



TIBOR KRAUSZ

Katherine Connor, the founder of Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary in Thailand, stands with a female elephant, one of many she has rescued.

Katherine Connor halted her backpacking trip to nurse a baby elephant. Today her sanctuary protects many others.

By **Tibor Krausz** / Correspondent

On a recent afternoon in SUKHOTHAI, THAILAND Katherine Connor was kneeling down in the dust before Wassana, a three-ton Asian elephant that still bears the scars of her former life.

For the British-born animal activist, getting down and dirty is part of her daily routine, and she was on her knees to tend to the older female elephant's foot.

Wassana was once a work elephant forced to haul heavy logs deep in the jungle near Thailand's northern border with war-torn Myanmar (formerly Burma). One day more than a decade ago she stepped on a land mine, which damaged part of one of her front feet. She still walks with a limp.

Every day Ms. Connor, who runs an elephant sanctuary she set up near the historical northern Thai town of Sukhothai, cleans and dresses the animal's foot.

She also tends to the ailments and infirmities of the 10 other rescued jumbos, many of them older, in her care.

"She's a beautiful animal," notes Connor as she applies some salve to Wassana. "You see their scars and injuries, but you still can't fathom what they've been through."

Wassana, whose name means "Fortune" in Thai, endures the treatment with stoic resilience, at one point balling up the tip of her trunk and placing it in her mouth the way some people bite on a forefinger when they're in pain.

"This is hurting her, and she could easily flick me aside, but she doesn't," Connor observes. "I really do think she knows we're trying to help her."

'I knew I had to help'

Connor spotted Wassana walking by the side of the road four years ago near a logging camp. Her forehead was dripping with blood from the stab wounds that her *mahout*, or handler, had inflicted on her with a pointy hook that *mahouts* use for controlling their animals.

"As she walked by, she looked me straight in the eye," Connor recalls. "I knew I had to

help her."

So she did. She launched a fundraising campaign on social media and bought the elephant from her owner.

Now Wassana lives at Connor's Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary (BLES), a 540-acre animal reserve in an idyllic rural setting with rolling hills, lush forests, and scenic ponds. All the elephant residents here have been rescued by Connor from a life of misery in Thailand's logging and tourism trades, which employ elephants as beasts of burden or as tourist attractions.

Lom (Umbrella), a boisterous young female, once had to tramp the streets of the city of Chiang Mai to beg from tourists, who could feed her sugar cane and plantains for the equivalent of a dollar or two. Bwua Ngam (Beautiful Lotus) used to be chained up in a graveyard at night and at a busy roadside by day to beg for handouts from passing motorists. Pang Dow (Lucky Star) was forced to carry tourists on her back in chunky, poorly fitted howdahs (seats),

► NEXT PAGE

which injured her spine. Despite a deformed ankle, she was also forced to haul heavy loads.

At one time all these elephants did was to spend their days doing their masters' bidding and their nights in chains. Now, thanks to Connor, they can roam freely and explore the sprawling sanctuary, nibbling from its fruit trees and frolicking to their heart's content with minimal interference.

"This place is as close to freedom as it is possible for captive elephants in Thailand," says Thean Yonyan, a local *mahout*, one of seven whom Connor employs to look after the elephants.

A century ago the Southeast Asian nation boasted some 100,000 elephants; today only a few thousand remain, with barely a handful left in the wild.

"We just want to let these abused animals be elephants at last," explains Connor, a petite woman with an impish smile. "Each one is an individual and has special needs.

"Boon Thong there," she says, indicating a bony female with a torn ear that is blind in one eye, "loves to be at the back and is fussy about her food. She was sickly when we brought her here, but she's come around."

Bonding with Baby Babar

The elephants have come far, but so has Connor.

Growing up in a sleepy suburb of London, the closest she got to elephants was during visits to the local zoo. As a child she loved Dumbo, the Disney cartoon elephant, but that was the extent of her familiarity with the animals.

Then in 2002, during a backpacking tour of Asia, Connor ended up volunteering at an elephant hospital in northern Thailand where she met Boon Lott, a prematurely born calf with various ailments.

