Zoo and Wildlife News -- International

Sanctuary and zoo opened to counter wildlife trade

Cambodia opened a wildlife sanctuary and zoo this month in an attempt to fight the rapid depletion of endangered species lost to a flourishing trade in wildlife. Almost all of the 500 residents of the Phnom Tamao Zoological Garden and Wildlife Rescue Centre on the outskirts of the capital, Phnom Penh, have been freed from pet stores, Chinese medicine shops or traffickers, according to Minister of Agriculture Chhea Song, who opened the facility with Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Officials say endangered animals may be safer in the zoo than in their natural habitat, which is rapidly being deforested and is infested with poachers. "The rare animals face destruction from human activiy. We should keep some representatives of those kinds of animals in the zoo," Mr Chhea Song said. At least two dozen of the 86 species at Phnom Tamao are endangered. David Ware of the Cambodian Wildlife Protection Office said many animals held in captivity might have lost their natural suspicion of humans and were thus even more susceptible to poaching in the wild.

Only a few hundred elephants and perhaps less than 100 tigers are left in Cambodia, environmentalists say. A featured attraction at the zoo is Lucky, an orphaned baby elephant seized from the private zoo of Nhim Vanda, a parliamentarian from Mr Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, a powerful, retired general who had taken the calf after its mother was killed by poachers.

The 80-hectare zoo has a breeding programme that has already produced one rare sun bear. Cambodia last year signed the international Convention on Illegal Trade in Endangered Species and is to host an international conference on wildlife trade in February. Mr Hun Sen vowed to stamp out the wildlife trade and turn the war-torn nation into a haven for eco-tourism.

But many wildlife traffickers in Cambodia are reputed to be backed by powerful military and police officials, and local conservation officers have said they often are too afraid to make arrests without getting clearance from their superiors. Mr Hun Sen said enforcement officials should not hesitate to confiscate animals and arrest traffickers.

Cages to give bats better access to mines -- Abandoned mine shafts are ideal as winter habitat

With a little human help, hundreds of thousands of bats will have better access to abandoned Upper Peninsula mines for winter hibernation in Hancock, Wisconsin, USA. Grants totaling $200,000 from the federal government and Bat Conservation International, a private conservation group will pay to install cages at the entrances of up to 10 mine shafts in the western Upper Peninsula, where copper mining thrived in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

The cages will have openings large enough for bats to fly in and out, but small enough to prevent people from getting into the mines and risking injury. The project "will open up new areas and allow more bats to colonize the mines," said Bruce Peterson, a federal district conservationist. "It will also give better access to the areas that bats have historically used."

Cages are being built over two shaft openings at the Quincy Mine at Hancock, part of the Keweenaw National Historical Park. Why special care about bats? It is practical as well as altruistic. Each can consume thousands of night-flying insects daily — a blessing in the Upper Peninsula, which is invaded every summer by mosquitoes and black flies. Representatives of Bat Conservation International, a Texas group that works to preserve bat habitat, found the mine ideal for the winged mammals, said Ed Yarbrough, manager of the Quincy Mine Hoist Association.

Peterson estimated about 200,000 bats live in the mine. Yarbrough said there would be even more if it were easier for them to get past the steel rails and chain-link fences erected to keep people out. The obstructions have chased bats away or made them stop at the entrances and work their way inside, leaving them vulnerable to attacks by predators such as raccoons and owls. Irving Riutta of Hancock designed the cages using metal bars spaced 5.5 inches apart. He worked on a similar bat project in Wisconsin's iron mines. He said he had attended a seminar in 1995 in Pennsylvania, where he studied bat habitat, maternity and hibernation. The cages were designed them to be pleasing to the eye as well as functional.

13,000 rare animals saved from the pot in China

January 19, 2000. Four southern provinces have launched a campaign to combat the thriving illegal trade in endangered species, many of which end up on restaurant dinner plates.

The No 2 Southern Operation, which began on Saturday, has already led to the rescue or confiscation of 13,309 endangered species, 4,178 of which were listed on China's important protected species list, it was reported.

