



# The Elephant Whisperer

LINDA VERGNANI REPORTS FROM SURIN, N.E. THAILAND, ON THE LATEST RESCUE MISSION OF 'LEK' CHAILERT, 'MOTHER THERESA OF THE ELEPHANTS'. THE THAI ANIMAL CHAMPION IS INTRODUCING ECOTOURISTS TO A NEW PACHYDERM PARK.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The gentle intelligence of Asian elephants shines out in this giant's soft eye



Two kilometres of tables, laden with melons, pumpkin, corn and other bounty line the streets of Surin as excited crowds gather for the annual Elephant Buffet in November.

Mahouts urge their charges down the road and suddenly the city centre is filled with 240 elephants. Tall bulls with impressive tusks, ebullient adolescents and cows with squealing calves shackled to them lollop on soft feet towards the tables.

Bristly trunks reach out and grab select morsels: curling around ripe watermelons; encircling bunches of turnip-like root vegetables; snuffling beneath the tables for fallen bananas. When their elephants are sated, the mahouts ride up to a stand being run by a diminutive woman with a radiant, broad-cheeked face. She and a team of international volunteers hand each mahout a green “care package”.

The woman is Sangduen “Lek” Chailert, founder of the Elephant Nature Foundation, whose remarkable work in rescuing and rehabilitating abused elephants has earned her the title, “Mother Theresa of the Elephants”.

Her foundation is dedicated to saving the elephants of Thailand and ensuring animals in captivity are treated humanely.

“We used to have 100,000 elephants in Thailand and now there are just 3,000. We need to protect them,” Chailert tells me. The packages handed out by the team are part of her campaign to win

over the mahouts and persuade them to treat their charges better. “I want to build a bridge of friendship with them.”

She is educating mahouts to train and control elephants with positive rewards, rather than the old-fashioned method, which includes painful jabs to the head with traditional elephant hooks.

Surin was once famous for its wild elephant hunters, who captured, broke in and sold elephants to loggers and farmers in Thailand and surrounding countries. Now with forest replaced by farmland, most of Surin’s remaining elephants are chained and used as beasts of burden.

Chailert was invited to Surin to assist the provincial government to establish a sustainable tourism initiative in its new 809-hectare elephant reserve. The governor has urged the owners of 300 street elephants, mainly used for begging in the cities, to bring them “home” to the forested sanctuary.

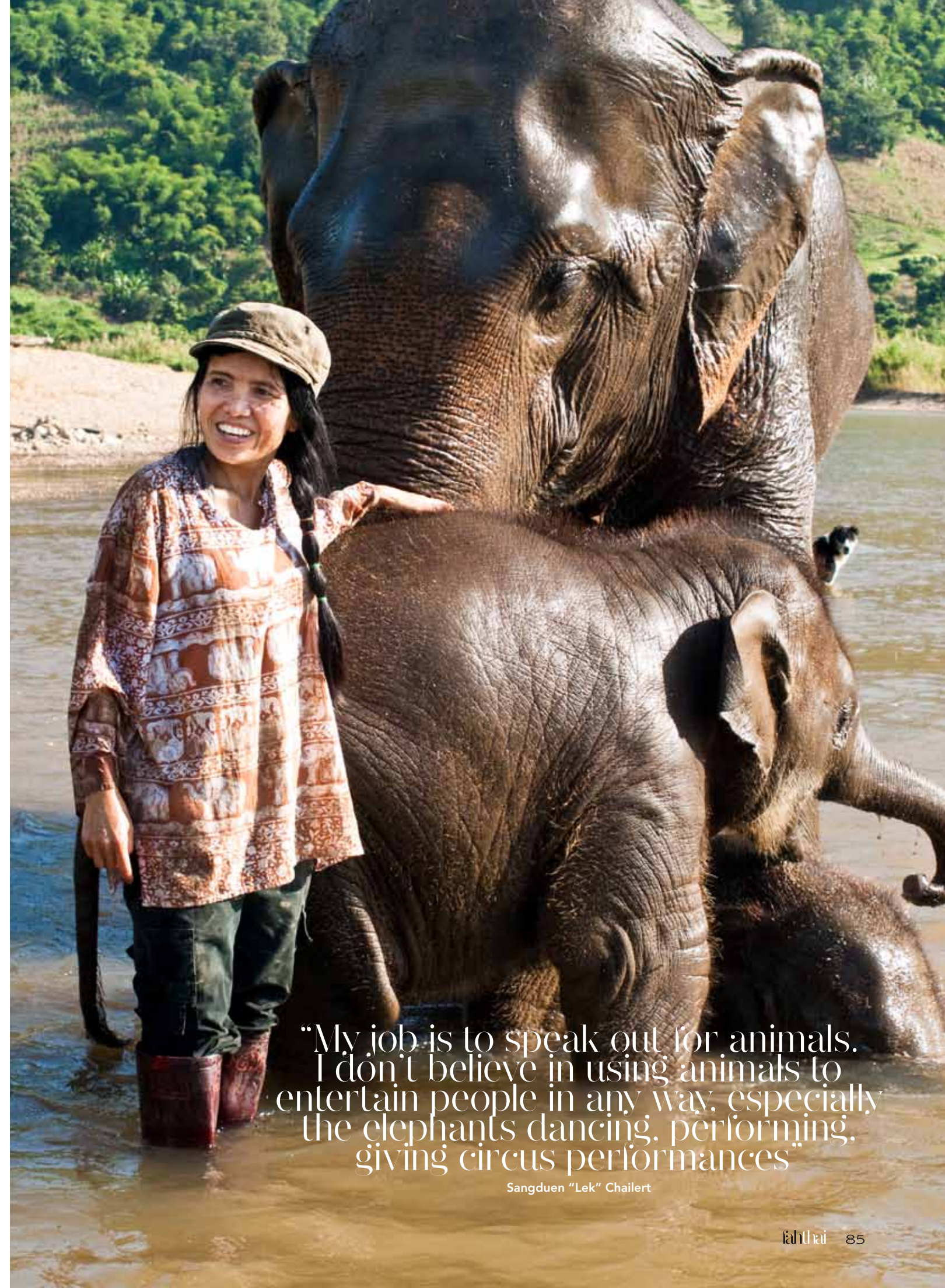
Named a “Hero of Asia” by *Time* magazine for her conservation efforts, Chailert says she is delighted the Surin government has decided to improve the lives of elephants.

