

## Elephant Observation Tower Ban Na - Mitigating a human-elephant conflict through community tourism

Bolikhamsay Province, Laos

william majuala

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### Project Summary

#### Elevator Pitch

**Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.**

"Lane Xang", the "Land of One Million Elephants", as Laos once proudly called itself, is nowadays home for probably not more than 650 elephants with a clear downward trend. About a tenth of these animals still live in "Phou Khao Khuay" National Protected Area This 2000 km<sup>2</sup> nature reserve is the closest to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The park is surrounded by numerous human settlements with subsequent threat of encroachment and illegal hunting and plant collection. The government funding for conservation activities is insufficient. Two hydro-power projects add to further loss of habitat for larger wildlife. Thus, human interference may have pushed an entire population of elephants to ...

### About You

#### Contact Information

**Title**

Dr.

**First name**

Klaus

**Last name**

Schwettmann

**Your job title**

Sustainable Tourism Consultant

**Name of your organization**

Ban Na Eco-guide Initiative

**Organization type**

Organization Type

**Annual budget/currency**

Annual Budget/Currency

**Mailing address**

Ban Na, Bolikhamsay Province, Thaphabath District

**Telephone number**

Telephone Number

**Postal/Zip Code****Country****Website**<http://www.trekkingcentrallaos.com>**Email address**[kschwett@laopdr.com](mailto:kschwett@laopdr.com)**Alternative email address**[klaus.schwettmann@gmail.com](mailto:klaus.schwettmann@gmail.com)

### Your idea

This will be the address used to plot your entry on the map.

**Street Address**

Ban Na

**City**

Bolikhamsay Province

**State/Province**

Thaphabath District

**Postal/Zip Code**

**Country**

**Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant**

Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists , Quality of benefit to residents for the destination , Quality of tourism management by destination leadership , Quality of stewardship of the destination.

**Organization size**

Small (1 to 100 employees)

**Indicate sector in which you principally work**

Community Organization

**Year innovation began**

2001

**Indicate sector in which you principally work**

Nature.

**Place your video embed code here from YouTube, Google Video and other video sharing websites. [How to embed a video from YouTube.](#)**

Paste your code here

**Innovation**

**What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.**

To create a model for environment/wildlife protection and the mitigation of an elephant-human conflict with the help of community-based tourism

**Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.**

"Lane Xang", the "Land of One Million Elephants", as Laos once proudly called itself, is nowadays home for probably not more than 650 elephants with a clear downward trend. About a tenth of these animals still live in "Phou Khao Khouay" National Protected Area This 2000 km<sup>2</sup> nature reserve is the closest to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The park is surrounded by numerous human settlements with subsequent threat of encroachment and illegal hunting and plant collection. The government funding for conservation activities is insufficient. Two hydro-power projects add to further loss of habitat for larger wildlife. Thus, human interference may have pushed an entire population of elephants to the outskirts of the park, increasingly forcing them to raid nearby farmlands - surely not to the pleasure of the affected farmers. The inevitable conflict finally culminated in the killing of elephants, jail sentences and hefty fines. Calls for eliminating the elephants were commonly heard. In Ban Na village, just 80 km from Vientiane, a community-based tourism development project has, with considerable success, achieved to mitigate this conflict and calls itself now the "elephant village", where tourists can watch wild elephants in their natural habitat from an observation tower.

**Explain in detail why your approach is innovative**

The heart of the project is an Elephant Observation Tower, located at a major natural saltlick at the edge of a National Park. From here, tourists can experience wild elephants in their natural habitat while being in almost touching distance to them. Sightings are, of course, not guaranteed, since the animals are wild, but the chances are good and possible "no-show-ups" properly explained. The village benefits from the income as do the district and the park authorities. The tower, by many considered as something "special", is financing itself as maintenance is guaranteed by the fees tourists pay for staying overnight. The number of tourists is limited in order to lower security risks and to promote a real nature experience.

