

Protection

of the Asian Elephant

There are thought to be fewer than 30,000 Asian elephants in the wild, most of which live in small, fragmented populations. As a result of habitat destruction and poaching, elephant numbers across Southeast Asia are rapidly in decline, with many of these population groups facing extinction. Many elephants are caught and face a life in captivity, either to provide labour for an illegal logging trade which sees them overworked, undernourished and addicted to amphetamines to meet the demands of their employers, or to perform on the streets for tourists as an alternative means of income for their handlers.

Managed, responsible contact has now become necessary for the protection of the Asian elephant and there are many organisations throughout the region that are dedicated to this cause. Friends of the Asian Elephant (FAE) established the world's first elephant hospital in Lampang in northern Thailand in 1993 since when it has treated nearly 2,500 patients. The hospital was also responsible for persuading the government to ban elephants and their mahouts from working in the big cities.

The majority of mahouts have the best intentions for their elephant, having formed a special relationship lasting, in some cases, the whole of the elephant's life. Too often mahouts cannot afford to keep their elephants due to the cost of food and veterinary care and are forced to give up their charge. The Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation has been set up to provide ethical and safe work for such elephants and also to keep a good mahout in employment with his/her elephant. Two places where the work of this foundation can be seen are at the Anantara Resort in northern Thailand and at the neighbouring Four Seasons Tented Camp, under the guidance of elephant conservationist John Roberts. Many of our clients have enjoyed visiting the elephants here and participated in the camp's mahout courses which provide income to support the elephants.

One woman in Thailand has taken elephant conservation a step further. In 1995 K. Lek Chailert established the Elephant Nature Park near Chiang Mai, as a place where elephants no longer work for humans. Instead, a team of full-time staff and park volunteers maintain the park and care for the elephants, of which there are now over 30. These previously abused and neglected creatures are able to live out the rest of their lives in peace and dignity in the beautiful Mae Taeng valley. The elephants are encouraged

to lead as natural a life as possible, roaming free amongst their natural surroundings, bathing in the river when the heat gets too much, frolicking when the moment strikes them, and trumpeting to one another throughout the day and night. The elephants are also able to form their own friendship groups, which include babies whose lively antics are monitored by mothers and attentive aunts, confident young males and those living out a happy retirement.

For the visitor, the emphasis here is on learning about elephants and their behaviour and observing them in their natural surroundings. There are no elephant rides and no stunt shows and the only physical contact visitors have with the elephants is occasionally bathing them. You can visit for the day or volunteer for a longer stay to help out with one of the park's many projects. These range from clearing elephant night shelters to digging elephant mud baths for the hot season. For those who have not had the opportunity to go on safari or trek through the jungles of Borneo, this is probably the closest you will come to seeing elephants in the wild, although a few of our clients have been fortunate enough to spot wild elephants in Thailand's Khao Yai National Park.

One of our favourite elephant sanctuaries is in Peninsular Malaysia. The Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary is located around 90 minutes outside Kuala Lumpur and is fully funded by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks. It was established in 1989 and is the base for the elephant relocation team. The team is dedicated to moving elephants out of areas where their habitat has been encroached by plantations, and into other suitable habitats, such as the Taman Negara National Park. In the past 25 years this team has successfully relocated over 500 wild elephants.

The sanctuary aims to promote public awareness of the plight of the elephant in Malaysia. Visitors are welcomed and can wash, ride and feed the resident elephants. These elephants are used to calm their wild counterparts and make them easier to handle during their time at the centre.

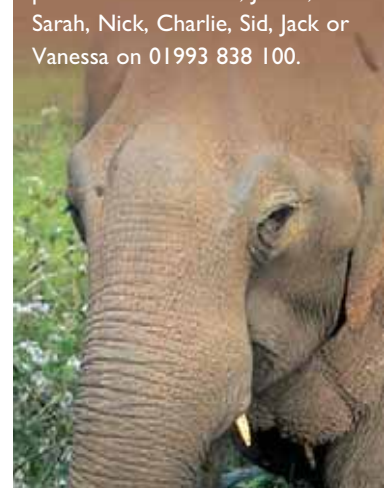
Visiting these sanctuaries is a unique experience and one that directly contributes towards the protection of one of the world's greatest treasures.

Natalie Lewis
Southeast Asia Programme Manager

Natalie Lewis,
Southeast Asia
Programme Manager,
discusses the plight of
the Asian elephant and
reveals what efforts
are being undertaken
to protect this species.

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Southeast Asia incorporating a visit to any of these sanctuaries starts from £1,750 per person. For details please contact Simon, James, Sarah, Nick, Charlie, Sid, Jack or Vanessa on 01993 838 100.



To learn more about the Elephant Nature Foundation and how you can help please visit www.elephantnaturefoundation.org