IN DANGER

EXPERTS WARN MONDULKIRI'S ELEPHANT-KEEPING CULTURE RISKS EXTINCTION

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALANNA JORDE

In Mondukiri's burgeoning ecotourism market, elephant trekking is a profitable cash cow. But as the prospect of communing with Earth's largest land mammal lures an increasing number of visitors to the remote eastern province, the ancient elephant-keeping traditions that sustain the popular treks risk becoming as endangered as the majestic animal.

Elephant trekking currently fetches up to $30 for day treks and $80 per elephant for overnight trips. A share of the fee goes to the guesthouse that arranges the trek, the trek's guide, the elephant handler or mahout, and the elephant's owner.

The elephants belong to ethnic Bunong clans—hill tribespeople who make up about half of Mondulkiri's population. The clan receives about $17 per day for each elephant used on a trek, says Pech Kiri guesthouse manager Chan Dara.

"Elephant trekking is very important to the (Bunong) economy … (and) very good for our business. It doesn't destroy the environment and it's an easier way to make money than other tourist-related activities," notes Chan Dara. Elephant treks first started in Mondulkiri 10 years ago and business has picked up considerably in recent years, he adds.

There are no statistics currently available on Cambodia's ecotourist sector but according to Ministry of Tourism figures, the number of international visitors to Mondulkiri has jumped exponentially in the last few years from only 395 in 2002 to 1,831 in 2006. Chan Vara estimates that Pech Kiri guesthouse arranges elephant treks for six out of 10 of its guests.

MONDULKIRI'S MILLENIUM OF ELEPHANT KEEPING

The Bunong likely began capturing wild elephants and training them for domestic use about 1,000 years ago when the "art and science of elephant-keeping" began spreading throughout Asia from northwest India, says Richard Lair.

The author of a book published by the United Nations called "Gone Astray: The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity," Lair is convinced the elephant-keeping culture all over Asia is in danger of extinction.

Unbridled development, deforestation and declining mahoutship standards pose the greatest threat to both elephant-keeping cultures and domesticated elephants across the continent, he says.

Ironically, the slow pace of change in Mondulkiri, compared to many other places in the region, and the poor state of its roads could account for why the Bunong elephant-keeping culture has remained intact as long as it has.

With the exception of ecotourist activities, today's domesticated elephants are the same beasts of burden doing the same jobs they've been doing for hundreds of years in Mondulkiri—farming, logging and transporting heavy loads or people long distances.

Although some conservationists and environmentalists are quick to deride elephant trekking, others are more pragmatic about the growing popularity of elephant-related tourist activities.

"If the trek is properly conducted—sound and healthy elephants are selected, they are well-fed and not overworked—then trekking is a good thing. It is certainly easier work for the elephants than the alternative, such as logging," suggests Lair.

The only work elephants are legally permitted to do in Thailand is related to tourists "one way or another," he points out. "Like it or not, it is the way of the future."

If the elephants have already been domesticated "whether they are used to transport tourists or work for the Bunong, I don't believe would make a difference to the long-term occurrence of domesticated elephants in Mondulkiri. In fact using elephants for ecotourism assists these communities in bringing in an income," says Chris Greenwood of the World Wildlife Fund Greater Mekong.

He adds that just this month the international non-governmental organization (NGO) hired an ecotourism coordinator who will be based in Mondulkiri.

THE DISAPPEARING DOMESTICATED ELEPHANT

But several factors are working against the long-term sustainability of elephant trekking in Mondulkiri.

Even though it currently boasts more domesticated elephants than any other province in Cambodia, the number is small and will almost certainly continue to decline.

A 2001 study by Cambodia's Wildlife Protection Office (WPO) concluded that this is inevitable "mainly due to improved roads, a preference for motorized vehicles, bans on wild elephant cap, and an aging domesticated elephant population."

The Bunong believe it is bad luck if one of their elephant cows has a baby (*see The Bunong Elephants*) and therefore do no permit their domesticated elephants to breed. "With no younger animals coming in and the loss of knowledge of how to capture and train (wild) elephants, the cultural heritage associated with (the elephant keeping) way of life is also in decline. It may be that the domesticated elephant will

Elephant trekkers return from an overnight trip to Kbal Preah waterfall arranged by Pech Kiri guesthouse. About 200 to 300 tourists make the trek every year.

disappear from Cambodian culture, except in memory and art," the WPO report warned.

