



FIELD NOTES

Bigger than the Moment

By Matthew Coomer (University of Montana) | July 14, 2011

(All photos by Matthew Coomer)

Saying elephants are large animals is like saying the sun is bright: even though you're explicitly stating the obvious, sometimes it just slips out. Though I mixed it up with synonyms, I must've said, "Elephants are so [insert varied adjective for big]!" several times during my first stay at the Elephant Nature Park. Being near these animals in person, rather than from a zoo - managed distance, makes one forget things like diction. Elephants are simply too interesting and strange to focus on anything else.

As tall as a one story house and as wide as a car, elephants are awesome in the truest, awe - involved sense of the word. They move like lumbering, stiff legged horses much of the time, sauntering around their environment and foraging for the tastiest grasses. When they're upset or a baby feels threatened though, as the youngsters at the park did at one point, they can kick into overdrive and achieve an unlikely gait approaching 25 kilometers



per hour. These instances are rare here, as the elephants at the park are remarkably calm and well-adjusted considering their past: outside of the babies, all were rescued from abusive situations. From being forced to work terrible hours in urban environments and illegal logging operations to enduring extreme physical abuse, their back story's read like unbelievable soap opera tragedies. Though the park can't offer them a return to the wild yet, it guarantees a much better life than anything they've had before. Here, they finally know peace, love, and freedom. As a result, one could easily spend days watching the park's elephants eat, amble, and interact; there's a tranquility to these animals and this place that begs long, meditative viewing sessions.

The park sits in an open part of the lush Mae Taeng valley, with a river and the forested mountains of Northern Thailand surrounding it. Though elephants would naturally choose more forested areas like the mountains themselves, the park's herd doesn't seem to mind the change of scenery. Through the Elephant Nature Foundation, they receive round the clock care from a full-time staff and thousands of volunteers annually. Most volunteers, people from



around the world who pay to live and work at the park, don't seem to mind the change of scenery either.



Despite the differences between them in age, background, and lifestyle, it seemed the volunteers were friendly and warm with everyone around them. It was as if the elephant's social spirit was imbued in each person through being here and united behind a common goal. Two women were in their extended fourth week at the park; neither could bear to leave each time their end approached. Another had been taking voluntourism vacations for years, including a Gibbon rescue right before her arrival, but had still never seen anything like the park. Everyone mentioned learning about the Elephant Nature Foundation and its founder Lek, then feeling a pull towards the cause. I knew their feelings exactly: a text page describing both was enough to originally commit me to this experience. The park on its own is spectacular and when coupled

with Lek, it becomes near transcendental.

Short in stature but with a smile, energy, and dedication as big as one of the pachyderms, Lek has dedicated her life to rescuing Thailand's Asian elephant. She grew up in a small mountain village and developed a close bond with her family's elephant, a devotion she followed into tourism work.



As she learned more about the rampant abuse and mistreatment of the industry's animals, Lek became determined to create a better life for elephants within her homeland. Today, she runs the foundation and park with a near boundless reserve of energy. That she's still beaming and down for a chat, even after a ten-hour plus day, shows the passion that drives her work. To see her out and interacting with the elephants is to witness magic, pure and simple.

We'd done several photo shoots with distant elephants to promote a new wildlife filmmaking program, but Lek thought we could do better. She wanted the elephants close, within 20 feet of her subjects, and was sure it was doable. That I was one of her subjects made me nervous. That the elephants she wanted turned out to be a family group, with two young babies, made me terrified.

Anything construed as threatening to the babies could result in us getting trampled by unstoppable adults; my mental pictures didn't end well. Once we were in place and fresh fruit had lured the elephants however, she allayed all of my fears. The animals were calm and unbothered by our close presence with her. The babies, skittish by nature, lit up as she came around, one coming nearer to romp with Lek in the tall grasses. I watched the pair playing in front



of me and was in awe of their bond. Witnessing such a joyful exchange, I couldn't help but grin. That moment and this work feel so much bigger than who I am and anything I'd ever expected. In the midst of their frolic, Lek asked me why I'd come and what I wanted to do. I told her that I'd come after being inspired by her story and reading about the park. And then, with a mile wide grin and full heart, I said, "This work that we're doing, right now with the elephants, is exactly what I want to do." I meant those words more than anything I've ever said.