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ELEPHANTS UNDER THREAT IN LAOS

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Laos was known as Muong Lan Xang Hom Khao or the "Land of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol" in the fourteenth century when it was founded. It was first called "Laos" by the French when they annexed it to their Far Eastern Empire in the last century. Today Laos, with a total land area of about 236,800 km² is estimated to have not more than 4,000 elephants in the wild and about 850 animals in captivity. One of the legacies of the Indo-China war is the ready availability of guns and firearms. Today, it is estimated that there are nearly 1.2 guns per mile in this strategic, land-locked, innocuous, little Buddhist country of 4 million people (Martin, 1992). Between 1990 and 1992, about 50 elephants had been killed by poachers for their tusks, skin and meat (Vientiane Mai, 1992). These killings occurred mostly in the Nam Theun area in the Khammouane province in central Laos. The killings of elephants were attributed to some poachers who crossed into Laos from neighbouring Vietnam (Vientiane, Mai, 1992). (Some of the poachers who were caught red-handed by the Laotian authorities turned out to be Vietnamese nationals!). At over 400,000 ha Nakai Plateau/Nam Theun is by far the largest proposed protected area in Laos with Vietnam as its eastern boundary (Salter *et al.*, 1991). This area has a known resident population of elephants, and is inhabited largely by Lao Loum and Lao Theung ethnic groups who practise slash and burn agriculture. Price of unworked raw ivory is about US\$ 50 per kg. Ivory carvers in Vientiane and Luang Prabang using hand tools carve out small souvenirs such as Buddha pendants from ivory for sale to tourists (Martin, 1992). Most of the tourists are from Thailand and the problem will only be exacerbated if the proposed plan to build a bridge (with Australian aid) across the Mekong river, linking Thailand to Laos goes ahead! Laos needs international assistance (mainly funds and equipment) to improve the protection of almost all the proposed conservation areas. Arresting the illegal trade in wildlife across its border with China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam will not be easy. It is recommended that Laos becomes a party to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). A British historian once casually remarked that "Laos is like the Cheshire cat. One minute it's there, the next it has disappeared; and sometimes, while you're watching, it begins to fade, until there's nothing left but the smile - the Lao smile" (Field, 1965). If poachers are allowed to ply their trade with impunity in Laos, then only the White Parasol will be left!

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