

Placement Report:

My placement to Thailand to work with the hill tribes and work with abused and neglected elephants enhanced my understanding of international ecology and broadened my understanding of foreign wildlife conservation efforts.

My time at the elephant park, working with abused, neglected and injured elephants that had been used part of the illegal logging trade, road side spectacles, circus performances and kept as pets. My time at the park showed how hard the sanctuary work and how much effort they put into conserving and rescuing them. We were taught how many elephants were left in the mountains and forests of Chiang Mai and how many had been taken from their mothers and broken until they were tamed.

The sanctuary's aim was to rehabilitate elephants that were abused and used for human purposes, caring for them and giving them back some of their independence and allowing them to live in a more natural setting. The sanctuary protects them by buying them off of their owners, removing them from the logging industries, trading, circuses and road side shows, by placing them either at the sanctuary or within a protected area up in the hills of Chiang Mai.

The work that myself and the team I was working with were extremely motivated to succeed in every task that was assigned to us. We pushed ourselves to our limits, we could not have worked so hard without the motivation from the leadership and management staff, who continuously supported us and kept reminding us of how our work would be benefiting those around us, there were times that we could have given up, when we were hot and tired, but we kept each other motivated and I feel that it created a great group dynamic that increased our ability to work as a team.

My days at the elephant sanctuary in Chiang Mai, were filled with animal husbandry, caring for the elephants, sorting out feeds, keeping their night enclosures clean and keeping the park and sanctuary ground area clean, keeping the animals themselves healthy, making sure that they are washed down in order to remove any ticks, parasites or insects that could be potentially harmful.

Preparing their feeds included, corn cutting (giving me experience with different vegetation cutting tools, including machetes, shears and loppers) and preparing the shoots, creating rice balls, which include vitamin supplements for the older elephants and a healthy varied diet of many different fruits and vegetables.

My tasks included helping visitors, interacting with the public, whilst learning social and leadership skills, improving my team working ability, interacting with elephants, learning how to behave around them.

We were taught how to identify different elephants by their markings, ear and head shape, how to tell how old they were and which elephants were in a family group. We learnt how an elephant's family dynamic worked and how they interacted with each other and others around them, and how they influenced the environment.

I learnt animal husbandry and animal welfare, through spending my days with the elephants and their mahouts (the person that they have bonded with and spend all day with, and makes sure the elephants are alright at all times).

This taught me that communication was key when working with such large animals, and that vigilance and care was needed when around them. We were taught that these animals needed to be treated with respect and dignity (especially as the elephant is the sacred animal of Thailand).

The park aimed to be extremely green and environmentally friendly, continuously planting trees and building out of natural materials, and focused heavily on conserving water and not producing any waste.

I enjoyed interacting with the members of the public and teaching them about the sanctuary and recounting to them all the different stories that the elephants at the park came with, teaching them how neglected and abused elephants were trained using hooks, that broke the elephants spirit, and how riding camps were not an ethical or humane activity, showing how detrimental taking an animal from its natural habitat can be for the animal itself and the species as a whole.

I also enjoyed working with elephants at such an up close and personal level, getting to know each elephant, their personalities and their stories. Broadening my understanding of how complex these animals really were.

The experience of working with elephants and shadowing the seasoned park rangers was very physically and emotionally demanding, with long hours, little breaks and a very warm climate, this built up to difficult and tiring days. However, the fact that it was so tiring, taught me the importance of perseverance and dedication, as by the end of my placement, I learnt how much of a difference one sanctuary and their supporters can make to the welfare and conservation of a species.

This experience has influenced my career and personal plans, and it has shown me how much good can come of hard work and dedication, how being so involved and getting so close to a species on a personal level can be so effective and emotive to do more work for them.

I was always more focused on working with large carnivorous mammals, now working with the elephants has shown me that some species may benefit from human intervention and interaction, but putting animals in a sanctuary should always be a last resort, as it is always better to prevent the need of a protected park, than try and put the issue right after it has happened. The work that is being done at the National Elephant Park is amazing work and the welfare of the elephants is always their priority, but witnessing what the animals had gone through before coming to the park, I feel that their distress should have been prevented before they needed the sanctuary. So now I have decided that I want to move into a career path that prevents the endangerment of species instead of trying to conserve them once they have already been put in danger.