“They want us to help them start up a world-class sanctuary. I have come here because I want them to manage the elephants in a sustainable way.”

The foundation has begun a pilot project where money paid by international volunteers is helping to provide an alternative income for mahouts prepared >

ณ งานโต๊ะจีนช้าง จังหวัดสุรินทร์ ผลไม้นานาชนิดวางกองอยู่บนโต๊ะที่เรียงไปตามถนนในเมืองยาว 2 กิโลเมตร มีช้างกว่า 240 เชือกมาร่วมงานนี้ และเมื่อเหล่าช้างนี้ได้อิ่มหนำแล้ว ความรู้ต่างก็ได้รับข้อเสนอการดูแลช้างจากผู้หญิงตัวเล็กท่านๆหนึ่ง

คุณเล็ก แสงเดือน ชัยเลิศ เป็นผู้ก่อตั้งศูนย์บริบาลช้างไทย เพื่อช่วยเหลือช้างที่ถูกทารุณกรรมและดูแลให้ช้างได้รับการปฏิบัติอย่างเหมาะสม โดยทางศูนย์ฯและทีมงานจะให้ความรู้กับ ความรู้ช้างถึงการสอนช้างด้วยวิธีการให้รางวัล แทนที่ การบังคับช้างด้วยวิธีใช้เคียวจะไปที่หัวช้าง



“My job is to speak out for animals. I don’t believe in using animals to entertain people in any way, especially the elephants dancing, performing, giving circus performances”

Sangduen “Lek” Chailert

PHOTO: LINDA VERGNANI

# We are working to get elephants off the street, off their chains and into their natural habitat

to move their elephants into the reserve. The owners want to continue making a living from these valuable animals so they will not simply release them into the wild.

Currently the project operates for just a week every month, when volunteer groups come to Surin to assist mahouts in caring for the elephants. The forest in the reserve needs to regenerate, so the volunteers help grow and harvest food crops for the animals.

Jeff Smith, manager of the foundation's Surin Project, says: "We are working with the provincial government and the local people to get elephants off the street, off their chains and into their natural habitat. Our volunteers are building a new home for these elephants."

The Surin Project draws from the experience of Chailert's highly successful

Elephant Nature Park, near Chiang Mai. Officials from Surin have already visited the reserve to discover how it works.

In this verdant park, more than 30 abused or disabled elephants – rescued from logging camps and street begging – today graze in small family herds. Among them is an elephant whose foot was blown off by a landmine, along with another who was blinded with a slingshot by a mahout after it raided a vegetable garden.

The park mahouts use positive reinforcement to manage the animals. Chailert is training some of the baby elephants born here with rewards and gentle talk to demonstrate that these methods really work. She radiates a calm joy when she is with her beloved elephants.

