

Management and Utilization of Elephant (*Elephas maximus Indicus*) in Thailand

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Abstract: This research aimed to examine the management and utilization of elephant in Thailand. Data were collected from 5 main elephant raising centers: Surin and Chaiyaphum centers in Northeast; Lampang Elephant Institute in the North, Ayuthaya center in Central and Phuket Fantasea in the South, between January and July 2007 by using qualitative research methodology. The finding of the research was as follow: Elephant raising in Thai had been in the process of changes continuously. When the Thai government terminated the timber monopoly in 1989, elephants and their mahouts were laid off. For their survival, the elephants' owners had to adapt themselves in terms of raising and management. Nowadays forms of elephant management are divided into 3 types: Firstly, by government sector; secondly, by private sector, in which the elephants were trained to present their capabilities in a circus and thirdly, by elephant's owners, in which the elephants owners train their elephants to do many amazing tasks, traveling and presenting elephant shows from places to places, while less gifted or less trained elephants going into larger towns and selling elephant's food to the elephant lovers along the streets. It is obvious that the utilization of the elephants in modern days is different from the past. In the past, elephants were used for logs moving. But nowadays elephants are able to perform various types of tasks, these include: Elephant actors or artist, elephants for tourism business and elephants for elephant's food or elephant related merchandises selling. The finding of this research reveals: The changes of elephant raising in Thailand, the relationship between the elephant and its mahout and the adaptation for survival of both elephants and their mahouts in accordance with global societies' changes.

Key words: Elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*), management, utilization, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Thai elephants (*Elephas maximus indicus*), belonging to Asian specie, have been associated with Thai people since ancient time in many aspects, such as in religion and beliefs, in war, as well as in normal daily life, which includes human and merchandises transportations (Laophakdee, 1994). In the past, Thailand had plenty amount of elephants in every region of the country, especially in the North and the Northeast. When Thailand began using National Social and Economic Plan, the government gave the private sectors the monopoly right in timber industry. Due to their strength, intelligence and capability in forest traveling, elephants were used for logs moving to manufacturing sites (Rodney, 1993). Then, when forest areas were decreased and the government terminated the timber permits, the elephant roles were also decreased (Srisombat, 1993). Since each elephant has to

eat about 250 kg of food per day, it has to walk for a long distance to find food. Sometimes there is not enough food in the forest, herds of wild elephants had come out of the forest and ate farming crops of the people, causing conflict between people and wild elephants. Pet elephants don't have enough food neither (Elephant Lover Cub Ban Khai Muen Phaeo, 2000). However, elephants are intelligent animals, having capability to be trained to perform many activities. Thus, the elephants' owners train their elephants for various types of shows in many places and occasions and earn the fee from the audience. Other than this, the owners may train their elephants to take parts in annual procession ceremonies and sometimes go to present elephant shows in the zoos within the country and out of the country (Srisombat, 1993). Nowadays the elephant population is about 5,000 heads, 2,000 wild elephants and 3,000 pet elephants, a lesser numbers than in India and in Indonesia (Elephant Lover Cub Ban Khai

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Muen Phaeo, 2000). The condition of Thai elephants are in critical situation: The decrease of elephant's population; the lack of wilderness, sources of food for wild and pet elephants; insufficient income for mahouts; being away from families and communities of the elephant's owners as they were used to be in the past, elephants slaying for their tusks. These incidents clearly point to the critical problems of Thai elephants. In order to solve the elephant's problems, ones need to have comprehensive data as references for working plan. Necessary data of the management and utilization of the elephant in Thailand are still limited, therefore the aim of this research was to examine the management and utilization of the elephant in Thailand. Then the finding knowledge would be used as a valuable foundation for treatment, management and laying out the direction or policy for the elephants management in Thailand and Asia in modern days.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area: Data from 5 main elephant raising centers of Thailand were collected during January and July 2007. These areas included Surin and Chaiyaphum in Northeast; Lampang National Elephant Institute, Lampang, in the North; Ayuthaya Pang Chang Lae Phaniet, Ayuthaya, in the Central and Phuket Fantasea, Phuket, in the South.

