

Goldman Environmental Prize Sample Nomination

1. Short Summary of Recent Environmental Achievement

Over the past five years, Vathana, locally known as ‘Uncle Elephant’ has brought together 40,000 community members from two communes to establish an environmental management network in rural Cambodia focusing on the protection of Asian elephants. Prior to the establishment of this network, the number of elephant deaths was spiraling out of control as habitat loss and fragmentation drove them increasingly to raid agricultural land bringing them into contact with people. Not only has Vathana’s work directly contributed to a significant reduction in elephant deaths, it has also significantly increased local community wellbeing, safety and social cohesion. These improvements in the lives of elephants and local people have been the result of his tireless efforts, often at significant personal cost, sharing problems with farmers, influencing skeptical decision makers and providing innovative solutions to real world problems.

2. Detailed Description of Recent Environmental Achievement

a. The background of the problem or issue

Emerging from Pol Pot’s brutal regime, Cambodia is a country in transition. Relative stability has resulted in dramatic increases in the human population and unregulated development on a massive scale. This has placed an enormous strain on the country’s natural resources especially the rainforests, which harbor a staggering array of species, many of which are still being discovered.

However, land clearance by farmers and landholders has caused the large forest estates to become fragmented and the ancient migration routes of the Asian elephants to be disrupted, leading to conflict between local communities and elephants. Many people coming into conflict with the elephant populations are also migrants, unable to secure land anywhere other than the forest edge. As a result, they are not experienced in living in wildlife areas, and have little bond with the forest as they are often moved on by other powerful interests. These people are very poor with little education and lack a social network to manage land and livelihoods issues. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly developing Cambodian economy and an ever greater cost of living, the relationship between these communities and the rich biodiversity they live within is increasingly at odds.

b. How the nominee used grassroots strategies to bring about their environmental achievement (list dates)

Tuy Sereivathana, or Vathana, has always been comfortable in the rural communities. Following his studies and government service, Vathana became increasingly aware of the lack of capacity within these communities to manage issues they were faced with. This was driving desperate farmers to resort to extreme, often fatal, measures to deal with elephants destroying their crops. From 2003, Vathana spent his time with farmers in their huts and fields, listening and getting a full understanding of how the problems really affected farmers’ ability to provide for their families. As part of a wildlife conservation group, he drew upon technical knowledge about how to stop elephants from raiding, using hot chilies, fences and other methods to create barriers. However, what Vathana found was that by facilitating the various farmers to combine efforts and work as a team they were much more effective in warding off elephants. He became known as Bu Damrei or ‘Uncle Elephant’.

As the trust of the farmers in elephant areas grew, around 2004, Vathana convened Guarding Groups, self help collectives who were equipped with early warning devices for elephants, conducted joint fencing operations to protect their crops and importantly began to explore alternative crops less attractive to

elephants. Education and understanding of the value and national pride attached to elephants has been part of his approach. Many Cambodians still revere elephants as Buddhist symbols but are less tolerant when standing in the rice paddy they have spent six months cultivating! These migrant farmers often did not know their neighbors and sadly, Cambodian culture is yet to recover from the ingrained distrust brought about during the terrifying Khmer Rouge period where people were forced to inform on neighbors and family members for ‘crimes’, often fabricated. The penalty for being ‘denounced’ was generally torture or death. This has caused a lack of social bonding within Cambodian society which will take generations to heal. However, Vathana used and is still using a tangible issue such as managing human-elephant conflict to bring people together to discuss and form bonds, the benefits of which extend far beyond wildlife conservation.

Vathana instigated an innovative approach to creating a market for ‘elephant-friendly’ food crops. By scouting the Phnom Penh city markets once a week, he was able to tell the local farmers where to take their produce to ensure the best price. This avoided being short-changed by agricultural brokers. In working with the farmers from 2003 to 2006, it was found that vegetables like cucumbers could be grown quickly with simple irrigation mechanisms and were ready for market before elephants sensed they were ripe. Additionally, if the elephants did come, only one of many annual harvests was damaged. These types of simple, effective strategies can only be developed if someone truly understands the dynamic of an environmental issue and is able to spend extensive energies at the grassroots, developing practical solutions.

