Expedition Report: Elephant Valley Project (EVP), Modulkiri, Cambodia

After attending the annual National photography exhibition at the National History Museum and the rise of articles surrounding wildlife tourism, such as National Geographic “Suffering unseen: The dark truth behind wildlife tourism,” I was keen to do volunteer in conservation this summer. I chose Elephant Valley project (EVP) in Mondulkiri, Cambodia due to its rave reviews and also it was voted the most ethical project in South-east Asia. I applied for the fund as I wanted to remerge myself fully into the Cambodian culture and the project itself, without financial worry of it all.

I travelled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia in July 2019, where I would then take a 9-hour bus journey to the project. We then took a further 20-minute coach journey to the project where I met the rest of my team.

Ethos of EVP

EVP has an Indigenous Land Title and works and employs the local members in Pugong. It’s aim is to improve the health and welfare of previously captive elephants. This ecotourism project provides an alternate approach to elephant care, rehabilitation and conservation. Furthermore, educating visitors how to respect and admire these majestic creatures from a distance. The project also highlights that despite elephant riding and bathing is popular
across Asia. The back of an elephant is incredibly weak and riding an elephant encourages this industry and so keeps the animals in detrimental living and working conditions. Plus, it was much more interesting to see the elephants in their natural habitat.

Views from my bedroom into the jungle (left) and the lounge area (right), no service was available at the camp, which was strangely freeing.
Breaking - bit different from my 80p co-op croissant!

Getting to the basecamp and meeting my team

We arrived at base we organised ourselves into the respective chores that needed to get done around camp. Which included cleaning the elephant wash station, feeding the cats (Caption Meow Meow and Hughie), keeping the lounge tidy, making medicine balls (contained turmeric which is an anti-inflammatory and can help the older elephants with arthritis) and watering the plants around basecamp. The daily routine included waking up at 6.30am every day (I really struggled with this as I am really not a morning person). We usually headed out to see the elephants, where we got several “elefies” (elephant selfies) - see below. We also learnt about the elephant’s back story and why they were brought to the sanctuary. The elephants were washed everyday by the mahouts, as they have been in captivity all their life and many of them did not learn how to wash themselves, it is also a way to check for abrasions and scratches.
Cheeky elefie!

Health checks
We also conducted weekly health checks on each elephant. We consisted of lightly pressing against the side of the stomach to check if the stomach was full—so if the elephant was eating enough (also to see if the mahouts were doing a good job and placing the elephants in a place with enough food at night), then pinching the skin lightly behind the leg to see if the skin would spring back into place quickly (this is to see if the elephant is hydrated enough). Checking the side of the elephant for fly bites (black spots) where flies could potentially lay eggs and this could cause infection. Also checking for any scratches or abrasions along the elephant’s side and truck. Also checking if the elephant is well hydrated if the elephants head is in line or above the shoulder blades. And the trunk and eyes are moist. Also measuring around the elephant and doing a calculation you can measure the weight of the elephant, which is recorded on a graph and compared to previous weeks. Also a BCS (Body conditioning Score) is taken of each of the body weight (round and heavy or you can see bones) which is measured from a 2-9 which is visually done. 3-6 is fine.
Elephant Profiles
Learning about all the elephant’s back-story at the sanctuary was emotionally hard-hitting at times, as many of elephants still suffer from PTSD from their time in the logging industry or tourism.

Such as Ruby, the smallest female at the camp, came in 2012 after she had an accident at a logging camp, where she fell down a hill with the logging cart pinning her down in the water, where she has since developed a fear of water. Gingal, was sold by her family to her elephant trader and used in the tourism industry where she was severely mistreated and had a solely sugar-based diet (sugar-cane is incredibly cheap source of energy in Asia, however no nutrition and rots elephant’s teeth). The elephant that stood at for me the most was Sambo, who is arguably the most famous elephant in Cambodia.

