

A close-up photograph of an elephant's head and trunk in a river. The elephant is splashing water, with droplets captured in mid-air around its trunk. The background is a lush green forest.

Yok Don National Park has scrapped tourist elephant rides, instead trumpeting Vietnam's first ethical trips with the saddle-free animals. **Jamie Fullerton** meets them among the undergrowth

越南Yok Don國家公園正式結束騎大象活動，轉而推廣越南首項動物道德旅遊。Jamie Fullerton在灌叢之間與象群相遇

Photos by **Matjaž Tančič**

The naked elephants

大象親善之旅



The head-shunt is ruthlessly effective. Y'Khun the Asian elephant trundle-crunches through greenery, forehead lowered, then fells a 20-foot

tree with a decisive nudge. She and her elephant pal Bun Kham writhe their trunks around the defeated tree, python-like appendages shoving vines into wobbly pink mouths.

A minute later, chomping momentarily over, the elephants stand together, their wrinkly grey skin protected from the sun by Yok Don National Park's green leaf ceiling. Trunks affectionately dab faces before searching foliage for edibles.

"They act like auntie and niece," says Dionne Slagter, animal welfare manager of the Animals Asia Foundation since 2017. Before working in Yok Don, Slagter was based at Cambodia's Elephant Valley Project and has also worked on conservation projects with primates. "They make low frequency rumbles," she says as we watch the elephant pair from behind long grass. "You'll see the sinus above the trunk move and they'll stand with their ears out. It's like when the French see each other and give two kisses."

A mahout – elephant trainer – clomps into view carrying banana trees, prompting Y'Khun and Bun Kham's ears to flap in anticipation. "These ladies have a strong bond," Slagter

says, smiling as the eight-foot long snacks are dropped in front of the animals. I just about hear her voice above their scoffing sounds.

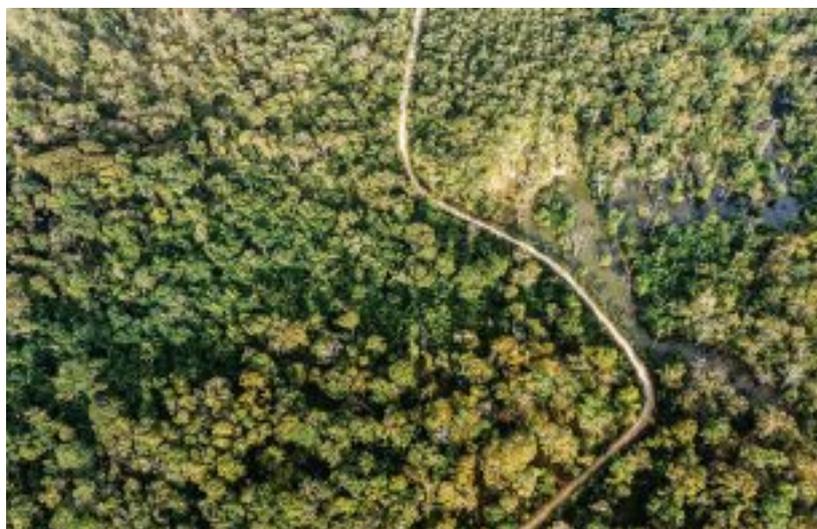
These two elephants – along with two others in Yok Don, in Vietnam's south-central Dak Lak province – spend up to 20 hours a day eating. But before last summer, their schedule was far less appealing. Each morning they would have clunky metal howdahs – elephant saddles – strapped to their backs, wearing them for up to 10 hours a day. Between giving rides to tourists, they would be sporadically whacked with sticks by mahouts to keep them obedient.

Similar scenes can still be seen at tourist attractions near the government-owned park. The Yok Don elephants, though, gave their final tourist rides last July. Concerned that the animals were becoming weaker – Y'Khun is in her 60s – and to cater to tourists demanding non-invasive elephant experiences, park officials agreed to work with Animals Asia on what they called the country's first ethical elephant tours. If successful, this could be groundbreaking for animal lovers and elephants alike in Vietnam.

On the trips, launched last October, tourists

Left to right: Mahouts looking out for their charges; inside Yok Don National Park; Dionne Slagter, animal welfare manager of the Animals Asia Foundation; aerial view of the lush Yok Don National Park

左至右：象夫從遠處看護象群；Yok Don國家公園一隅；亞洲動物基金動物權益經理Dionne Slagter；鳥瞰茂盛的Yok Don國家公園



“I nearly cried because it was a promise to them: This is your last day”

我幾乎哭出來了，那是對大象的承諾，牠們以後都不用再受苦

那一下頭銜真是狠而準。亞洲象Y'Khun在樹叢之間緩慢移動，令途經的樹枝沙沙作響，她低下頭來，將一棵20呎高大樹乾脆俐落地推倒。牠跟大象同伴Bun Kham用長長的鼻子捲著樹幹，將樹葉塞進粉紅色的口裡。

一分鐘後，兩頭大象似乎咀嚼完畢，站在一起。在Yok Don國家公園的綠蔭保護下，其滿佈皺摺的灰色皮膚免受陽光侵害。長鼻子溫柔地拍拍臉龐，然後再伸進枝葉裡，搜尋食物。