The campaign involves forestry, Customs, police and airline officials in Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian and Yunnan - provinces known for their lush vegetation, abundant wildlife, and cuisines that often feature exotic species.

The mainland has belatedly begun strengthening its enforcement of laws against poaching. On January 1, it closed the Hoh Xil Nature Reserve in the far west to protect the endangered Tibetan antelope, prized for its fine fur, which is used to make illegal shahtoosh shawls. With their natural habitat destroyed by rapid economic development and intensive agriculture and forestry, a number of species are on the verge of extinction.

The South China tiger, the Yangtze River dolphin and the giant panda are among the most endangered. But other less well-known snakes, lizards and birds also are widely hunted and sold to restaurants. The 10-day anti-poaching campaign was intended to help change "bad eating habits" and root out the "hotbeds of corruption" that had allowed the smuggling of endangered species to thrive. In the first three days, 396 suspects had been arrested. Since the campaign began, inspectors in Fujian alone had found 382 businesses dealing in protected species, People's Daily reported. *Published in the South China Morning Post.*

Endangered Species Produces flogged on the World Wide Web

Friday, January 14, 2000. Gainesville, Florida. Products made from endangered species, such as items made from turtle shells, are being sold on Internet auction sites, alarming conservation groups and federal wildlife officials.

U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-La., holds a rare albino alligator, one of only 25 such reptiles in captivity, to demonstrate his support for the commercial alligator industry at the 2000 Panamerican Leather Fair. In his remarks at the Miami convention Breaux underscored economic benefits of responsible harvest of alligators as a sustainable hide and meat produce resource. Michel Verdure/AP Conservation groups and federal wildlife officials have raised concerns about trading on eBay.com, by far the largest of hundreds of Internet trading companies.

Appelson said an eBay search last week turned up 50 items believed to be made from hawksbill sea turtles, a critically endangered species. Jewelry, eyeglass frames and even cigarette holders are made from hawksbill shell, which is known commonly as "tortoise shell." The total bidding for those items was more than $4,000.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is charged with enforcing laws banning sales of such products, says it does not have the resources to deal with the problem, but has been consulting with eBay. Company officials say they're working to reduce illegal sales through increased monitoring. They also say it's often difficult to know for sure that an item is illegal unless it is examined by an expert.

eBay, based in San Jose, Calif., provides a forum for buying and selling millions of products around the clock. More than 400,000 new items are posted daily. Company policy prohibits the listing of items made from sea turtles, bears, leopards and many other rare animals, but items in all those categories could be quickly found on the site this week.

The interstate sale of products made from endangered species was outlawed by the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Violating the act is punishable by up to one year in jail and $100,000 in criminal fines per person. Civil fines can be assessed up to $25,000 per violation.

Federal wildlife officials say they don't have the luxury of monitoring online auctions full-time to look for illegal sales. A senior special agent with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Internet trading poses problems that traditional commerce does not. There's more volume, more speed and more anonymity, she said.

Male elephant flown to Thailand in quest for mate

Bangkok, Thailand (January 27, 2000). A male elephant born in Israel, where female pachyderm company is hard to come by, arrived by airplane in Thailand Thursday with hopes of finding true love. Five-year old Chapati, whose parents were originally from Thailand, was sent off by 3,000 well-wishers in Jerusalem, where the elephant was born and raised in a zoo.

He touched down at Bangkok's Don Muang airport and was greeted like a celebrity and fed a welcome breakfast of apples and bananas from a platter. After the flight from Jerusalem inside a metal-barred traveling box, the 3,300 pound elephant looked perky and trumpeted happily.

"He's a male elephant and there's no female elephants in Israel. It's best for Chapati to come to Thailand to live a normal life," said Thai Agriculture Minister Pongpol Adireksan. Described by his handler as a "beloved son of Jerusalem," Chapati is going to stay at an elephant conservation center in northern Lampang province where it is hoped he will find a mate.

