



# asia family traveller

Winter 2020/21

HK\$35/S\$6/US\$4

Big adventures for little people

## Testing the water

Where to head in 2021



### School's out

Best kids clubs in Asia

### A tale of two cities

Family fun in Hong Kong &  
Singapore

# CREATURE CRISIS

The pandemic has allowed nature to thrive and we've all enjoyed the heartening tales of dolphins returning to waterways and turtles nesting on tourist beaches. But has it all been good news? asks **Frances Marcellin**

**A**s the revving motorbike sped along the muddy track in Cambodia's Cardamom Rainforest it was suddenly intercepted by a Wildlife Alliance ranger. Under the panicked rider, stuffed into the storage seat, the ranger discovered a ball-shaped, blue plastic shopping bag with a curled-up Sunda pangolin inside.

The terrified creature was gravely wounded from a snare, but, unlike the other 900,000 pangolins who were trafficked between 2000 and 2019, it was destined to recover at a rescue centre rather than illegally sold for meat or medicine.

Pangolins are the most trafficked animal in the world. Around 96,000kg pangolin scales were seized in Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam between 2017 and 2019, but other body parts, blood and fetuses are also in demand, particularly in China.

The Wildlife Alliance works closely with Shinta Mani Wild, a five-star, tented camp in the depths of the Cambodian forest.

The unique luxury resort was founded by eco-warrior Bill Bensley and his business partner Sokoun Chanpreda. In the 1970s, 75% of Cambodia was covered with forest; in 2007 that figure was shockingly at 3%, when just 3,220 square kilometres of primary forest remained. In a bid to prevent further deforestation and wildlife endangerment, Bensley and





Chanpreda bought an 800-acre block at a logging auction.

Attracting those who seek adventure from responsible travel, but who also want to contribute to a conservation programme in comfort, guests can take a zip line across the forest to reach the accommodation (or go by jeep), as well as take part in a programme of activities. These include birdwatching, sailing on expedition boats, hiking, mountain biking, swimming in the 'cistern' (a huge iron-bath-shaped pool), kayaking and joining anti-poaching patrols.

The Wildlife Alliance operates the patrol station, but it is completely funded – from rangers' salaries to equipment and fuel – by the revenue from

Shinta Mani Wild.

But with the Covid-19 pandemic shutting down tourism and with travel restrictions still in place, the funding has ground to a halt.

"Without guests we have no revenue," explains Jason Friedman, a development director at Shinta Mani Hotels. "This means all of the poaching patrols have to be funded out of our reservation accounts and by Bill Bensley and Sokoun Chanpreda. It's expensive and if the local staff do not have work they might be tempted to become poachers again."

At the resort a dark-wood board displays conservation wins from the Wildlife Alliance patrols at Shinta Mani. Since it started the patrol has uncovered 1819

snares, 80 chainsaws and 68 logging camps.

"Without our continued funding of this ranger station we know that there would be a big spike in poaching," says Friedman. Wildlife Conservation is driven by passionate people on the ground doing the conservation work and without the donors we have no money to fund the people on the ground."

With poaching on the rise, elephants particularly find themselves in danger. Today, elephant poaching has reached unprecedented levels and 393,100kg of ivory was seized worldwide between 2008 and 2017.

Protecting elephants at this time is more important than ever as poachers are ever ready to pounce and take advantage of degenerating protection resources.

This is especially challenging in Thailand, which has the world's largest unregulated ivory market. Ivory appears in all kinds of products and trinkets, including sword handles, jewellery and good luck charms. Selling ivory from wild elephants

is illegal in Thailand, but the sale of ivory from captive elephants is still legal – the tusks can be cut every few years once the elephant is 15 years old or over – and it helps to fuel the black market.

But elephant protection groups such as Phuket Elephant Sanctuary are struggling to continue operations with the crash in tourism.