**Impact**

**Describe the degree of success you have had to date. How do you measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact on sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How has it transformed or contributed to the power of place or demonstrated the sustainability of tourism? How does your approach minimize negative impacts?**

Strong indicators for success and sustainability are the increasing number of tourists and bookings by national and international tour operators, countless blogs and entries in the internet telling Ban Na is a "must go", interest of ANIMAL PLANET, requests from all over the world for internships, interest of other development projects to learn from our work, various press inquiries, but last but not least, the obvious happiness of the people of Ban Na with the project. The villagers did not take the bait to rip off tourists and did not "teach" their children to beg for a dollar. They showed genuine sadness and anger when elephants were killed recently by outside poachers. Even more is the self-management of the project, which is truly community-based and well running since two and a half years without any help from outside. A villager is just setting up a small guesthouse on his own, additional guides have been recruited and trained by the experienced (with more applications than currently needed), and the services such as provision of food and drinks improved. Mr. Bounthanom as manager gets invited by NGOs and government institutions as resource person to talk about his experiences, even in other provinces.

**In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?**

During the project planning and implementation period, the villagers were kept informed and asked in village meetings for their opinion. Discussions during such meetings were often very lively and sometime controversial, seen as good sign of active involvement. The villagers always had the last word and decisions were made by consensus. Finally the villagers were handed over complete responsibility for the project thus being now a wholly village owned "business". The use of the revolving fund, which already accumulated considerable money, is controlled by a village elected fund management team plus a supervising team; both are gender balanced.

**How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?**

Alone the chance to see wild elephants at close range in their natural habitat is creating enthusiasm. It is exciting to wait for the elephants while listening to the sounds in the jungle. But even if the animals do not show up, spending a night on the tower is for the vast majority a great experience. Seeing elephants many regard just an "extra", although they're the "object of the desire". The guides are enthusiastic, too, giving the tourists a feeling of really being welcome. The project draws quite a number of young people who want to work as volunteer there.

**Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area's cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.**

Tourists show keen interest in the goals of the project. The feed-back is great and encouraging. They learn first-hand about the problems villagers encounter when living close to animals "competing" with them for the same crops. The villagers learn to live with and finally appreciate wildlife, since elephants are not anymore their enemies but seen as an asset worth to protect - but they are proud, because outsiders are suddenly interested in the achievements of the Ban Na people. The same is true for the local authorities. They see: only an intact environment brings rewards, in prestige and money wise.

**Sustainability**

**How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.**

The project is now generating enough income to finance itself. There is no fixed annual budget as it has to rely on the "market" forces. A clear price system for the services is in place. Foreign volunteers regularly teach English and help occasionally in other fields free of charge. With no permanently hired personnel, all persons involved are villagers, who contribute their time either voluntarily or being occasionally hired. The exception are the 16 guides who are working part-time and get a fee of 8 Dollars/day for their guiding services in a rotating system. Only one person, Mr. Bounthanom, gets a tiny additional salary for his many management activities, paid by the village from income generated through the tower. Each tourist staying overnight on the tower has to pay 10 Dollars. This money is used for maintenance and compensation expenses in case damages caused by raiding elephants occur.

**Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?**

The project has proven to be sustainable. Since more than two years it is managed by the villagers and financing itself without any help from outside. The popularity is increasing as is the number of arriving tourists. Different organizations, even from Thailand, come to see the achievements and learn from the project. We nevertheless need to improve the standards to finally serve as a real model applicable in other sectors. Therefore we need to find support for a second phase, which means to improve the services and the knowledge about the elephants, but not to keep the project alive as such.

**What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?**

The project is running very well. The barrier is to find some more financial and technical support (which includes a professionally trained adviser) for a limited period of time (2-3 years) to push through a second phase as already stated. Though running well the project is now kept somehow where it is without further significant improvement. The villagers, as simple farmers, naturally lack the educational background or experience that goes beyond the village boundaries as well as the facilities and financial means to further develop the project in the sense of innovation to satisfy international market demands. It is still a raw product to be fine-tuned.

**What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.**

Our common goal is to let the elephants live in peace, to provide tourists a good wildlife experience and to establish a model for environment protection reciprocal in other areas of rural development. A second phase of the project, with expert's advice included, has been drafted. Unfortunately, adequate funding has yet to be found. This phase shall include more training for villagers, establish more educational facilities ("nature trail", information centre), do thorough research on the elephants, test alternative methods of keeping elephants from the fields, get more villagers actively engaged, introduce more handicraft, improve accommodation, involve local schools.

**The Story**

**What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.**

At a time aiming to support the park management in its efforts to find sustainable solutions for its huge conservation task through tourism, we became aware of a smoldering elephant- human conflict at the edge of the park and that farmers began to shoot elephants when raiding their fields. We carefully approached the affected villages and it finally came down to one seriously attacked village, Ban Na. After several village meetings asking for their interest and support – we started to develop tourism there from the scratch – an endeavor with open end.

