

Supporting Wild Elephant Conservation, Sustaining Laos' Pride and Culture

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Xayabouly Province once again hosted the Elephant Festival on the 14. and 15. of February 2009, which drew thousands of visitors from many places around the country and from other counties across the region.

The Elephant Festival is an event that brings together domestic elephants from five districts in Xayabouly Province. This year there were 60 elephants. The festival consists of a number of events such as the "Xayabouly Cultural Procession"; "Baci Ceremony" – which is a ceremony to celebrate a special event, whether a marriage, a homecoming, a welcome, a birth, or one of the annual festivals; and "Elephant of the Year Procession" – which included the healthy and good looking elephant contest.

The festival aims to raise awareness of Asian elephants, which are recognized as an endangered species globally, their important role in the history and culture of Laos, and to promote national tourism that can generate income and help conserve domestic elephants.

In Laos domestic elephants have been used in the logging industry for decades. Even though today logging is not dependant on elephants as much as it was in the past, elephants are still needed in places that machinery cannot access.

Today the Lao government tries to shift elephants from hazardous work to tourism industry. Xayabouly Province has been selected to conduct activities that need continuous promotion and accommodate a number of domestic elephants from around the country.

"Asian elephants are under threat," said Dr. Lien Thikeo the Governor of Xayabouly Province in his opening speech at the festival. "This festival helps explain to Lao people and the new

generation why we need to conserve elephants and allow them to live with us forever," he said.

WWF participated in the Elephant Festival to address the important link between wild elephants and domestic elephants. "There are less healthy bulls in captivity, they need to breed with wild bulls," said Khamkhoun Khounboline, National Species Coordinator.

Nowadays domestic elephant populations mostly rely on wild elephants for breeding. Generally domestic elephants are worked hard and receive poor health care, resulting in poor condition. As a result, there are few healthy domestic bulls, reducing the chances to breed amongst domestic elephants. "Whenever wild populations are disturbed it is absolutely going to effect domestic populations," he added.

"Domestic elephants are separately used in different working areas so I have to leave my female elephant in the jungle and let her breed with wild elephants" said a 54 years old mahout from Thongmixay District. She will come back to her owner within a month or so depending on how soon she can find a wild bull, the mahout explained.

The festival was also a good opportunity for WWF to provide information on the human-elephant conflict to people. Protecting wild elephants is not only about survival of the wild population and conserving biodiversity, but also about sustaining the domestic ones, securing local livelihoods, and preserving the culture of Laos, the National Species Coordinator added.

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