The absence of a nationwide registration system, reasonably priced veterinary support, specific laws protecting domesticated elephants in Cambodia and enforcement of the regulations that are in place only compounds an already bleak situation.

"In theory, it is illegal to kill or (I assume) capture a wild elephant. In practice there is very little 'on the ground' protection," says Nick Marx, animal husbandry specialist for the international NGO WildAid. The organization has rescued several wild elephants, which have had to be taken into captivity for their own protection. The last of these animals was a baby male elephant from Mondulkiri who was taken to Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center near Phnom Penh, notes Marx.

Bunong mahout, Noy Sothy, gives 50-year-old "Phun" a bath. The Bunong people are commonly referred to as the Phnong, but they prefer to be called the Bunong.

IMPROVING MAHOUTSHIP, CARE AND TREATMENT

Few veterinarians survived the violent and turbulent 1970s, which has left a serious shortage of professionals capable of providing good, quality veterinary care for domesticated elephants.

Jack Highwood established a community-based NGO called Elephant Livelihood Initiative Environment (ELIE) in Mondulkiri last year to address that and other gaps.

He says the province lacks even a basic standard of medical care for elephants. Serious injuries and ailments such as wounds, bites and parasitic infections go untreated for long periods of times, which is endangering the lives of Mondulkiri's domestic elephants and threatens the livelihoods of the Bunong.

There is an urgent need for at least two or three trained vets in Mondulkiri, he adds. "I typically see elephants every day of a varied standard of care and condition. There are 28 elephants currently in need of daily medical treatment, 11 of which are severely injured and need hospitalization which cannot be found in Mondulkiri … One elephant died three weeks ago of suspected poisoning."

ELIE does not have the funds to employ a full-time vet, but the NGO has trained two staff members to provide basic first aid to domesticated elephants and also offers advice and assistance to elephant owners and mahouts.

According to Highwood, some of the worst and the best cared for elephants in Mondulkiri are used in tourist trekking and he estimates from six to 11 elephants are used every day for tourism activities.

The standard of mahoutship in Mondulkiri is another issue that must be addressed.

"My understanding from numerous sources (which included) firsthand accounts is that the quality of mahoutship among the (Bunong) is very poor," says Lair.

Mahoutship standards are "a big concern" to Highwood as well. He points out that most mahouts in Mondulkiri are children, teenagers or old men and "a generation gap is preventing knowledge from being passed down."

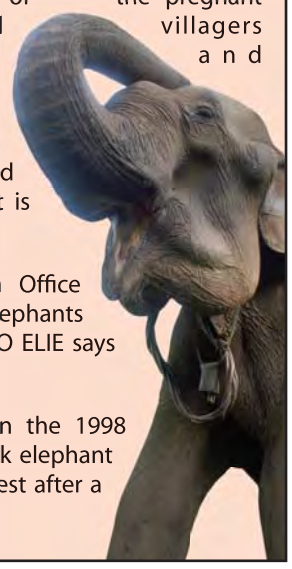
ELIE is currently building a domesticated elephant "rest center," where animals will be able to "rest and recuperate" while they take a break from their usual work, says Highwood. The rest center is being constructed at the site of a future ecotourism project that the NGO expects to get underway in 2008.

—With additional reporting by Chhut Chheana

THE BUNONG ELEPHANTS

• Each Bunong clan is made up of 10 to 35 families and each family in the clan has the right to use any of the clan's elephants. Ownership is passed on from generation to generation which means it is not uncommon for an elephant to belong to three or four generations of a clan at the same time.

• Many of the domesticated elephants in Mondulkiri are extremely old. The Bunong people consider it bad luck if one of their cow elephants gets pregnant so they do not permit their domesticated elephants to breed. If an elephant does get pregnant, the owner of the pregnant elephant often must pay compensation to all villagers by hosting a feast where at least three buffalo and three pigs are sacrificed and huge quantities of rice wine are consumed. The time and cost associated with the parties tends to discourage elephant owners from breeding domesticated elephants even if they do not believe that it is taboo.



• A 2001 study by the Wildlife Protection Office concluded that there were 91 domesticated elephants in Mondulkiri. Jack Highwood of the local NGO ELIE says there are 63 today.

• The final outcome of Mondulkiri voting in the 1998 election was delayed by a day when a lovesick elephant transporting ballot boxes took off into the forest after a wild elephant.

Source: "The Status, Distribution and Management of the Domesticated Asian Elephant in Cambodia."