Earlier this year, the sanctuary welcomed two female elephants rescued by the Save Elephant Foundation from a smaller elephant park nearby that had to close from the impact of Covid-19.

"Pre-Covid, we welcomed an average of 50 paying visitors a day, which allowed us to continue our work and to rescue three-to-four elephants per year," says Vincent Gerards, director of marketing at the sanctuary. Despite challenging times, the sanctuary is determined to keep founder Montri Todtane's vision alive of providing rescued elephants with a 'loving and final home'.

The 30-acre piece of land is home to twelve elephants



Pangolins are illegally trafficked for meat and medicine



Park rangers at work in Cardamom Park of Cambodia



Elephants at Anantara's Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort, Thailand

“

**WITH THE TOURIST DOLLAR GONE, FUNDING FOR WILDLIFE PROTECTION PROJECTS HAS GROUND TO A HALT**

and, due to its size, can provide them with natural food sources. Gerards explains that elephants eat around eight per cent of their bodyweight, which equates to around 15,000- 20,000 Thai Baht (or €450) each month.

Yet for captive elephants in Thailand - Gerards estimates there are around 4,500 who mostly work in the tourism industry (shows, camps and sanctuaries) as well as the logging industry - the financial burden is problematic and complex.

"Due to Covid-19, virtually

every tourism related elephant camp had to close in the first quarter of 2020," says Gerards. "Without the income from tourists it has been incredibly difficult for most camps to take care of their elephants and staff."

He says that the food costs, combined with renting land and paying wages created a big financial burden for many camp owners. And since they don't own the elephants or the land (both are rented in most cases), most camps stopped rental agreements, closed down and returned the elephants to their owners who often live in other parts of Thailand. Elephant owners are left facing the challenge of feeding the elephants without being able to generate any income.

There are not many choices for these elephant owners. Returning an elephant into the wild is not often an option once it has lived in captivity. "The elephants have never learned the natural behaviour that would enable them to survive in the wild, and instead rely on humans for food and veterinary care," says Gerards.

Many owners have returned to work in the logging industry.

In order to cope with the revenue loss and maintain the high level of care given to the elephants, the Phuket Elephant Sanctuary has been planting more trees to increase self-sufficiency and is encouraging future guests to book now with a 30% deposit.

They have also produced two short films about the lives of some of the elephants, which are being sold to their online community.

"Each purchase helped to feed an elephant at our sanctuary for an entire day while we were closed, so we've been able to continue our work without interruptions."

Meanwhile in Chiang Rai, in the north of Thailand, the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation is usually supported by tourism through luxury hospitality brand Anantara. However, since the Covid pandemic halted international tourism, it has been forced to survive on fund reserves.

John Roberts, the group director of Sustainability and Conservation at Anantara, runs

the foundation, which rescues elephants and supports the lives of 'mahouts' (elephant keepers) and their families.

His love for and knowledge of elephants is evident just by watching one of the many fascinating and fun Facebook Live sessions he filmed and narrating - often just metres away from elephants munching on deep-green grasses - throughout lockdown. He has clearly been on a mission to increase awareness and donations.

The fund is now having to survive on public goodwill. During the initial stages of the Covid crisis the foundation was also supporting three additional 'Covid refugee elephants' who would otherwise have been unfed. It also subsidised the wages of 14 vets in camps that were also struggling.

"So far we have managed to keep our mahouts paid and elephants on full rations," he explains. "But outside of our bubble people are not so lucky."

Roberts says they have also been feeding some of their mahouts' extended family to stop them worrying about food.

They are also concerned about a drought hitting the village of Ban Ta Klang where the mahouts live. "So agricultural incomes are also under threat," he says, adding that they continue to support the school there, too.

It has not been easy, but he remains optimistic, aware of the resilience of the local people. "Mahouts will have been through similar crises before and are adept at surviving on low resources even in these changed times," he says, adding that the Thai Elephant Alliance and the Tourism Authority of Thailand are also helping.

