asian elephants grow up to 21 feet long, stand up to 10 feet tall, and weigh up to 11,000 pounds - smaller than their African counterparts. Even smaller are Sumatran and Bornean elephants which are more diminutive than the elephants in mainland Asia. Females reach around eight and a half feet tall and weigh less than males. Asian elephants can live to be 60.

Asian elephants have been tamed as beasts of burden for about 4,000 years. Most elephants recruited for such work as hauling and lumber are still taken from the wild.

Habitat

Asian elephants live in large blocks of forest near water sources and grasslands. They inhabit India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Bangladesh, and southern China. Asian elephants inhabit a variety of tropical forest habitats from moist, evergreen lowland forest to dry semi-deciduous teak forests to cooler, mountain forests up to 10,000 feet, though they strongly prefer lowlands. They also frequent adjacent grasslands and farm areas. Their varied diet enables them to live in disturbed forests as long as they have plenty of space to move around and exploit different food sources without coming into conflict with people.



The population numbers used for the Asian elephant range map is courtesy of the Elephant Research Foundation and can be found in Elephant (vol.2, no. 4, pp.11-12, ©2000)

Diet

Asian elephants will eat about 300 pounds of food per day -- mostly roots, grasses, leaves, bark, bananas and sugar cane. These elephants spend more than 12 hours a day in feeding, and their choice of plant species and plant parts varies considerably with the season.

Reproduction

Both males and females become sexually active between the ages of 12 and 15. The chance of successful mating increases with the size and the age of the male, thus the older bulls will mate before the younger bulls. The gestation period is 20-22 months and females will produce a calf every four to five years. An Asian elephant calf is about 260 pounds at birth.

Threats

Female Asian elephants are not affected by ivory poaching (due to their lack of tusks), so poaching has not affected the overall population numbers of Asian elephants as drastically as it has African elephants. The single most important cause of the decline of the Asian elephant has been the loss of habitat and subsequent conflict with humans.

Many experts believe there is now no future for the Asian elephant outside protected areas. With the possible exception of parts of India, elephant populations have declined substantially in all countries during the past few decades. Even in India, the species has lost ground in the northeast, while in the south poaching for ivory threatens the genetic viability of the population. Historically, the major causes for the decline of the Asian elephant have been capture for domestication and loss of habitat in the face of the expanding human population. Even today, unsustainable capture (often illegal) persists in some countries, while human expansion continues to reduce and fragment the forest habitat, constricting elephant populations to small numbers which cannot survive in the long-term.

Status

The population of Asian elephants today stands at between 25,600 and 32,750 in the wild with an additional 15,000 in captivity. The Asian elephant is listed as endangered on IUCN's Red List of Threatened Animals and is also on Appendix I of CITES, meaning that international commercial trade is not allowed.

For more info:

http://www.worldwildlife.org/elephants/subspecies/subspecies_ase.cfm

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/7140/all>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/178.shtml>



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Humans and Elephants

The loss of their environment and farmers

Pachyderm Patrols Fend Off Elephants Rioting in Sumatra; 'Flying Squad' Beats Back Herds That Kill People And Devastate Plantations

Tom Wright, Wall Street Journal. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Dec 6, 2007. pg. A.1

TESSO NILO, Indonesia -- If you're trying to keep the peace between man and beast, it helps to have the elephant "Flying Squad" on your side.

On the Indonesian island of Sumatra, deadly clashes between rare Asian elephants and human beings have become common as plantations of oil palm and coffee have pushed deeper into once-pristine forests. Since 2002, 100 elephants and 42 people have died as a result, including a three-year-old girl and her mother who were trampled in June. Villagers and plantation owners have poisoned and shot elephants to protect their homes and crops.

Into this volatile mix, the World Wildlife Fund, the conservation group in Geneva, thought it would be a good idea to introduce more elephants, but on the farmers' side. Three years ago, it set up what it calls the Flying Squad of four trained elephants. Using techniques dating to ancient battles, Indonesian mahouts, or elephant keepers, ride atop their trained elephants against wild herds in order to force them away from plantations and back to the jungle.

The effort has been so successful at reducing crop damage in one area on the border of the Tesso Nilo National Park in Sumatra's Riau Province -- home to about 90 elephants and to rare Sumatran tigers -- that a number of large palm-oil plantations in the area are now setting up their own elephant police teams with the WWF's help. Nobody -- neither man nor elephant -- has been killed in conflicts around the park since the project began.

"Before the Flying Squad, local people were saying they wanted to kill the elephants," says Dani Rahadian, a campaign officer at the WWF's Riau office. "But they are not angry anymore, as the Flying Squad is helping to protect their palm-oil plantations."