Since 2005, Vathana has focused his energies on two particularly affected communes, *Prey Proseth* and *Trang Troyen*. 40,000 people live in these forest edge communities, many only moving here in the past 5 years. Elephants and other wildlife regularly raid crops as anarchic agricultural development has invaded a number of national parks and forests. However, Vathana has used an elephant conservation banner to draw together commune leaders and provide agricultural advice, land use planning, and educational development. Through this process, these communities have named themselves ‘elephant conservation communities’, drawing up codes of practice for all residents and establishing local bylaws linking agricultural, educational and social assistance to sensible use of the natural environment. This includes regulations banning timber extraction from the forests & prevention of hunting. As these processes are consensus driven, adherence is monitored by the community, greatly decreasing non-compliance in a country with a virtually non-existent legal system. Vathana has been the core part of developing this process through painstaking dialogue.

As the program has grown and the trust (and aspirations) of the community have increased, Vathana in 2008 was asked to find some support to provide teachers in these very isolated communities. Vathana saw this as another opportunity to embed the elephant and wildlife conservation message. With support from Steve Irwin’s Australia Zoo, Vathana sourced teachers for four schools, teaching 250 kids. These schools are in the most isolated communities, generally completely surrounded with forest or scrublands. It was agreed by the communities that one day per week, the children should learn about the natural environment, elephants and other wildlife. A curriculum has been drawn up on ecology, safety around wildlife, the value of food webs and biodiversity in providing resources. Vathana has sourced school materials and the students even have elephant branded school bags! He was so successful in securing materials that he has been able to supplement neighboring schools, beyond these four.

c. Results of nominee’s work (list dates of achievement)

As word of Vathana’s creativity and passion for elephants and helping local communities has spread, many other community leaders are now visiting the elephant conservation communities to understand the transformations and how things work. His personal reputation has spread locally, and he is still known as ‘Uncle Elephant’. Vathana has already identified the next priority community and he will make this as

much as a success as those communities he has already fundamentally affected through his work.

In the past 4 years, there have been no elephant killings in the area (compared with c.15 in 2002!). Teams are observing young tracks regularly during forest monitoring patrols, indicating a) that the elephant population are renewing themselves and b) that the elephants are relaxed enough to breed. The forest in the project area of impact is being much less impacted and even recovering in parts. With a dramatic effect on over 40,000 people, Vathana has achieved remarkable conservation outcomes and is ready and able to achieve much more.

One thing that is clear is that the behavior change in communities and amongst the elephants requires constant vigilance. A specific reminder of this was highlighted during recent Khmer New Year celebrations when the guarding groups had a little too much party spirit and awoke to find four fields flattened by elephants. Whilst distressing for the farmers, it highlights the value and importance of the structures that have been established and keeps the communities aware of the delicate balance between their wellbeing and sensitive management of their environment.

A major outcome of this work to date is the shift to an entirely different and bespoke agricultural regime. The regime has to take into account seasonally dry conditions, attractiveness to elephants and local experience in farming. As such, Vathana has managed to develop a food production system that suits the local community as well as the wildlife that surrounds them. This has meant that farmers work intensively on the same fields year on year, rather than clearing new forest for low crop yields on an annual basis. This improves the social dynamic considerably and protects elephants from further clearing of their diminishing habitat. This has also created increased local wealth with hand tractors and permanent housing improving the lives of people considerably. One example is that parents are able to send their children to the local schools instead of working the land, a result that bodes well for the future.

This has led to much peer to peer learning on agriculture, avoiding elephant crop-raiding, etc, beyond the initial scope of the project. Good ideas get shared amongst people and these communities are acting as information hubs for other communities facing similar issues.

People living in the area and interacting with ‘Uncle Elephant’ now also see a clear link between sensitive use of their environment and social benefits. This link means that people have an improved attitude to wildlife and understand that their livelihoods are being bolstered by the presence of elephants. With a structured support program around them, communities are able to live adjacent to elephant populations and even gain social security from having them around. Vathana’s work has gained some profile globally with a number of TV stars and dignitaries dropping by. This reinforces the community’s pride in their achievements and demonstrates respect for the programs being developed.

