

by Belinda Stewart-Cox

Making Enemies into Allies

Four years ago, my colleague Jittin Ritthirat and I turned our attention to a little known, woefully neglected wildlife sanctuary called Salakpra, which lies a few kilometers south of the better known UNESCO world heritage site Huai Kha Khaeng, my original “home” in Thailand. I’d not heard of Salakpra until I wrote the world heritage nomination for its more famous neighbor, but I discovered how integral both sites are to Thailand’s largest, most biologi-

cally diverse tract of protected forest, now known as the Western Forest Conservation Complex or WEFCOM.

Salakpra as symbol

Salakpra was the first wildlife sanctuary in Thailand, and is now one of its most distressed. A little over 20 kilometers (about 32 miles) from the provincial capital of Kanchanaburi, it lost some of its best land in the 1970s to the roads, reservoir, and settlements spawned by a

hydroelectric dam. The project blocked the routes of Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) across the river and squeezed 150 to 200 of them into a narrow forest peninsula. As a result, Salakpra became a hotspot of human-elephant conflict. The sanctuary harbors around 10 percent of Thailand’s beleaguered wild elephants – icons of king, country, and Lord Ganesh, the Hindu god of wisdom and success.

When asked why I “switched from the plum to the pudding,” I point out that

A group of wild Indian elephants visits Tha Kradan waterhole. ECN/ZSL





ECN researcher Gip takes a GPS reading, accompanied by a forest ranger on the northern corridor survey. ECN/ZSL

Salakpra was once the pride of Thailand's protected area system but, after years of mismanagement, apathy, and neglect, it is now the shame. Plums turn into pudding if not preserved. Conserving Salakpra in the face of human-elephant conflict requires a huge commitment, collaboration, and sustained effort. Salakpra matters to the local people because it provides the ecosystem services on which their well-being and livelihoods depend, and because it is – or could be – a source of empowerment and pride.

Elephant adversaries

When we began this project in late 2005, wild elephants were the enemies of farmers and forest users. Elephants

raided crops constantly, we were told, causing immense financial damage and risking local lives. People told us they were sick of wildlife organizations, researchers, and government officials collecting information, telling them what they should or shouldn't do, then disappearing. "It's easy for you people," they said with some justification, "you don't have to live with the problem or its impacts."

It's true, we don't. We can walk away whenever we like, but we chose not to.

We adopted five policies from the outset. First, understand the problem. Second, recruit people locally if possible. Third, work collaboratively in collecting data and solving problems. Fourth,

commit to tackling this issue for as long as it takes to facilitate solutions and make ourselves redundant. Fifth, share everything we learn with local and national stakeholders.

To understand what's happening around Salakpra, we trained village monitors to record crop-raiding information, including economic costs. A year later, they also tested crop-protection methods with farmers who were hit hard by elephants. Using satellite photos, we mapped land use around the sanctuary. At the same time, we conducted a socio-economic survey to compare households that are, and are not, upset by elephants. Then, with help from older residents who knew the valley before it was dammed,



(Top): A patch of forest encroaches on elephant habitat in one of the narrow valleys in the northern corridor.
 (Bottom): ECN researchers Jittin Ritthirat and Passanan Boontua take a GPS reading during a forest survey.

we mapped the routes that elephants once used to cross the river. Meantime, we surveyed Salakpra to find out how elephants and people use the forest.

Revising the human/elephant equation

Like the gradual emergence of a jigsaw picture, the pieces of information we gathered revealed a two-sided equation. On one side, elephants do have impacts on people.

Although in this region they seldom injure people, elephants raid their crops. The crop raiding began the year the dam and reservoir inundated the valley. To our surprise, we found that fewer than five percent of households are affected by crop raiding, and that most raids near the sanctuary occurred along the traditional routes elephants took to get water. In other words, the impact of elephants outside the sanctuary is limited in scale and scope.

On the other side of the equation, the story is reversed. Human impacts on elephants and their habitat are widespread and extensive. Local and outside people exploit the forest year-round. Impacts include hunting, logging, cattle-grazing, bamboo cutting, and seasonal foraging of fungi and shoots. There are also human-related dry-season fires that alter the forest and exacerbate crop-raiding. In effect, the problem is a human/human conflict, with elephants caught in the middle, doing what they must to survive.

Changes in attitudes

As soon as we had information to share, we shared it. In the beginning, farmers were hopeful but skeptical, sometimes even hostile. Two years later, we had to hold five meetings back-to-back to accommodate everyone who wanted to join this problem-solving process. We organized the first national workshop on human/elephant conflicts, allowing elephant researchers, community leaders, and project participants from around Thailand came to share information and discuss solutions.

The change in attitude among villagers and local leaders is notable. People no



Members of a community women's group meet to plan alternative livelihoods. ECN/ZSL

longer blame elephants, and they are less hostile to Salakpra. Information, collaboration, and commitment are the reasons for this change of heart. They engender understanding, a sense of inclusion, and feelings of trust, faith and “can do.”

Facilitating action

Our aim now is to reduce the human pressure on elephants and their habitat while also reducing the elephant pressure on farmers. Around Salakpra, we are helping forest users develop occupations that do not depend on forest products and training them in forest restoration techniques. Inside the forest, we are helping Salakpra improve its system of protection, and the wildlife habitat corridor plan we proposed is now part of the government's agenda.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's *Wildlife Without Borders* Asian Elephant Conservation Fund (WWB-ASECF) has been a key aid to these efforts. First, it allowed us to implement the habitat corridor survey. More recently it helped us start the Salakpra Elephant Ecosystem Conservation Alliance, which enables villagers to develop alternative livelihoods and help restore their ecosystem. It is

also funding the training and equipment necessary to improve the sanctuary's patrol system. We think of WWB-ASECF as a firm friend.

We are keen to share our findings and lessons learned with other communities and conservation areas in Kanchanaburi, WEFKOM, Thailand, and other countries in Asia. It takes time, energy and commitment to tackle human/elephant conflicts, but if we can restore the pride of Salakpra and turn its antagonists into friends, we will achieve something worth emulating.

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