Visiting the park, an hour's drive from Chiang Mai, I watch >

ปัจจุบัน ศูนย์คชศึกษาได้เริ่มโครงการทดลองให้ความรู้ช้างนำช้างของตนเข้ามาอยู่ในศูนย์ฯ แทนที่จะไปร่อนเร่อยู่ตามถนน ช้างที่อยู่ที่นี่จะถูกลูกสอนอย่างมีนวัตด้วยวิธีการให้รางวัลเมื่อทำถูกต้อง และนอกจากช้างเร่ร่อนแล้วทางศูนย์คชศึกษายังดูแลช้างที่ถูกทารุณและช้างพิการกว่า 30 เชือกอีกด้วย

คุณแสงเดือนกล่าวว่าช้างก็เหมือนคนที่ต้องการให้ปฏิบัติตัวอย่างอ่อนโยน ในทางกลับกันพวกมันจะได้เรียนรู้วิธีการปฏิบัติอย่างอ่อนโยนต่อคน เธอผูกพันกับช้างตั้งแต่อายุ 5 ปี และตัดสินใจจะตั้งศูนย์บริบาลช้างขึ้นหลังจากเห็นช้างลากซุงที่ถูกทรมาน คุณแสงเดือนซื้อช้างตัวแรกในปี พ.ศ. 2545 และเริ่มโครงการรักษาพยาบาลช้างและความรู้ช้างโดยไม่คิดค่าใช้จ่าย



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Highly sociable, elephants constantly touch each other with their trunks

Chailert sitting on the ground of a stall, singing lullabies to wrinkly baby Pha Mai. The youngster, who was born at the park, stands swaying above her, its trunk curled tenderly around her face.

Eventually its eyes begin shutting and she helps the baby lay down, then strokes it soothingly until it falls into a deep slumber. “I believe these animals are like us, they are part of our family,” explains Chailert. “They love it when I sing. Elephants need us to speak nicely to them, to be soft and gentle so they can learn how to be soft and gentle with us.”

She first bonded with these great beasts as a five-year-old in the Karen village of Baan Lao. Her grandfather, a traditional healer, was given a retired logging elephant as a gift from a grateful patient whose life he had saved. “She was this huge giant, but so gentle,” explains Chailert. “She somehow connected with me and made me realise that if you treat these animals gently then they give the love back.”

She decided to start a sanctuary for the animals after seeing the shocking state of some of the chained elephants in the logging camps. She bought her first elephant in 1992 and raised money to start the foundation. It funds projects like Jumbo Express, which offers free veterinary treatment to elephants as well as medical services to the mahouts and villagers who live alongside them.

Chailert wants the government to introduce a bill of rights for all animals. She says domesticated elephants have no legal protection in Thailand and are treated as livestock.

“My job is to speak out for animals. I don’t believe in using animals to entertain people in any way, especially the elephants dancing, performing, giving circus performances.

I don’t agree with that.

If I have a choice, I’d rather the elephant stay alone. You can see them and feed them rather than ride them.”

At her park, volunteers help the trained staff tend to the elephants; collecting and preparing food for them, assisting with



**Lek with baby Pha Mai and her mother Mae Bua Tong, one of the rescued animals at the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai**

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community outreach programs and even building shelters. Day visitors delight in feeding the animals and helping mahouts bathe them.

Sitting on a platform, observing the park’s elephants slide joyously around a mud bath below, Chailert says: “My goal is to give them 24-hour freedom.” The foundation is working with volunteers and local communities to re-forest vast areas of land. Eventually, Chailert aims to release the healthiest elephants in nearby Elephant Haven, a 1.4 sq km re-vegetated forest. For her, the Surin project is the culmination of a lifelong campaign to protect elephants.

When I meet Chailert in Surin at the Elephant Buffet and Round-up weeks later, I notice in the town numerous

mahouts begging for food for their elephants. She and her team are deeply concerned about the condition of some of these animals.

They discuss malnourished calves that are too small for their age. They point out the chains that have cut deeply into some ▷

สิ่งที่คุณแสงเดือนต้องการเห็น ณ วันนี่คือการที่รัฐบาล ออกกฎหมายคุ้มครองสัตว์ขึ้นมา ทุกวันนี้เธอทำหน้าที่เป็น กระบอกเสียงแทนช้าง และไม่เห็นด้วยที่จะนำช้างมาสร้างความบันเทิงให้กับผู้คน ที่ศูนย์บริบาลช้างของคุณแสงเดือน อาสาสมัครจะคอยฝึกเจ้าหน้าที่เพื่อดูแลช้างตั้งแต่การเตรียมอาหาร ช่วยเหลือในการสร้างที่พักพิง ในขณะที่ผู้มาเยี่ยมชม ระหว่างวันคอยช่วยความทุกข์ของช้างน้ำซังและให้อาหาร

PHOTO: LINDA VERGNANI

elephants' legs. They note the bleeding puncture marks left by the elephant hooks in their foreheads.