Last month, PT Peputra Supra Jaya, a company that runs a 20,000-acre palm-oil plantation near Tesso Nilo, asked the local government to help after a herd of wild elephants began eating its crops. The cash-strapped government turned to the Flying Squad, which trucked in two male elephants -- Indro and Rahman -- from their base about two hours away. Indro derives from the Madagascan word for woodsman. Rahman is an Arabic name meaning compassionate. Scouting the palm-oil plantation in four-wheel-drive vehicles, the mahouts looked for signs of the wild elephants, such as footprints and broken foliage. Then, near dusk, a radio call came in from a plantation manager: Three elephants had just attacked a group of farmers before crashing back into the forest.

Atop the Flying Squad elephants, the mahouts quickly picked up the trail, hacking a path through the dense jungle foliage with short knives. As usual, the mahouts avoid direct confrontation by combining their trained elephants with scare tactics.

When the wild elephants were within earshot, Joni Saptajaya, a 28-year-old mahout, readied a mix of calcium carbide and water, which, when ignited, makes a loud noise. Using an improvised cannon made from plastic tubes, he let off a volley from the top of Rahman. The wild herd, startled by the noise, stampeded deeper into the jungle, averting a trunk-to-trunk encounter.

Often these meetings are more bruising. Rahman, 22 years old, and Indro, 20, had been trained to fight in mock battles in which their tusks were wrapped in cloth to keep them from hurting each other. Last year, the pair made use of their training in forcing a much larger male elephant away from a village, with Rahman leading the charge.

Mr. Saptajaya, like the seven other mahouts on the team, is paid about \$100 a month to ride the elephants on missions. That is about twice what he was paid to train elephants to do tricks for foreign tourists in a government-run camp in Lampung Province on the southern tip of Sumatra. "I prefer this job," says Mr. Saptajaya, who works in long pants, a T-shirt and rubber boots.

Not everyone is happy with the squad's work. Samson Siregar, operations manager for Peputra, says the wild animals may be gone for now but they will come back looking for food. "It's better to put the elephants in a camp," he says. But with the state elephant camp in Riau already overcrowded, and many of the inhabitants underfed, the government is refusing to do that.

"By setting up plantations so near Tesso Nilo, companies have to anticipate elephants coming in," says Syamsuardi, who has run the Flying Squad for the WWF since it was created in 2004. In the wild, elephants can be among nature's fiercest creatures. African tuskers are able to crush lions and even rhinoceroses. Before gunpowder, they were often deployed by generals to destroy enemy infantry lines and to trample prisoners to death. In the third century B.C., Hannibal, Carthage's renowned military commander, famously drove African elephants across Spain and over the Alps to attack the Romans.

In the Flying Squad, by learning to act together, the elephants have often been able to scare off herds of as many as 20 animals without violence.

The WWF acknowledges its little team of four elephants is too small to patrol every conflict and is urging companies to set up their own pachyderm police squads. A company owned by Raja Garuda Mas, a Singapore company with palm-oil plantations in the area, this year began its first patrols. But the available squads still fall far short of what is needed, especially in the most impoverished and remote parts of Sumatra.

In Ulu Semong village, located in the western highlands of Lampung Province, the coffee farmers say they won't venture into their fields after the death of the girl and her mother this past summer. Darwin, a coffee trader who is head of the village, shows grisly photos of what he says are the victims' remains. Foraging elephants trampled the pair as they slept in a hut on the edge of a plantation. "I never saw elephants coming into human areas like this," he says.

The district in which Ulu Semong is located is the center of the worst recent human-elephant conflict on Sumatra, with 10 people dying in the past two years. Many

elephants have died, too. Just four wild elephants are left there, down from 22 in 2001, the WWF says. During a recent visit, the surviving herd was seen taking shelter in a tiny swath of natural forest, hemmed in between coffee plantations and small roads. At the approach of people, the herd charged forward aggressively but stopped short of making an attack.

Unlike Tesso Nilo, where the Singapore company Raja Garuda Mas has built a broad access road, Ulu Semong is remote and served by a muddy track that is impassable in the rainy season. And the area is so overrun by coffee plantations that there isn't much forest left as a natural home for the elephants.

The village wants the government to move the four remaining wild elephants to a camp, but so far the state has done nothing. So, villagers have taken things into their own hands. In July, an elephant was found dead. An autopsy carried out by the WWF found food laced with poison in the beast's stomach.

Mr. Darwin says Ulu Semong's residents hate the elephants, but he denies that people there were responsible for the killing. He blames it on a neighboring village.



Elephants, Mahouts and the City

Tradition vs. Urban Development

Caution: Elephants Brake for Food on Bangkok's Roads

Thomas Fuller, New York Times, January 2, 2008

BANGKOK — Of all the illegal activities that animate the streets of Bangkok — the vendors who hawk pirated DVDs and fake watches, the brothels that call themselves saunas — one stands out more than others.

