

HUAIKHAENGAENG: A sanctuary of beauty

The magnificent Thai riverine ecosystem and World Heritage Site needs vigilance to maintain its majesty

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Mist hangs in the air early one morning as a green peafowl calls from up-river. A male bird, its long tail feathers glistening in the early sun, struts across a sandbar looking for something to eat. A pair of wreathed hornbills fly into a fruiting fig tree and two white-winged ducks honk as they wing past Khao Ban Dai ranger station deep in the interior of Thailand's top protected area.



Wild Water buffalo herd.

the river is really something to see. The call of a male peafowl is truly inspirational, its feathers a beautiful translucent green colour. These birds still thrive in the deciduous and bamboo thickets along the river and in the interior, and this sanctuary has one of the last and largest wild concentrations of this species in the world.

Mammals, from elephants to treeshrews, survive in good numbers in most areas of the sanctuary. Due to an incredible amount of prey, animals such as deer, wild pigs and cattle, tigers, leopards and Asian wild dogs thrive in good numbers too. There are eight species of cat from the tiger down to the little leopard cat, plus another eight species of civet. Three species of wild bovid including gaur, banteng and wild water buffalo are here, probably the only place in the world where this occurs.



White-winged duck.

Carnivores such as tigers and leopards are common in the interior, as are the herbivores. The balance of nature is played out everyday where eat or be eaten is the norm. Vultures were once found here but have virtually disappeared from Thai skies primarily due to people poisoning carcasses. Illegal poaching, logging and gathering of forest products still occur on a small scale and is a constant drain on all the species of flora and fauna.

Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary is part of the Western Forest Complex, the largest forested area in Southeast Asia, which covers some 15,000km². All the protected areas are the responsibility of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP). Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary to the west is also a World Heritage Site and forms a continuous forest with Huai Kha Khaeng.

There are many heroes of the past that have been associated with nature but one man stands out. Seub Nakhasathien dedicated his life to Huai Kha Khaeng and the nature conservation movement. In September 1990, this dedicated ranger, who fought hard for the rights of wild flora and fauna, took his own life at the headquarters area. A large bronze statue has been built close to his house in his honour - now his spiritual home. Many people flock to this magic place, including myself, to pay homage to him.



Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, which covers some 2,780km² of mountainous forest in Uthai Thani province in the western central plains, is one of the greatest biospheres on the planet. Its status as a Unesco World Heritage Site is well deserved. The river named Huai Khaeng flows through the middle of the sanctuary for about 100km before joining the Khwae Yai River further south. This riverine habitat has an unmatched biodiversity with the many tributary streams course through its hilly woodlands. Thousands of plants and animals thrive here, and the sanctuary is truly a tribute to the Kingdom's natural heritage.

Deciduous and hill evergreen forests make up most of this forest. Thousands of insect species thrive and the bird life is exceptional. There are an incredible 22 woodpecker species - including the white-bellied and great slaty, the largest of the Old World woodpeckers - one of the highest densities in the world for comparable areas. Hornbills and fish-eagles are also found along the river, and all up there are more than 350 recorded bird species.

Thailand's largest bird, the green peafowl is now rare and found only in a few locations in the Kingdom. It is the most spectacular of all Thai birds, especially in November when the breeding season begins. The magnificent tail feather display when the male walks along



Tuskless bull elephant.

The most significant species in the protected area is likely to be the buffalo. This is the last wild herd in the Kingdom, and Southeast Asia for that matter. Centuries ago, wild water buffalo were found in many forests and rivers. A mature bull can weigh up to a tonne and have hooves 20cm across. They leave deep tracks in the sandy soil along the river. These magnificent bovids are much larger and more aggressive than their domestic counterparts. Wild buffalo have a distinct forehead with horn bases closer together than domestic buffalo, whose boss is wider. Wild buffalo have a fierce temperament and will group together in the herd to face a predator such as a tiger or Asian wild dog. Male solitary bulls will charge without hesitation. Many a hunter has had a close call or been killed by these massive low-slung beasts.

Due to a very small population of just 50 or so, the future of the wild water buffalo in Thailand is uncertain. Many dangers threaten them, such as foot and mouth disease, which could easily be passed on by domesticated buffalo living just outside the southern border of the sanctuary. In the past, local villagers have deliberately mingled their buffalo with the wild herd so their offspring would be sturdy. Also, a few solitary bulls have come out of the sanctuary looking for females in heat. This is a very dangerous situation, which, if not checked, could lead to a decline of all the classic herbivores in Huai Kha Khaeng. The southern border at Krueang Krai ranger station remains a gateway for danger and must be protected at all costs.



Muntjac on the run.

Seub helped propose Huai Kha Khaeng as a World Heritage Site, along with Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary to the west. But he did not live long enough to see the proposal accepted. Together, the two sanctuaries help protect 6,427km² of pristine wildlife habitat. They make up one of the finest and largest protected areas in Southeast Asia. The flora and fauna of this area includes an exceptional number of species from four bio-geographic zones - Sino-Himalayan, Sundaic, Indo-Burmese and Indo-Chinese - with significant habitat diversity.

Four or five years ago, the department built a huge visitor centre and three VIP bungalows at Khao Ban Dai. More than 100 construction workers camped out here and materials were trucked into the location. Construction took more than a year. During and just after the completion of these buildings, I made many trips to the station only to find out that green peafowls and many other creatures normally seen had disappeared, or it seemed that way. Last month, I made a trip to Khao Ban Dai and it was an inspiration to see that green peafowls, wreathed hornbills, fish-eagles, bantengs and gaurs have returned to this magnificent natural paradise. It means, increased protection and patrols by the DNP are effective in the long run.

The statue of Seub Nakhasathien.



However, the importance of saving Huai Kha Khaeng for future generations cannot be stressed enough. It is hoped that management of the protected area will continue to improve, and government funding will also increase. More personnel are needed to take care of these valuable places. As it stands, budgets have been consistently slashed across the board for all protected areas over the last few years by bean counters. The department's old policies need to be improved, and a constant watch kept for corruption, which can be tough to prevent. Only time will tell if Huai Kha Khaeng can survive such threats.

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