

We know ROCKY.  We know SMALL DOGS.™

Meet ROCKY's friends. >



Discovery STORE  SHOP NOW

Discovery Channel  
TLC  
Animal Planet  
Travel Channel  
Discovery Health

► Site Index

# animalplanet.com

Search



August 18, 2010

## Animal Planet Feature

### Safari Special: Elephant Rescue



#### Thai Elephants

#### Beyond Beast of Burden: Elephants in Thai Culture

By Wendee Holtcamp

In war and peace, Asian elephants have been a talisman to Thailand for thousands of years. Smaller and gentler than their African counterparts, they were well-suited for carrying kings or cargo. Young elephants were caught wild, trained in camps, and taught to work with people and respond to commands.

Not just beasts of burden, elephants were greatly loved and honored. Their image was emblazoned on the nation's (Siamese) flag, coins and Buddhist temples, representing strength, wisdom and victory. The king rode atop an elephant at the front of royal ceremonial processions.

"The elephant has so much importance in Thai history," says Sangduen Chailert, founder of the Elephant Nature Park. "They saved our kingdom by helping our military to fight wars." When Thailand was called Siam, the country used elephants in warfare against neighboring Burma, like precursors to modern-day tanks.

✉ Send to a friend

🖨 Printer-friendly



#### Ele-Fact

The Asian elephant is the largest land mammal in Asia, measuring 18 to 20 feet from head to tail, standing 8 to 9 feet tall from shoulder to foot and

#### Advertisement



Vote for your favorite.

The park with the most votes will receive \$100,000.



Colorful paintings show warriors charging into battle atop tusked elephants.

weighing about 3 tons.

At the turn of the 20th century, elephants were practically everywhere. Some 300,000 wild elephants roamed wild in Thailand alone, and 100,000 more were domesticated for farming and forestry. Each elephant enjoyed a special relationship with its trainer, or *mahout*.

As logging increased, wild elephant numbers declined sharply. Domesticated elephant power was used to drag teak logs from the forest, demolishing the creatures' own habitat. By the late 1900s, Thailand's rain forest, which previously covered 90 percent of the country, had diminished to under 15 percent, with an estimated 1,500 to 3,000 wild elephants. In 1990, Thailand outlawed logging to preserve what forest remained. The law left thousands of domesticated elephants out of work, with no forest to return to.

Elephants still play an important role in Thai culture. "The old Thai people really respect and believe the elephant is a magic animal," says Chailert. "For the new generation, the elephant is less important." To reverse the trend, she speaks at schools and universities about elephants, inspiring hope that they may again approach their former stature — in people's eyes and in the natural world.



NEXT >

Pictures: Sakchai Lalit/AP | Richard Vogel/AP | Apichart Weerawong/AP |

[Discovery Channel](#) | [TLC](#) | [Animal Planet](#) | [Discovery Health](#) | [Science Channel](#) | [Planet Green](#)  
[Discovery Kids](#) | [Military Channel](#) | [Discovery News](#) | [Investigation Discovery](#) | [HD Theater](#) | [Turbo](#) |  
[FitTV](#)

[HowStuffWorks](#) | [TreeHugger](#) | [Petfinder](#) | [PetVideo](#) | [Discovery Education](#)

Visit the [Discovery Store](#): [Toys & Games](#) | [Telescopes](#) | [DVD Sets](#) | [Planet Earth DVD](#) | [Gift Ideas](#)

By visiting this site, you agree to the terms and conditions  
of our [Visitor Agreement](#). Please read. [Privacy Policy](#).

ATTENTION! We recently updated our privacy policy. The changes are effective as of September  
10, 2008.

To see the new policy, [click here](#). Questions? See the policy for the contact information.

Copyright © 2010 [Discovery Communications, LLC](#).

The leading global real-world media and entertainment company.