Elephants are not supposed to saunter down the city's streets as they do almost every night. For at least two decades the giant gray beasts have plodded through this giant gray city, stopping off at red-light districts and tourist areas where their handlers peddle elephant snacks of sugar cane and bananas to passers-by.

Occasionally the elephants knock off the side-view mirrors from cars or stumble into gutters and cut themselves on sharp objects.

The police shrug, politicians periodically order crackdowns and animal lovers despair.

The creation of a Stray Elephant Task Force in 2006 did not keep the elephants off city streets. Nor did the team of undercover elephant enforcers who periodically cruise through Bangkok on motorcycles scouting for the beasts.

"To be honest, nobody wants to do this job, nobody wants to deal with the elephants," said Prayote Promsuwon, who is in charge of the Stray Elephant Task Force, which was formed after an elephant handler, fleeing the police, raced his elephant the wrong way down a large Bangkok boulevard, causing traffic chaos.

The police shy away from detaining the elephants' handlers, also known as mahouts, because the officers fear they will not be able to control the animals on their own.

"This is a dangerous job," Mr. Prayote said. "An angry elephant can destroy cars and make trouble — and then we have responsibility for the damage."

The government says there are 3,837 domesticated elephants in Thailand today. Only a tiny fraction come into Bangkok — usually no more than half a dozen each evening — but they are hard to miss. Many Thais say they serve as a daily reminder of the inequalities in Thailand, the gap between provincial poverty and urban wealth.

Mahouts bring their elephants into the city for the same reasons that the sons and daughters of rice farmers try their luck



Palani Mohan / Reportage by Getty Images

as waiters, golf caddies and massage therapists in Bangkok: they need the money.

But to critics, elephants in the city highlight the persistent impunity of lawbreakers in Thailand, a country with no shortage of rules but gaping lapses in enforcement. Thailand has eight distinct laws that can be used to arrest mahouts who bring elephants into the city, rules that cover moving violations, wildlife protection, public health and urban tidiness.

"We've been fined many times," said Nattawut Inthong, a 24-year-old mahout who travels around Bangkok with his 2-year-old elephant, Gra-po.

Mr. Nattawut treats the fine of 300 baht, about \$10, like a business expense: he pays it and moves on. Most evenings he parades Gra-po through the Nana red-light district, a warren of go-go bars in Bangkok's bustling Sukhumvit neighborhood. The elephant adds to the carnival-like atmosphere created by thumping music, hawkers dressed in hill-tribe costumes and bar girls twirling around poles in bathing suits.

Mr. Nattawut makes about 2,000 baht a day, or about \$67, selling sugar cane to passers-by, good money in a country where a typical factory wage is 8,000 baht (about \$269) a month.

When the night life quiets down, Mr. Nattawut leads his elephant by an ear to an abandoned lot on the outskirts of the city where he and the animal sleep.

Greater Bangkok, with more than 10 million residents sprawled across an area nearly three times the size of Rhode Island, has many animal problems, among them snakes that occasionally cause panic when they slither into homes and the city's ubiquitous and mangy stray dogs, which have been known to bite pedestrians.

But elephants stand apart because for centuries they have been considered noble beasts, collected by kings and used in preindustrial times as the tanks of the battlefield.

Like pandas for China, they were also tools of diplomacy. In the 19th century, King Mongkut offered a few pairs of elephants to the American government, thinking it might help cement a budding friendship between the countries.

(Abraham Lincoln, president at the time, replied that the United States might not have a favorable climate for the animals. "Our political jurisdiction," Lincoln wrote, "does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant.")

Before motor vehicles took over, elephants were the taxis of the rich and the workhorses of rural Thailand, especially prized for their help in clearing thick swaths of jungle. It was not until the late 1980s, when the government banned logging to save the nation's dwindling forests, that hundreds of elephants found themselves unemployed.

Some elephants were given jobs in the tourism industry, carrying jungle trekkers and amusing visitors with their ability to paint or even play in an "elephant orchestra." For others, the unemployment line led to Bangkok.

Eight years ago, former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun lamented that when Thais saw elephants walking down the streets in Bangkok, "we are not only sorry for the elephant but we're also ashamed of ourselves."

"The elephant was a symbol of honor, of dignity and leadership," he said, "but today it has become the symbol of the failures and injustices of Thailand's development."

Since those comments were made, the government has experimented, unsuccessfully, with two projects to confine the elephants to Thailand's rural hinterland.

In 2002, elephants and their mahouts were offered jobs as scouts in national parks. The project failed because it was underfinanced and the elephants and their trainers were "lonely," said Kritapon Sala-ngam, secretary of the

Thai Elephant Association, a nonprofit group.

