

Wildlife Field Research and Conservation Training Agreement for Thailand

In many parts of Southeast Asia, deforestation has resulted in the fragmentation and loss of wildlife habitats (Laurance & Bierregaard, 1997). Wildlife species which were previously widespread and rare endemics with limited ranges alike are fast becoming limited to habitat remnants which are reduced in size, threatened by human encroachment from the outside, and subjected to unsustainable levels of hunting, resource extraction and other disturbances from within. As an example of this trend, Thailand lost 50% of its forest cover in the 30 years between 1961 and 1991 (ARBHABHIRAMA *ET AL.*, 1988; COLLINS *ET AL.*, 1991) and the Kingdom now ranks in the top twelve countries for numbers of threatened mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians (GROOMBRIDGE, 1992). On a positive note, Thailand is striving to preserve wildlife by maintaining an impressive array of over 150 protected areas; national parks wildlife sanctuaries and non-hunting areas which cover around 15% of the land area (DEARDEN, 1996). Unique to Southeast Asia, all Thai protected areas are supported by permanent paid staff who live and work inside them.

On the face of it Thailand's network of protected reserves look good. But a closer look on the ground shows that wildlife species in many of Thailand's forests are still threatened by unsustainable levels of hunting and capture for local and international trade, and by the disturbance and loss of their habitats via cutting and burning in the protected areas. Clearly, circling areas on maps and building guard posts is not sufficient to solve the problems. Park and sanctuary staff need training to understand their responsibilities, and know how to document, protect and monitor remnant wildlife populations. The New York based Wildlife Conservation Society (also known as WCS) is working with the Royal Forest Department in this area.

In 1996, the Royal Thai Forest Department invited Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, then WCS Director for Asia Programs, to train 25 junior staff of wildlife sanctuaries in techniques of wildlife research and conservation. The training was made possible by a generous donation from Texaco Foundation USA. Using a training text developed by Dr. Rabinowitz, "Wildlife Field Research and Conservation Training Manual" (RABINOWITZ, 1993), the first training course was held at Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary in July 1996. The course took the trainees through a wide range of material, starting with the theoretical and practical aspects of navigation, through observing and documenting wildlife, measuring and quantifying wildlife habitats, identifying wildlife sign, and finally, techniques for assessing and documenting the status and distribution of wildlife. Following this first training, the WCS - Thailand Program further developed this basic training curriculum, and provided three more courses for staff of national parks, marine national parks, and wildlife sanctuaries. The curriculum combines short intensive classroom lectures followed by field demonstrations of techniques, challenging field exercises to reinforce concepts taught in class, and a comprehensive assessment for trainees based on exams, practical tests and quizzes. A team comprising local Thai and Thailand-based WCS staff, and US-based trainers was formed to conduct the training. By late 1998, over 100 staff of the Royal Thai Forest Department had been trained using the curriculum.

As a measure of acceptance of the basic training program, and to ensure its continuity and development, in October 1998 Dr. Plodprasop Suraswadi, Director-General of the Royal Forest Department requested the drafting of a Memorandum of Understanding with the WCS – Thailand Country Program. On 29th December 1998, WCS Director of Science, Asia, Dr. Alan Rabinowitz, and Thailand Country Coordinator, Dr. Tony Lynam met briefly with the Director-General and attended a ceremony to formalize a MOU with senior forestry officials. The scope of the three-year training MOU includes the following;

- continuation of the basic training program for junior field staff in protected areas
- training in planning and wildlife management for senior protected area staff
- the possibility of advanced training in special techniques e.g. tiger survey training, and training of forest guards
- all aspects of training will be coordinated with the RFD Training and Foreign Forestry Affairs Divisions
- translation and publication of the training manual in Thai language. The training manual is now available from the WCS and the Seub Nakasathien Foundation.
- recruitment of RFD trainers to continue the basic training program
- the possibility for using Thailand as a base for regional training of wildlife staff from neighbouring countries using WCS training curricula
- the Khao Yai Training Centre, a facility constructed with funds from DANCED, will be used as the site for field based training courses.

For 30 years the Wildlife Conservation Society has worked with the Royal Thai Forest Department in designing protected areas, biodiversity conservation, and autecological studies, but the relationship was never formally recognized. The signing of this agreement marks a commitment on the part of the Thai government to develop the capacity of Royal Forest Department staff to document, monitor and conserve the biodiversity contained in parks and sanctuaries. It also signifies for the first time recognition on the part of the government of a solid partnership with WCS in working to save Thailand's wildlife.

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