

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN THAILAND

Thailand : the Ecological Crossroads of Southeast Asia

Thailand, because of its unique position as the link between the Indochinese and Malay Peninsula, has an amazingly rich and varied native fauna. Many species of birds, mammals and reptiles from the cool, drier climes of northern Asia reach their southern most limit in Thailand; similarly, a large number of species from the hot, moist tropics find their northern most suitable habitat in Thailand. The Asian elephant, tiger, leopard and clouded leopard, kouprey, gaur, Javan and Sumatran rhinoceros, wild water buffalo, several species of langur, white-handed and pileated gibbons, Malayan tapir, sarus crane, many species of hornbills and five species of marine turtles are just a small part of Thailand's beautiful and exotic native fauna.

History and Legislation

For many centuries, humans lived at this ecological crossroads with the resident fauna with little effect on wildlife populations. Pre-technological human societies were small land concentrated in the most accessible areas of suitable agricultural land. Wildlife was protected by virtue of man's low numbers, use of primitive weapons and the inaccessibility of most wildlife habitat. With the advent of modern technology in the twentieth century, Thailand's human population has increased greatly. Following World War II, sophisticated land clearing equipment, allterrain vehicles and automatic weapons became available, and were focused on Thailand's vast wilderness. Previously inaccessible wildlife habitat was cleared for lumber and put to agricultural production of cash crops. Wildlife was hunted excessively to satisfy increasing international market demands.

By the middle of this century, it had become obvious to many that without legal protection, Thailand would lose its once rich natural heritage. Through the efforts of concerned Thai citizens and legislators, backed by the influence of some Thai conservation societies, Thailand's first environmental law, The Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act, was passed on December 26, 1960. Until now Wildlife Reservation and Protection Act B.E. 2535 (1992) was legislated on February 19, 1992 to take place The Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act B.E. 2504. The Act provided for the establishment of lists of reserved and protected wild animals limited hunting, controlled trade in wild animal products, allowed for the

preservation of wildlife habitat and provided for the creation of the Wildlife Conservation Division within the Royal Forest Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

The list reserved wild animals generated by the act includes 15 species, which are considered extremely rare and in danger of extinction (some in fact, may already be extinct).

Reserved Wild Animals

1. White-eyed River-Martin	<u>Pseudochelidon sirintarae</u>
2. Javan Rhinoceros	<u>Rhinoceros sondaicus</u>
3. Sumatran Rhinoceros	<u>Didermocerus sumatraensis</u>
4. Kouprey	<u>Bos sauveli</u>
5. Wild Water Buffalo	<u>Bubalus bubalis</u>
6. Eld's Deer	<u>Cervus eldi</u>
7. Schomburgk's Deer	<u>Cervus schomburgki</u>
8. Serow	<u>Capricornis sumatraensis</u>
9. Goral	<u>Naemorhedus griseus</u>
10. Gurney's Pitta	<u>Pitta gurneyi</u>
11. Sarus Crane	<u>Grus antigone</u>
12. Marbled Cat	<u>Pardofelis marmorata</u>
13. Malayan Tapir	<u>Tapirus indicus</u>
14. Fea's Barking Deer	<u>Muntiacus feai</u>
15. Dugong	<u>Dugong dugon</u>

Hunting, collecting or keeping in captivity of these 15 species is forbidden, except by the special permission of the Royal Forest Department.

Protected species may not be in immediate danger of extinction, but are protected to prevent their becoming so. These species cannot be hunted, collected or kept in possession without the permission of the Royal Forest Department. But such permission is only granted in strict accordance with the act, except species allowed to be bred in captivity as follow:

1. Mammals : sambar deer, mouse deer, barking deer, hog deer, shot-tailed macaca and small civet

2. Birds : all pheasants in Family Phasianidae, black-cooled Starling, Red-whiskered Bulbul. Common Myna, Lesser Whistling-Duck (Lesser Treeduck)

3. Reptiles : Python spp., Crocodylus spp.

4. Amphibians : Rana blythii

A large system of wildlife sanctuaries and non-hunting areas has been established throughout the country. As result of the Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act.

About one year after the passage of the Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act B.E. 2504 (1960) the National Parks Act was passed by the Thai government. This law provided for further protection of natural habitats for the benefit of the public, through education and tourism. At present the total amount of wildlife habitat protected by these two acts, in the form of wildlife sanctuaries, non-hunting area and national parks, equals almost 9 % of Thailand's total land area.

Projects in Wildlife Conservation

The Wildlife Conservation Division and the National Parks Division are involved in many projects in wildlife conservation. Public environmental education and extension are considered critical to the preservation of wildlife and habitat. Only through the support of an informed and concerned citizenry can Thailand hope to preserve what remind of its dwindling natural heritage and resources. Wildlife Conservation Development and Extension Centers (Nature and Wildlife Interpretation Center former name) have been established in several sanctuaries and protected areas around the country. Captive Breeding Centers have been set up to study the feasibility of raising and eventually releasing several rare species of wildlife: several of the centers are Royal Initiated Projects of Thailand's Monarchy.

The Wildlife Conservation Division is continually involved in research; recent examples include elephant and marine turtle censusing projects. Programs involving captive breeding and reintroduction of the locally extirpated eastern sarus crane and white winged wood duck are being conducted with international support. The Wildlife Conservation Division also encourages foreign academic research projects in Thailand's protected areas; two longterm projects have studied gibbon and macaque ecology.

Enforcing the Act

Enforcement of Thailand's environmental laws is a critical concern. Poaching is a serious problem threatening many species of wildlife; high market values for some types of wildlife and

wildlife products tempt many people into illegal hunting and trading of endangered species. Widescale clearing of protected habitat and the slash and burn agricultural practices of nomadic cultivators, for instance, the hill tribe peoples of the North, indirectly destroy wildlife by destroying their natural habitats. Each sanctuary, park and non-hunting area has a staff assigned to the suppressing of these threats; violators may be subject to fines or jail terms. Conflicts with other government agencies over the use of natural resources also occur, for instance, in the selection of dam and reservoir sites. Wildlife conservation often takes a backseat to economic development in government decisions.

On January 12, 1983, Thailand became a signatory nation of CITES. In accordance with the convention, inspection stations have been established at the Bangkok International Airport and seaport, and at other points of exit to control exports of protected wildlife and wild animal products.

Hope for the Future

There is growing concern in Thailand today that the country's rich natural heritage is being lost to short-sighted development schemes. Through the efforts of the Thai government's wildlife conservation forces, together with private local and international environmental organizations, progress is being made. New wildlife sanctuaries, nonhunting areas and national parks are being designated each year; research and public environmental awareness programs are helping to turn the tide of environmental destruction in Thailand. While some of the region's wildlife have been irrevocably lost, there is new hope that species which remain can be preserved for the future, and that parts of Thailand will always be wild.

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