Research method: Using interdisciplinary approach, including anthropology and biology, after Vortkamp's dissertation (2006) for the love of elephants: Mahoutship and elephant conservation in Thailand. Data were collected from documents as well as from mahouts and elephant conservationists in Thailand.

Data analysis: Data were analyzed by using Jane Ritchie's approach in her article, Carrying out Qualitative Analysis, discussing on: data management, descriptive data, explanatory accounts and group-data analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data on the management and utilization of the elephants, collected from main elephant centers throughout Thailand, shown as follow:

Types of elephant management in Thailand: There are 3 types of elephant management.

Management by the government: In 1969, Thai government established Young Elephant Training Center at Lampang in Northern Thailand. This was the first and the only one such place in the world to train young

elephants for timber works. Then, the government ended the timber permit throughout the country, causing all working elephants and their mahouts who used to work in timber business and for forest authority to be out of jobs in 1989. These elephants had to return to the Young Elephant Training Center. In 1991, the Young Elephant Training Center was moved to a new site in a national forest reservation area in Lampang, by the permission of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative. The new center was named Thai Elephant Conservation Center. The center has changed its role from elephant conservation to eco-tourism, charging fee from tourists for food, medicine and elephant related activities supports and maintenance. Then the center becomes National Institute for Elephant Conservation. The National Center for Elephant Conservation is divided into many divisions: elephant show, describing the nature and the tie between the elephants and their mahouts; elephant training, giving orders to the elephants to perform certain capabilities and creativities, such as painting, playing music. Elephant riding for sight seeing is the most popular and profitable activity of this institute. In additions, the institute also gives free medical treatments for all sick elephants from within and outside the institute in Northern region, whereas sick elephants in other regions of the country, the institute will send elephant doctors to the needed location on request. In Surin province of Northeast Thailand, the government established an elephant center called Elephant Studies Center in 2006. The project aims to appeal to the elephants and their mahouts who are away from home to return to their home villages for community development. The budget has been supported by the provincial administration organization, giving financial support for 69 elephants. Each elephant and its mahout get 8,000 baht per month. The center gets support from tourists in the form of donation, elephants' food selling, elephant riding, elephant bathing show, elephant show in the Elephant Fair and selling gifts made from ivory. This center is considered to be the largest elephant village in the world. The elephants which do not associated with the center prefer to take their elephants traveling into many big cities, selling elephant's food, such as banana and sugar canes, or taking part in various ceremonial processions, performing some rituals, such as chasing away bad luck crawling under elephant's belly. This dues to the nature of kui ethnic people who like to travel and adventure and the lack of wilderness forest for enough elephants' food supplies. Homeless elephants were found throughout the country.

Management by private sector: Since elephants are very large and clever animal. They can be trained to do many certain activities. Therefore some private sectors have brought out these gifted aspects of the elephants for their

business attraction, especially in tourism. There are many tourism sites in Thailand that use elephants intelligence for their commercial services. For instances, at Ayuthaya Pang Chang Lae Phaniat Elephant Center, Ayuthaya province in central Thailand, there are 150 elephants. This center presents elephant show in royal ceremony and elephant show for the king, presenting light and sound and movie on the elephants. At the Chaiyaphum and Surin elephant villages, elephant trainings are very important for the country to preserve the elephant sciences and knowledge of elephants and of their mahouts. Besides, at the Phuket Fantasea elephant center in Phuket, Southern Thailand, it is a big show business of the elephants. The main activity is the elephant circusmen and elephants show. Most elephants and their mahouts are hired from other elephant sites, especially from Surin and Chaiyaphum in Northeast region.