She bonded instantly with the needy baby elephant. On a whim she launched an international "Save Baby Babar" campaign to raise funds for him and his mother, a logging elephant named Pang Tong (Mrs. Gold).

"He was so weak and skinny yet so full of life," Connor recalls.

One day, while out for a frolic, Boon Lott fell

How to take action

UniversalGiving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. Projects are vetted by Universal Giving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause.

Below are groups selected by Universal Giving that help those in need in Thailand:

■ **Globe Aware** (<http://bit.ly/GlobeAware>) promotes volunteer opportunities around the world that increase cultural awareness. Take action: Help elephants in Thailand (<http://bit.ly/ElephantHelper>).

■ **Soi Dog Foundation** (<http://bit.ly/SoiDog>) helps dogs and cats in Thailand by ending animal cruelty and animal homelessness. Take action: Provide emergency medical treatment to a stray cat or street dog in Thailand (<http://bit.ly/ThaiDog>).

■ **Christian Care Foundation for Children with Disabilities** (<http://bit.ly/CCFOUNDATION>) enables disabled children in Thailand to develop to their fullest potential and to fully integrate into mainstream society. Take action: Volunteer in Thailand (<http://bit.ly/ThaiVolunteer>).

down a hillside and his hind legs became paralyzed. Connor was distraught but persisted in trying to save the young jumbo.

"His name means 'Survivor' in Thai, and he was a survivor," she says. "I felt I owed it to him to help him."

She launched another fundraising campaign among friends and animal lovers back home, built a hydrotherapy pool for Boon Lott, and set up a modified equine sling for him so he could stand up. She looked after him day and night, even bedding down beside him for sleep.

Connor tried acupuncture and aromatherapy, as well as traditional Thai massages, to help aid his recovery. She quit her job in retail management in London so she could stay with Boon Lott in Thailand.

"Who knows what it was about this elephant that so captivated me and made me change my life?" she ponders. "I still can't explain it."

By the time the calf was 2, he could move about with the help of a specialized wheelchair Connor had built for him. But he eventually fell down again and died soon afterward.

To honor his memory, in 2005 Connor set up an elephant sanctuary in Boon Lott's name on a small piece of forested land she bought in Sukhothai. She shrugged off warnings about the hardships and hurdles she would face in running a private animal sanctuary as a foreigner in Thailand. She plowed ahead.

"I keep my head down. I don't preach to local people. I try to lead by example," she says.

She started off with just a couple of elephants, one of them Boon Lott's mother. Her modus operandi is simple: She follows up on tips about abused elephants and then takes to social media to raise funds for their purchase. If her funds allow, she also buys up more of the adjoining land for her sanctuary.

"It isn't just me who has done this," Connor stresses. "It's thousands of people worldwide who have helped make this happen [by donating funds]."

Today BLES is home to not just elephants but also to a growing menagerie of other animals Connor has rescued from neglect and abuse, including two humped cows, a dozen dogs, 30 cats, and 25 tortoises. They roam, romp, and crawl unhindered around the premises, making her small office quarters look like a scene from "Doctor Dolittle."

A few years ago Connor married a local *mahout*, and she is now mother to four young children, including a newborn. That means she constantly needs to juggle the competing demands of motherhood and animal conservation. She rarely gets to sleep more than four hours a day, she says.

"I know I can't save every elephant in Thailand," Connor concedes. "But I can help a few."

■ *To learn more about Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary, including how to observe the elephants firsthand by staying at a guesthouse on-site, visit <http://www.blesele.org>.*

Next week's difference-maker:

Through her group Tech Goes Home, **DEB SOCIA** has become a champion for immigrants and those who are poor, disabled, or older and lack access to computers and the Internet.

Know someone who is making a difference?
Let us know at pmad@csmonitor.com.



Ellen Calmus helps families in Mexico meet challenges.



Shan Sethna teaches skiers about avalanche safety.



Sabrina Mahtani gives legal aid to women in Sierra Leone.



Alvaro Cogollo draws on music to inspire a love of nature.

GALLERY OF RECENT PROFILES