The early idea was to offer adventurous tourists the opportunity to track down elephants without much more service. We quickly realized that this was neither beneficial enough for the villagers nor would it be good for the elephants being "chased" all the time. Finally the idea came up to build an elephant observation tower, from where tourists can safely watch elephants with a minimum of disturbance of the elephants. We would be able to regulate the stream of tourists (obeying a maximum number of visitors at one time = carrying capacity), and the villagers would benefit financially from the new visitors. The goal was that the villagers themselves could manage their tourism business, and, in turn, would give the elephants a chance to be left in peace. In short: mitigate the elephant-human conflict with alternative income, offer an exciting experience for tourists, learning about wildlife for villagers and tourists alike, making "friends out of foes".

Mr. Bounthanom, a rice farmer was the first who shot an elephant in 1999. He finally turned his heart, being a genuine conservationist now - a remarkable change that even attracted ANIMAL PLANET (Discovery Channel) to feature him. He is now the guide leader and tourism manager in

the village. Without him the project would have hardly been realized.

The project is small, but the number of tourists is increasing. The attitude of the people in and around the village has measurably changed. No elephant was harmed anymore by a villager from the area and though poaching occurred (definitely by outsiders!) the villagers were very sad about these three incidents. Even after a man in a neighboring village was killed by elephants in a tragic accident, no call of removing elephants was heard. Tourists bring money for the guides, village revolving fund (steadily increasing), the park authorities and district for trekking permits, for the maintenance of the tower, with a certain percentage set aside for compensation in case of serious damage caused by elephants, as well as income through home-stay, food sale, handicraft etc.

A Thailand-based volunteer placement organization ([www.openmindprojects.org](http://www.openmindprojects.org)) is helping by providing volunteers who teach English and give other assistance like establishing the website for the project ([www.trekkingcentrallaos.com](http://www.trekkingcentrallaos.com)) to the village. Since two years the project is run by the village itself and it is still prospering. The villagers recruit and train new guides, learn English and maintain the (safety of) the tower and improve their services entirely on their own.

**Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers' marketing material.**

Trained as biologist, I first worked in Laos with the Department of Forestry (1997-2000) as adviser for environmental education and public awareness. I then switched to the Lao National Tourism Administration as consultant for eco-tourism development from 2000 to 2006 and was active in that capacity for nearly 5 years in two villages (Ban Na, Ban Hatkhai) and Phou Khao Khouay National Protected Area. Though not directly connected with the project anymore, I still support the village on a voluntary basis. Currently I am employed by "Green Discovery Laos", a leading adventure tours and eco-tourism operator, as senior adviser.

**Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.**

After a day of trekking through rice fields and dense forest, enjoying sweeping waterfalls and giggling rapids in crystal-clear streams and hiking full of suspense inside elephant territory, it is a great experience to watch out for the elephants themselves. They, young and old, come to the saltlick, usually during night, and take a bath there in a puddle of water, delightfully smacking, burping, moaning and trumpeting. One may have heard them already during the day from a distance, but to get so close to them from the safety of the tower is simply breath-taking and unforgettable. Sleeping there is like spending the night in a tree-house, seven meter above ground, deep in the jungle, and woken up in the morning mist and first sun rays in-midst a noisy concert staged by countless birds. Soon all the noise suddenly subsides and tranquility takes its reign.

Direct contact with villagers, either in the village or with the guides on tour, is always a great experience. While preparing food or playing cards with the guests, they know a lot of stories to tell (if not in English then in Lao and body language – it works and lots of laughter is guaranteed).

**What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?**

We would like to work more closely with organizations that are engaged in wildlife protection (WWF, WCS and others, either in-country but also international) and would like to exchange knowledge or do complementary work (e.g. research) that we alone cannot do due to lack of funding, technical equipment and/or expertise. Joint marketing, where feasible, would be of help to promote the common goals and achievements.

Important is the cooperation with private tour operators. Provided they can support the principles of the project, they are welcome to sell the project and channel the incoming visitors, thus bringing the project closer to nature enthusiasts.

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**Source URL:** <https://www.changemakers.com/geotourismchallenge/entries/elephant-observation-tower-ban-na-mitigating-human#comment-0>