

‘Baby bonus’ to tackle decline in captive Lao elephant population

An Australian study has shown the captive elephant population in Laos is declining as the elephants are not allowed to breed at a rate sufficient to sustain the population.



Credit: ElefantAsia

The captive elephant population in Laos will be extinct in just over a century if current management practices do not change, according to a recent University of Queensland study.

It is estimated that only 480 captive elephants remain across Laos, and [the study](#) – published in the journal *Endangered Species Research* – shows that changes to conservation management are necessary to prevent extinction.

The study’s lead author, UQ’s Dr Ingrid Suter, said captive elephants were an important part of Lao culture and supported the livelihood of many rural communities.

‘Elephant ownership has long been associated with Lao culture and national identity,’ Dr Suter said.

‘Extinction of this population would lead to loss of income for the mahouts (elephant owners) and their communities, impact on tourism and the logging industry, and would mean the end of thousands of years of elephants and humans working alongside each other.’

Female elephants require at least four years off work to produce and wean a calf, an unaffordable length of time for mahouts.

For the study, UQ researchers collaborated with ElefantAsia, a non-government organisation which aims to overcome this breeding barrier through a unique ‘[Baby Bonus](#)’ program.

The Baby Bonus program works with mahouts to provide alternative income while their elephants are on ‘maternity leave’, and to ensure the calves are well cared for.

UQ's Dr Greg Baxter, the study's senior author, said a wider management approach was needed to prevent further population decline.

'The small number of breeding-age females is limiting the growth of the captive Laos elephant population,' he said.

'Increasing the breeding rate through programs such as the Baby Bonus is a good start, but it is unlikely to prevent population decline over the next 100 to 200 years.

'Establishing a rental agreement with other countries would allow the import and exchange of elephants for the purpose of breeding and provide benefit to all countries involved.'

Source: UQ

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