In 2006, the government started the "Bring Elephants Home" project, offering to pay mahouts 8,000 baht a month if they agreed to live in a specially designated area in Surin, a province about 250 miles northeast of Bangkok.

However, the area is short on water and tall grass — the staple of the elephants' ravenous daily diet of 50 gallons of water and food equivalent to 10 percent of their body weight. (Thai elephants weigh an average of about 5,500 pounds.) The project started with 181 elephants but is down to 64, Mr. Kritapon said.

Surin Province is home to 1,005, or about one-quarter, of Thailand's domesticated elephants.

Their mahouts are generally Gouay people, a small ethnic group that speaks a language distantly related to Khmer and that for centuries specialized in the art of capturing wild elephants from the jungle.

Weerasak Pintawong, the chief veterinarian at the National Institute of Elephant Research and Health Services in Surin, said the concentration of elephants was a big problem.

"There are too many elephants in Surin, and there's not enough money," he said.

Mr. Weerasak, who treats wounded and sick elephants from around the country, said it was common for elephants to be injured by cars. Often, he said, young elephants will carelessly bump into parked vehicles and bruise themselves.

"Sometimes they fall into a hole," Mr. Weerasak said. "Sometimes the elephant is frustrated at being commanded too much, and it runs away."

Yet unlike many city people who hold romantic notions about elephants, Mr. Weerasak and others who train the animals have a more practical view. They offer a note of caution for the drunken tourists who enjoy patting the elephants on their backsides and the Thai bar girls who duck under elephants' bellies in the belief that it brings good luck.

Elephants, Mr. Weerasak said, are powerful, restless creatures prone to rebellion.

The single most appropriate word for them, he said, is "fierce."

Current Events/Debate

African Elephants - The Environment and Human Development

South Africa: Elephant Kills Are Legal Again

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, New York Time, February 26, 2008

The government said it would start killing elephants beginning May 1 to reduce their growing numbers, ending a 13-year moratorium. Environment Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk said it was “a last option” to reduce environmental degradation and rising conflicts with humans. There would be no “wholesale slaughter,” he added, but did not specify how many elephants might be killed. The announcement follows months of impassioned debate, with some conservationists, including the World Wildlife Fund, cautiously arguing for elephant culling to protect the ecosystem, and other groups outraged. South Africa had just 200 elephants at the beginning of the 20th century and now has 18,000, a number expected to double by 2020. The new regulations say killing must be through “quick and humane methods,” preferably a single shot to the brain by a marksman in a helicopter.



Palani Mohan / Reportage by Getty Images

Further Resources on Photography

Museums & Galleries

Fovea Exhibitions Beacon Gallery
Center for Photography at Woodstock
Photography-Now
The International Center of Photography
Museum of Modern Art
Leica Gallery
Danzinger Projects
401 Projects
Powerhouse Arena (Powerhouse Books)

Inspiration

VII Photo
MediaStorm- Multimedia Pieces
Magnum Photos
PBS- American Photography: A Century of Images
FiftyCrows

Organizations

American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP)
National Press Photographers Association (NPPA)
Student Photographic Society

Seminars/Festivals/Conferences

Visa Pour l'Image
Pingyao International Photojournalism Festival
Women in Photojournalism
Southwestern Photojournalism Conference
Northern Short Course
Flying Short Course
Southern Short Course

Workshops

Maine Photographic Workshops
Photography at the Summit
Santa Fe Workshops
Missouri Photo Workshop
Stan Kalish Workshop
Mountain Workshops
Sports Shooter Academy
Truth With A Camera
Multimedia Bootcamp
Visual Edge

The Business of Photography

US Copyright Office
NPPA: Business Practices Toolkit
Advertising Photographers of America (APA): Business
FotoQuote
Poynter
Rob Galbraith

Contests

Altpick Awards
World Press Photo
Photographer of the Year
College Photographer of the Year
NPPA's Best of Photojournalism
White House News Photographers Association
Robert Capa Award
W. Eugene Smith Award

Photography Tips

MediaStorm
Nikon.net
betterphoto.com
Photo.net
Digital Photography review

Books

The Photograph- Graham Clarke
Photojournalism - Ken Kobre
On Photography by Susan Sontag
Criticizing Photographs- Terry Barrett
de.MO Publishing
Trolley Press

Online Magazines

Digital Journalist
Photo District News / Photo District News edu
BlueEyes Magazine

Magazines

American Photo
Communication Arts
Blind Spot Magazine
Aperture
Daylight
Foto8

Blogs

American Photo Blog
washingtonpost.com multimedia blog
Photo Business News & Forum
A Picture's Worth
A Photo A Day
PhotoColumn
Dan Heller's Photography Business Blog

Online Communities

LightStalkers
A Photo A Day
SportsShooter