Shai Doron, the director-general of the elephant's old home at the Tisch Family Zoological Gardens in Jerusalem, said the best place in the world for Chapati was Thailand. "In one way we are very sad to say good-bye to Chapati," Doron told Associated Press Television News. "But we are also very happy for his future." David Matnai, Israel's ambassador to Thailand, said the elephant's voyage was a symbol of friendship between the countries.

Wildlife Infections on Rise -- Diseases Threaten Species; Also Humans

An estimated 15,000 tons of peanuts are fed to birds in England anually, leading the a rise in avian infection. Crowded living conditions, moving to new places and eating unusual foods can spread disease — among wild animals, too. A new study warns that when it comes to the globalization of the planet, animals face a lot of the same hazards as people, including so-called emerging infectious diseases. While concern about newly evolving diseases has focused on humans, scientists warn that wildlife face the same threats as animals are forced into more crowded conditions and moved to new locations.

The causes of emerging diseases in animals are the same as for humans, explained Peter Daszak of the University of Georgia. "Basically, it's the globalization of the planet, things are taken abroad from one country to another and you spread diseases that way as well. We call it pathogen pollution". Emerging infectious diseases can cause local extinctions among wild animals and in some cases even lead to total extinction of a species and we need to take this issue seriously, especially if we are to take biodiversity seriously," Daszak said.

He urged scientific research on the emerging diseases and social efforts to prevent their spread. He mentioned legislation to try to prevent the importation of diseases that affect wild animals; such steps now are taken to block foot and mouth disease, rabies and other diseases. Bringing animals together in zoos and wild animal parks in an effort to conserve them may also cause problems, for example, researchers have determined that a type of herpes virus that is harmless to African elephants can be fatal to their Asian cousins. And zoo animals in the United Kingdom have been exposed to food contaminated with the agent that causes mad cow disease. They reported that that exposure to the agent, called BSE, has been found in 58 zoo animals of 17 species.

The study also found that "measles contracted from humans threatens wild mountain gorillas habituated to tourists and polio virus has killed chimpanzees in Gombe National Park in Tanzania."

South East Asian Wildlife Tours feature Endangered Species Rescue Centres part of the Tour

Sarawak's Semenggok Rehabilitation Centre (www.jaring.my/stb/semggok.htm) cares for endangered species which have either been found injured in the forest, or have been kept as illegal pets. The center houses a number of different species including rescued hornbills, honey bears, gibbons and porcupines, but the main attraction is the Orangutans. When the rescued orangutans first arrive, they are often in a sorry state and riddled with diseases. They are put into cages and given medical care. The wardens then teach them how to forage for fruit, climb trees and generally fend for themselves. When they are mid-way through the rehabilitation process they are released into the surrounding forest reserve. The animals then spend most of their time in the forest but often return to the centre for a free meal. When the wardens feel that that an orangutan is fully rehabilitated, it is caught and then returned to the wild - usually deep in the forest or to one of Sarawak's National Parks or Wildlife Sanctuaries. The best time to visit Semenggok is at feeding time (approx. 8:30 a.m.-9 a.m. and 2.30 p.m.-3 p.m.) when there is a good chance of seeing the semi-wild Orangutans who live in the surrounding forest return to the feeding area. A list of other such facilities in South Asia follows. Even if you don't go it is interesting reading with much information on the animals.

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation (www.jaring.my/sts/sepilok.htm)
Danum Valley Field Center (www.infosabah.com.my/sabah/danum/activity.htm).
Borneo Rainforest Lodge (www.jaring.my/sabah/borlodg.htm),
Wanariset Rehabilitation Center (www.redcube.nl/bos/bos.htm)
Tourism Indonesia Orangutanwww.tourismindonesia.com/orang.htm)
Asia's orangutan conservation and rehabilitation centers www.geocities.com/RainForest/Vines/5408/pubedu.htm.
Orangutan Foundation International website at www.ns.net:80/orangutan.
Thai Elephants Homepage (www.geocities.com/RainForest/6933)
Friends of the Asian Elephant (www.elephant.tnet.co.th)
Thailand's Elephant Nature Park (www.thaifocus.com/elephant),
The Surin Elephant Round-up: www.tourismthailand.org/festival/nov.htm