In terms of poaching, Roberts says an increase is obvious, especially from those who once



had stable city jobs and have now been forced to return to the countryside where they hunt for meat.

Anantara also helps to fund a tented park in Cambodia, Cardamon Park, where Roberts says a balance is being upheld as rangers have been able to up their patrol rates to ensure opportunistic poaching doesn't arise.

One of his greatest concerns is the land-grabbing attempts by 'local elites' and other rangers working outside our 18,000ha concession in the same forest," where there is an increase in tree cutting for luxury timber.

"There have also been attempts to poach pangolins and other bushmeat," he says. "Which of course caused this pandemic in the first place, don't forget."

Since Covid-19 crashed into our lives, the link between wildlife poaching and human health can no longer be ignored.

While the origin of Covid-19 is still unproven, scientific studies point to it being through zoonotic transmission from a bat or pangolin, possibly at a wildlife market in Wuhan, China, where it was first reported on 31 December 2019. Some scientists now believe that the pangolin may have acted as an intermediary host, which made transmission to humans easier, but much evidence points to it having evolved in bats.

Covid-19 is related to SARS-CoV 2002-03 which originated from civet cats, sold in a wet market similar to that in Wuhan. These animals are still poached and sold – in fact Shinta Mani Wild has rescued and released seven civet cats since the Wildlife Alliance patrols started.

If funding stops altogether, the worst-case scenario will set in. "The day we have to call off patrols the poachers will move

“

**AN INCREASE  
IN POACHING IS  
OBVIOUS; MANY  
WHO ONCE HELD  
STABLE CITY JOBS  
HAVE BEEN FORCED  
TO RETURN TO  
THE COUNTRYSIDE  
WHERE THEY HUNT  
FOR MEAT**

in and six years' work building up the wildlife – endangered species like elephant, leopard, clouded leopard, Asiatic wild dog and bears as well as more

common deer, monkeys, peafowl and otters, now to the point they are confident to be seen by people – will be undone in a matter of weeks," says Friedman.

The fact that air trafficking has slowed down has also meant that poachers are pushed further underground and online to sell the animals. Even before the Covid-19 crisis exploded, TRAFFIC, the world's wildlife trade monitoring organization, stated that levels of poaching, trafficking and consumption of wildlife products in Southeast Asia are persistent, if not increasing. "Illicit online marketplaces, including through social media, have mushroomed over the past decade," it declared in its February 2020 report.

If poaching increases, due to loss of income from wildlife tourism, which it already is, then

so will trafficking, as explained by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW).

"IFAW has evidence from the field that poaching is on the increase in many parts of Asia and Africa. Countries that rely heavily on wildlife tourism are hit the hardest," says Grace Gabriel, IFAW's Regional Director in Asia. "Poachers and traffickers are taking advantage of the pandemic-caused distress in already poverty-stricken countries and regions."

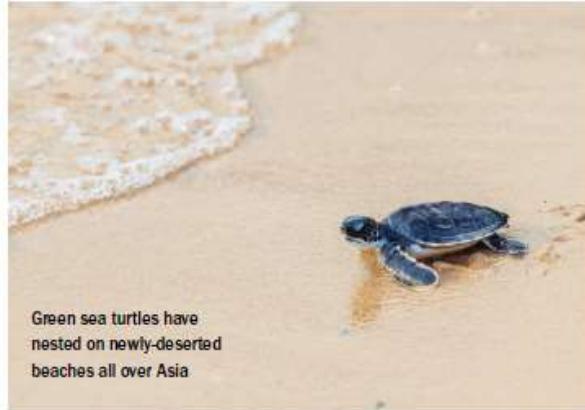
With the World Health Organisation (WHO) reporting that 60% of known infectious diseases and 75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, wildlife conservation has now become a public health emergency and humanitarian crisis.

