

Impacts of Social Change on Domesticated Elephants in Thailand

—A Case Study in the Provinces of Lampang and Surin —

Entry in Heisei 15

Destination country : Thailand

Destination of dispatch organization : Elephant Nature Park and National Elephant Institute

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Destination of dispatch organization in brief

Elephant Nature Park (ENP) is a private-run sanctuary dealing with Asian elephant conservation. Located in Mae Taeng Valley, north of downtown Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, ENP was founded in 1995, with the objectives of rescuing abused elephants, caring for those traumatized as well as educating the public about the distress of the pachyderms in Thailand (see Fig.1). Practically, the ENP provides opportunities for visitors to have experiences with freely ranging elephants through various projects such as volunteering for daily chores and at times operating emergency medical unit called Jumbo Express.

National Elephant Institute (NEI) is a state agency grappling with conservation of Thai elephants. Established at Thungkwian district, Lampang Province in 2002, NEI is the new transformation of the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC), which has functioned under the command of Forest Industry Organization (FIO), of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. Its objectives are preserving Thai elephants, providing medical care for the aged and ill, and sustaining knowledge on Thai elephants through mahout training school to coordinate the management of elephant problems with other elephant-relevant organizations including NGOs (see Fig.2).



Fig.1 The verdant landscape of Elephant Nature Park Fig.2 Elephant training school at National Elephant Institute

Aspiration/motive of dispatch and objectives before being dispatched

My internships at Elephant Nature Park and National Elephant Institute were significantly determined to serve my academic and personal aspirations/objectives. Academically, being an intern at both sites would undoubtedly help extend my horizons about the ideology and practices of the dual exemplars; private and state organizations. On the one hand, ENP seemed dramatically appealing for the study of nowadays trend of conservation which apparently emphasizes on the rights of the elephants. On the other hand, NEI appeared to be indispensable, at least, to understand the changing environment and society in which Thai elephants and mahouts, the elephant keepers, have lived. Individually, it was also my curiosity to observe and sometimes scrutinize the images and reality of domesticated elephants, particularly the gap/discrepancy of those two entities in Thailand. Since the conservation of elephants in the country has been more increasingly put on alert by various relevant groups, to what extent the discourses have so far come into practices does strongly attract my inquisitiveness.

Activities during dispatch

During my internship at Elephant Nature Park, my duty was assigned as a volunteer, like others from foreign countries, to handle the daily tasks. The aim of the job allocation at ENP was to enable participants, including me, to learn about the livelihood of mahouts and at the same time the nature of the elephants. Every early morning, I helped a mahout clean the elephant dung, unchain the fetter and watch carefully as to how elephant reacts to his/her keeper at the stable. Then, I walked along with mahouts to let elephant roam freely in the sanctuary for a couple of hours. Sometimes, I also helped carry stands of banana trees as supplementary food for elephants in the park. About 10 a.m., everyone assisted in preparing foods, mainly including fruits and vegetables, and separating the amount in baskets for every single elephant. After gulping kilos of food, elephants ranged for an hour and then were taken to bathe in the river in the afternoon (see Fig.3). Moreover, I talked to both mahouts and other volunteers/visitors by asking their experiences and sharing opinions for present conditions of ENP and elephant conservation.

At National Elephant Institute, I was not given any specific duty. However, I was allowed to closely observe the training of mahouts and baby elephants, at the mahout training school which is the center for experienced mahouts (see Fig.4). While observing the ritual of training baby elephants, I realized that this tradition has locally served for not just cultural beliefs but also human safety as elephants have to be tamed and controllable. This traditional practice, nevertheless, exists not without the ongoing disagreement and discontentment, particularly from westernized conservationists, and can not readily be taken for granted for understanding the changing circumstances in Thailand.



Fig.3 Foreign volunteers bathing elephants at the ENP. Fig.4.The student elephant and his mahout during training.

Experiences impressed at the dispatch destination

Having participated in Elephant Nature Park and National Elephant Institute, I feel a contradiction. In general, I admire the attempts of both organizations to better the plight of Thai domesticated elephants through their pilot projects and activities. I did actually witness love and care that mahouts, officials and visitors kindly expressed to the “endangered” pachyderms though each organization has its own specific, or rather unique, modus operandi (Fig.5). The elephants that pragmatically live together in herds and have their own family/community, for instance, at ENP are seemingly happier and more playful to some extent when compared with those in other elephant camps.

However, it could not help realizing that the discord pertaining to ideas and practices between elephant-rearing communities remarkably exists and thereby probably making the future of Thai elephants as well as mahouts ambiguous and vulnerable (see Fig.6). The solution for this question is likely to turn more complicated and unreachable unless the wider scale of public raises the awareness and eventually actualize cooperation with state, private and IOs/NGOs for elephants and their keepers.



Fig.5 Visitors fervently taking photos of a heard of elephants at the Elephant Nature Park , Chiang Mai Province (above).



Fig.6 A glance at the elephant training process at the National Elephant Institute, Lampang Province (right).

Attainability of objectives and reflection

The accomplishment for the objectives I set seemed tangible to a certain extent. The most important and concrete one is that my understanding about the reality of domesticated elephants, in relations with mahouts at localities was reshaped and much clearer. Though it is still quite an arduous work to comprehend all the pertaining factors in my research, I have learned the intricate interplays of actors involved as well as their mindset. This is crucial as the dialogues I have had with them unravel their beliefs, and more profoundly the history not only of the individuals but also the struggles for sustaining their livelihood amidst the changing political, economic and social environments. Interestingly, for instance, the so-called crush ritual (separation of elephant mother and her baby) that has been a tradition for elephant rearing groups throughout Thailand turn out to be labeled barbaric and inappropriate when viewed from the modernized standpoints. This debate, however, needs to be investigated with cautions for the tradition is fundamentally embedded with meaning and value despite the unavoidability to undergo changes.