The new reserve could provide a better life for many of these beasts. Chailert says: "We will use the money from volunteers to pay the mahouts so they can set the elephants free. If they want, the mahouts can make lots of money from home stays; by planting crops to sell to us and helping us plant trees."

We get a glimpse of the future when we travel through flooded rice paddies, past the traditional elephant village of Ta Klang to the new elephant reserve. Here Jeff Smith shows us a small herd of elephants, including a cute baby eating some cut cane in a clearing among the trees.

It looks like a wild herd, but until recently these animals were in circuses or begging. The forest in the reserve has to regenerate, so the elephants need supplementary fodder.

The six mahouts caring for these animals have volunteered to stop using elephant hooks; guiding the elephants with their hands and quiet commands, they lead them to a nearby field of sugarcane where visitor volunteers are slashing down great bundles of cane for the beasts.

One volunteer, Erika Sullivan, a Canadian veterinarian, says: "I usually work with small animals. The elephants are such beautiful animals, with personalities like humans, or cows, or dogs."

Later in the day, the animals amble to the Moon River, a

tributary of the Mekong. The baby emits a tinny toy trumpet sound as it wades in with its elders. Loading watermelons into canoes, the volunteers take the fruit out to the frolicking elephants.

Mahout Sa-ngad Padphai, who is caring for a pregnant elephant, says: "This is a good idea because it gives us more time with the elephants. The elephants can live well and the mahouts can live well."

Smith says: "It's exciting and challenging working with Lek. I think she has brilliant ideas about how to work with elephants so that people still benefit."

Already there is a waiting list of 20 mahouts eager to join the programme. By mid-2010 there should be sufficient volunteers to keep the programme running all year round. Smith concludes: "This will be the biggest and best Asian elephant sanctuary in the world, presenting lots of opportunities for mahouts and their families for generations."

Chailert says it will take time to educate mahouts that ecotourism can provide an alternative income. "I know tourists from around the world who would want to see elephants living in total freedom." □

Visit [www.elephantnaturefoundation.org](http://www.elephantnaturefoundation.org) or call +66 (0)53 272855.

Volunteers for the Surin project can email [surin@elephantnaturefoundation.org](mailto:surin@elephantnaturefoundation.org).

A day visit to Elephant Nature Park costs baht 2,500 (US\$75), while a week's volunteering, with board/lodging, costs baht 12,000 (US\$375).

## GETTING THERE

### THE ELEPHANT NATURE PARK:

Bangkok Airways has regular flights to Chiang Mai. The Elephant Nature Park arranges complimentary pick-ups and drop-offs for visitors and volunteers from hotels in Chiang Mai. Visitors can also get transport to the park from the Chiang Mai office of the foundation.

### THE SURIN PROJECT:

The foundation provides transportation to the Surin project from Bangkok or Chiang Mai – both cities serviced by Bangkok Airways. It can also provide van transport from the Surin bus station to the centre. At present only volunteers are able to visit the project in Surin.

หลังจากการจัดงานโต๊ะจีนสำหรับช้างเพียงไม่กี่อาทิตย์ เราก็ยังพบเห็นความทุกข์นำช้างมาขออาหารตามถนนเช่นเคย น่าเป็นห่วงว่าช้างเหล่านี้ไม่ได้รับการดูแลที่ดีพอ คุณแสงเดือนกล่าวว่า เธอจะนำเงินที่ได้จากอาสาสมัครมาปลดปล่อยช้างให้เป็นอิสระ และเมื่อเราได้เดินทางไปเยี่ยมชมศูนย์อนุรักษ์ช้างแห่งใหม่ที่จังหวัดสุรินทร์ ก็ได้พบกับช้างฝูงเล็ก ๆ และลูกช้างที่กำลังกินอ้อยอยู่ พวกมันดูเหมือนช้างป่า ไม่น่าเชื่อว่าก่อนหน้านี้จะเคยร่อนเร่อยู่ตามถนน ความทุกข์ที่ไม่ใช้แต่จะออกคำสั่งด้วยการใช้สัญญาณมือ คุณแจฟฟ์ สมบัติผู้จัดการของศูนย์อนุรักษ์ช้างในจังหวัดสุรินทร์กล่าวว่าที่นี่จะเป็นศูนย์อนุรักษ์ช้างที่ดีที่สุดในโลก ที่สร้างโอกาสด้านอาชีพให้ความทุกข์ช้างและครอบครัวสืบไป