"Research has shown that the destruction of wildlife is linked to the outbreak of deadly viruses," stresses Paula Vlamings, chief impact officer at Tourism Cares, one of the seven NGO partners making up the Future of Tourism Coalition. "So it is not only in our best interest to preserve wildlife for our travelers, it is critical to our own survival as well."

Yet before the pandemic, the travel industry was suffering from over-tourism. Finding a balance that brings in enough tourism to fund anti-poaching and wildlife conservation programmes, and also doesn't create an irreversibly negative impact on local people and ecosystems is a difficult one to find.

"The reports of increased poaching and illegal logging and mining activity during the tourism shutdown has demonstrated not just the critical need for conservation tourism, but an urgent call for all tourism companies to create business models around sustainability," says Vlamings.

Tourism companies are urged



Green sea turtles have nested on newly-deserted beaches all over Asia

to sign-up and adhere to a collection of guiding principles, which aim to rebuild tourism sustainably as it re-grows following the Covid crisis.

“

**THE DAY WE HAVE TO CALL OFF THE PATROLS, THE POACHERS WILL MOVE IN AND SIX YEARS OF WORK BUILDING UP THE WILDLIFE WILL BE UNDONE IN WEEKS**

With beaches now deserted and tourism hotspots empty, wildlife has had an opportunity to explore and inhabit spaces that it has not been able to before. This has been one of the few positive outcomes of the pandemic.

During the global lockdown, in a sheltered cove in Koh Samui at the five-star Banyan Tree Samui resort, a once-busy beach became the birthplace of more than 200 baby green turtles.

In what is a rare occurrence so close to a tourist area, four nests hatched after the mother, a giant turtle, laid her eggs on the beach.

"It was heart-warming to watch the baby turtles being born, and then scurrying to the sea," said Thepsuda Loyjiw, the hotel's resident marine biologist. "Ever since the mother turtle laid her eggs on our beach, we have been protecting them from predators such as birds and monitor lizards, and gauging the temperature of the eggs to make sure the hatchlings would be given every chance of survival."

Sustainable tourism makes up part of the vision of a group of friends who founded Nikoi Island, a beautiful 15-hectare resort about 50 miles from Singapore and adult-only island Cempedak. With white-sand beaches surrounded by crystal-clear blue-mottled water, these islands offer luxury accommodation – there are plunge pools and huge terraces in each villa – to local and international guests. Cempedak has a rainforest that's home to a diverse range of birdlife as well as endangered species such as pangolins. As both are located in a Marine Protected Area (MPA), they created The Island Foundation, which is helping to organise a management plan for the MPA, and are supporting a

local NGO with similar goals.

"We're really excited with the progress being made," says Andrew Dixon, one of the founders of the islands and Island Foundation board member. "In addition, they have just completed a reforestation project on an island that was illegally mined for bauxite in conjunction with the local community."

Ocean clean ups are also a large part of the work Nixon is involved with along the east coast of Bintan, part of Indonesia's Riau Islands – all in conjunction with social purpose group Seven Clean Seas.

"In the past they have organised clean ups using volunteers," explains Dixon. "With Covid that became impossible so instead they have agreed to pay our furloughed staff a daily wage with a bonus element for cleaning the beaches."

Over six weeks they covered 10km of beaches, collecting more than 8 tonnes of plastic. "This is the equivalent of 400,000 plastic bottles," adds Dixon.

As the tourist industry looks forward to when it can open up, there is a sense that perhaps new beginnings and optimism can be born alongside a better, more sustainable post-Covid-crisis vision. This is certainly how Gerards and the Phuket Elephant Sanctuary likes to think of the future.

"We believe that the indirect, positive effect Covid-19 has made on the environment is resulting in a new appreciation of the natural world and sustainability among travellers," he says, acknowledging that the picture could change if they miss Phuket's high season.

"Despite all the challenges presented by Covid-19, we remain committed as ever to keeping this vision alive." 🌱