As a young elephant she was taken away during the Khmer Rouge (Cambodia Civil War). Where she was used as a “human tractor” and got a cut in her back leg by the Khmer Rouge. The young boy from the family found Sambo and traded her for a water Buffalo. During the 1990s lots of aid was coming in to Phnom Peng, lots of foreigners felt attracted to Sambo as they had never seen an elephant before. Her owner began to earn money from her. And she began to do tricks for people and people fed her Coca Cola, read and hamburgers in return, so her owner didn’t have to spend as much money on her food.

Walking on concrete for more than 30 years during the tourist industry, her padding filed away and she stood on a nail and it grew an abyss (early 2000s), this is when animal organisations started to fight for her release. And she slowly turned up at EVP and met Ruby (Who was the first elephant she had met in 30 years). Sambo was really scared and Rub recognised this so kept calm and her distance. So much of their emotional connections come from interactions with other elephants. Sambo still suffers from PTSD especially from abrupt noises, and has destroyed a motorbike.
1. Planting elephant grass for the elephants

We headed down to the elephant grass where my team and I took machetes and cut down some elephant grass and carried a huge pile up to a nearby banana tree field the rest of the team were hoeing the field. Then we used the machete to cut the stems and the leaves off the elephant grass so it had 3 nodes. We then shared the task of digging trenches and planting the stems with nodes in then shifting the soil over it. And placing dead banana leaves over the nodes for decomposition/compost for the plants to grow. We worked so well as a team which unified the group and we were so proud of our work, after our work we took several photos (see above).

2. Aforestation and burning sumanse weed

Volunteering with the head conservationist, Adam, we planted trees along the edge of the forest on the side of the hill, as the forest seemed to be sliding down the side of The Valley. After planting the tree and mixing the plant soil with ash for fertiliser. We spent the remainder hours pulling a huge amount of súmanse weed (a huge pest in Asia at the moment), which was transported by motorcycle to the shelter where it would dry out and then be burned.
**Challenges**

Despite the fact that EVP is situated on an 300,000 acres of forest and protected by the legislation of ‘indigenous land title.’ However, the new village of Phutmay is next to the project and is constantly encroaching on this protected forest which the elephants heavily rely on. The night rangers are constantly checking out illegal chain sawing in the night, which can be heard at basecamp. The whole irony of the situation, which sums up the circumstance of a lot of south-east Asia, is that the minister of environment and fisheries of Cambodia lives on this illegal land in this new Phutmay Village. Seeing this first-hand was incredibly shocking as the clearing of up to 4 hectares a day was just sickening.

After the project I took a bus across to Siem Riep, where my stayed with my auntie. Also it is where the temples of Angkor Wat are situated and I met up with a friend from High School where we biked around the temples. However, I did see elephant riding as a popular tourist activity (Although I recently read it is getting banned completely in Siem Riep in 2020!). I did experience a huge reality shock of the extent of the wildlife tourism first-hand.

(WARNING-EXPLICIT CONTENT)
I watched as two Chinese dressed in suits point to one of the elephants chained to the wall, where a mahout walked towards and in one swift movement cut the tip of the tail of the elephant with a machete (the hair on an elephant’s tail is meant to bring you “luck” and used in Chinese medicine and made into bracelets). The elephant made a loud toe-curling screech, which stirred up the other elephants and the amount of blood from the tail was just heart-breaking. I was struck by a mix of emotions, sadness; I just spend two life changing weeks at a sanctuary that actively worked against actions like this, shock and angry of the Chinese tourists of the arrogance of their actions that they could think they could buy whatever they want and not be struck by the lack of morality and empathy towards these truly amazing animals.
When I got back to London for my third and final year I ran a 10k in Stratford to raise money for the sanctuary as it is currently struggling financially and planning on returning to the sanctuary and my team meets in the near-future.

In conclusion

I am eternally grateful that the Expedition fund enabled me to go to Cambodia and volunteer at this amazing sanctuary. As after a rather difficult break-up a couple months prior, it was something that really made me smile again. Furthermore, it made me admire the resilience that the people work there have, and in the times that we currently live in, has reinstated in me how important my geography degree really is as wildlife tourism has still a way to go.