Vathana has already identified Kon Kok village as his next priority. An isolated forested community known for hunting and logging with large elephant populations all around, he is keen to take this model (and most likely a few community members!) and try and assist this community to better manage their wildlife conflict problems and try and stoke a more sensitive approach to their local environment. No doubt he will get there and whilst nothing is certain, few would underestimate Vathana’s likelihood to succeed. With his gentle manner and willingness to explore different approaches, it is likely we will see another ‘elephant conservation community’ be inaugurated in the 2010.

d. Why this accomplishment is significant on a national and/or international level

Elephant populations throughout Asia continue to decline and this is one of few beacons of hope where local communities directly adjacent to elephant populations are now able to maintain a healthy life. Securing elephant populations is a global priority if we are to see this species into the next century.

Elephants prefer lowland areas as do farming communities so developing mechanisms for joint living such as Vathana's are critical.

Vathana's work serves as a demonstration of a model of local empowerment. This can lead to securing wildlife, habitats and rural people if applied carefully. This project is a strong learning opportunity for others and would benefit from winning this prize, due to media attention and increased profile amongst other elephant range states.

Human-elephant conflict mitigation is an ongoing and severe problem in most countries with elephant populations. It is a result of competing land use issues and practical solutions such as these are required globally.

This work is a demonstration that improving social organization is not necessarily a threat to the Cambodian government and can solve locally relevant issues in a long term manner. This message must be promoted if Cambodia's rural population is going to get a fair deal in the 21st Century.

e. Controversy or concerns surrounding the nominee's work or circumstances

Vathana has not taken an easy path by getting involved in these communities. He left his government post as he found that communities had little trust in officials and he was being hampered by the bureaucracy as they tried to secure funding for their own staff and wants above the communities. Whilst he has managed to stay on good terms with government colleagues and still works with many former colleagues, his transition to a wildlife charity was a robust statement of intent to make the project work even at his own personal cost.

Cambodia still has many problems with land grabbing. Powerful figures take over commercial land for monoculture concessions or often just for speculation. Through his work, Vathana has had to engage some of these groups or individuals to ask for sensitivity to the community's needs. Additionally, large land holders have experienced conflict with elephants and Vathana has had to negotiate to protect the elephants from their security guard's automatic weapons.

He has also had to work with a suspicious and scared community who did not understand why he wanted to assist and what he stood to gain. Building the trust of the communities he works with has been BY FAR the greatest achievement of Vathana's approach. Breaking through decades of mistrust and re-forming social bonds in these communities has been core to the success of the project and the recovering elephant populations.

f. Threats and/or personal risks faced by the nominee (please be specific)

The risks of injury when fending elephants off crops are also considerable. Many of Vathana's team have had close shaves and a number of community members have been injured or killed. However, these types of issues have declined sharply as elephants tend to stay away now, knowing that the guarding groups will consistently shoo them away and that the crops are not generally palatable to them anyway.

There have been more sinister incidents as well where death threats were made against Vathana and his team for assisting communities to establish themselves where rich landowners were hoping to secure land for speculation. These threats were reported to the police and human rights groups in the area to ensure that those issuing the threats knew that many people were aware, should they wish to carry these threats out. However, Vathana continued to work on the site, if anything spending more time in the area. Fortunately, none were followed through but this was a very difficult time for all involved when the project is designed around enabling people and this had elicited such a concerning response.

- g. Has the nominee experienced any hardships, such as being detained, imprisoned, sued, deported, or arrested for his or her work? If yes, please explain.**

This project is focused in southern Cambodia, in very rural and poorly managed land. Vathana has spent months (now years) sleeping in farmers huts, hammocks and out in the bush waiting for elephant raids which can begin at 1am and go through until dawn. He has stayed on the forest edges with the farmers, repelling elephants using fireworks, clapping, shouting and fog horns. This has been a tremendous sacrifice for his family and friends as well as his health. He has never complained or made mention of any such discomfort but the toll on his health from long periods on poor food, lack of sleep and pressure from all sides for him to 'fix' the problem has been considerable.

Criminal record unknown, but unlikely.

- h. Could increased media attention be detrimental or dangerous for the individual, should he/she win the Prize? If so, please explain**

No risk from media attention, though governance issues in Cambodia should not be highlighted in any PR from a security perspective.