Management by elephants' owners: This type of management is operated by a group of mahouts/elephant owners in Chaiyaphum in Northeast Thailand. The mahouts/elephant owners train the elephants and set up show troupe, traveling from places to places in many provinces. There are 17 elephants troupes from Chaiyaphum, each troupe consists of about 2-5 elephants, aged between 2-20 years old. The owners of each troupe set up their own showing style, train their elephants to perform certain activities which appeal or attract the audience. During transportation by trucks, the elephants owners have to stay closely with the elephants all the time.

Types of the utilization of the elephant in Thailand: There are 3 types of elephant uses.

Elephant circus/athlete show: In the past the people raised the elephants for sale or to work in timber business, especially log moving job in Northern Thailand. But when the forest area was decreased and the government terminated the forest harvesting monopoly permit, the elephants' tasks were shifted to show business. The elephants owners train their young elephants to perform different actions or activities according to the owners' ideas based on the gifts/capabilities of each young elephant. These young elephants which are able to perform well are called Artist Elephants. After training process was finished, each troupe has its own name. Then they will start their journey, setting up their show to the public from places to places, province to province, collecting fee from the audience for elephant's food, necessary expenses and for family support. An elephant troupe, consisting of 2-5 elephants, loading up in 2 big trucks, leading by one public announcement truck, begin

their aimless journey from dawn to dusk, depending on showing schedule at 4 o'clock and at 8 o'clock pm. This troupe preferred to present their show with risky and dangerous manners that often caused injuries and got a lot of complaints from foreigners for animal brutalities.

Elephant for tourism business: In the past, this group of elephants were used to work in timber industry, especially the elephants in Northern Thailand, about 1,500 heads. Today these elephants have been transferred into tourism business, consisting of many big centers through out the country. Elephants were used in tourism business in 25 sites. These include: Ayuthaya in the Central; Lampang in the North and Phuket in the South. Each of these big tourism sites consists of about 20 and more than 100 elephants, while smaller tourism centers, 50-75 sites in number, 2-10 elephants. Some elephant centers are operated for special tasks for tourist services. This group are becoming larger in number, some of them are bought for doing homeless journey.

Homeless elephant for selling food and elephant related products: This group of elephants came from Surin, Buriram and Chaiyaphum in Northeast Thailand. At first there were only 300 elephants. These elephants belonged to their ancestors and have been transferred to their descendents. During the past 10 years, natural forests were decreased, changing into eucalyptus farms. The elephants and their mahouts did not have jobs. Therefore, many elephant families decided to travel, hoping to find better jobs and earning enough money to support their families. They brought their elephants into towns, selling elephant's food, such as banana and sugar cane, packed in bags. The people who love elephants and feel pity on them will buy these food and feed the elephants. Each mahout/elephant owner can make monthly income between 30,000 and 50,000 bath. Some owners/mahouts may make as high as 150,000 baht per month. In additions, they may sell ivory products such as carved ivories, wrist rings, or finger rings. Some audience may pay certain fee for a crawl under elephant belly to gain auspiciousness. Nowadays this group becomes big business, many elephants were bought by rich business men, putting together about 700- 800 elephants. During high tourism seasons, these elephants may work in various private tourism centers. When tourism season fades out, the elephants will shift to homeless journey again. Sometimes, the rich business men may lend money to the mahouts to buy new elephants. Then the mahouts can have their own elephants, making and saving enough money to pay off the debts. After that the elephant owners may begin their journey, going from place to place and may end up on selling their elephants again.

CONCLUSION

Elephant raising in Thailand has developed continuously. When the elephant's food supplies in the forest were scarcely, it seriously affected the ways of life of the elephants and their owners/mahouts. Due to its large size, high value, big appetite, the elephants owners/mahouts, spending their whole lives with their elephants, had to adapted themselves on how to manage, use and raise the elephants. Thus, 3 types of the management and utilization of the elephants in Thailand have been formed. The first type is managed by government, the second type by private sector and the third type by elephants owners/mahouts. Elephant centers operated by government or private sectors share their common aspects-attracting the tourists to see them at their tourism centers, while elephant troupes operated by their owners/mahouts move the elephant shows to the audience along the way of their journey.

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