「牠們就像阿姨和姨甥女一樣。」Dionne Slagter說。她自2017年起擔任亞洲動物基金的動物權益經理，前來Yok Don國家公園之前，曾在柬埔寨展開大象谷計劃，也參與過靈長類動物的保育項目。我們在長草叢中觀察這兩頭大象，Slagter接著說：「牠們會發出一些低頻率叫聲。你可以看到其鼻竇在抖動，兩頭大象站著伸出耳朵，就像法國人見面時

親親兩頰。」

此時，象夫扛著香蕉樹走出來，Y'Khun和Bun Kham見狀，即時快樂地拍著耳朵。

「這兩位女士默契十足。」Slagter說。那幾棵八呎高的點心丟在大象前面，讓她由衷微笑。大象大聲咀嚼，我好不容易才聽到Slagter的說話。

Yok Don國家公園位於越南中南部多樂省，這兩頭雌象和公園內的另外兩頭，每天都要花上20小時進食。但去年夏季之前，象群的生活比現在艱苦得多。牠們每天都要戴上笨重的金屬象轎，由早到晚揹著長達十小時。即使不用乘載遊客的時候，象夫偶然也會用棍子擊打大象，使牠們服從指令。

在這個公營公園附近的旅遊景點，上述情況依然時有所聞。不過，Yok Don國家公園的大象，於去年七月已完成最後一次載客任務。由於擔憂大象日漸退化——Y'Khun已年屆60多歲——以及為了滿足旅客對非侵擾式大象體驗的需求，

公園管理層決定跟亞洲動物基金合作，籌備該國首項大象道德旅遊活動。

新旅程於去年10月推出，遊客不會觸摸到大象，而象轎也只會象徵式地懸掛在公園餐廳的天花板上。參加者親身踏足森林，哪裡看到大象就會停下來觀看，了解牠們如何適應野外新生活。在象夫的陪同下，大象可以在十一萬五千公頃的公園內自由走動，隨意進食、游泳和散步。不過，牠們大部分時間都在吃東西。

Slagter是荷蘭人，前來Yok Don國家公園是為了協助安排過渡工作。「騎大象活動的最後一天，我拍了一些照片，心想，這一天終於來臨了，越南大象的命運從此改寫。」她憶述當時情景，聲音變得有點沙啞。「我幾乎哭出來了，那是對大象的承諾，保證以後都不用再受苦。」

Yok Don國家公園旅遊主管Vu Duc Gioi指出，全球各地對動物權益日漸重視，令他相信

don't touch the elephants, whose howdahs are symbolically strung from the ceiling of Yok Don's restaurant. Instead, visitors simply head into the forest on foot to watch the elephants wherever they happen to be and as they go about their new lives amid the greenery. The elephants roam alongside mahouts but are free to travel wherever they want in the 115,000-hectare park – eating, swimming and strolling where they choose. But mainly eating.

Netherlands-born Slagter was here for the transition. “On that final riding day I took photos because I thought: This is it... this is changing history for elephants in Vietnam,” she says, her voice cracking slightly at the memory. “I nearly cried because it was a promise to them: This is your last day.”

Vu Duc Gioi, head of Yok Don tourism, says that the recent rise in global awareness of animal rights gave him confidence that the time was right for the switch. With Asian zoos regularly shamed on social media for appalling conditions, the animal rights climate is decidedly different to that of 20 years ago – that was when the first tourist elephant rides were offered in the province to almost no backlash.

Since around 2014, Gioi says, Yok Don ran “care” elephant tours on which tourists could feed and wash the animals. These still involved tourists touching elephants, though, and the riding experiences were on offer to those who still wanted to saddle up. “Many people told us that they didn't want to ride... After we found support from Animals Asia, we changed completely,” Gioi says. “The animals aren't strong enough to carry tourists. We had to change.”

Animal rights activists might call the change belated. Recent kickback against elephant-riding in other Asian countries has already resulted in many non-invasive encounters being offered in place of rides. In 2006, Cambodia's Elephant Valley Project launched with the motto, “Let them roam free”. Laos' Elephant Conservation Center, opened in 2011, has around 30 elephants in a protected forest. In the mid-2000s, Elephant Nature Park, near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, phased out elephant performances and focused on caring for them instead.

According to Slagter, Vietnam lags behind these neighbours partly because of the

comparatively low number of elephants in the country. There are around 80 captive in Vietnam, used for riding, farm work or in zoos, compared to thousands in Thailand.

The deeply embedded tradition of using working elephants in Dak Lak further explains why the province has not become a bastion of animal rights awareness. In Ban Don Tourist Centre, which showcases the culture of the local M'Nong ethnic minority, I see a 38-year-old female elephant named H'Tuk standing, chained to a tree. Howdah on her back, she's surrounded by dung as tourists use her as a selfie backdrop.

Close by is a statue of Vua San Voi, described as one of the original mahouts in Dak Lak province's Ban Don county, who died in 1937 and was called Elephant King due to his owning nearly 500 elephants in his lifetime. Pinned to walls near the statue, which depict the king with chains slung over his shoulder, photos show M'Nong people astride elephants.

The M'Nong traditionally used elephants to carry farm equipment around the rural region, before shifting the focus of working elephants to tourist rides over the past decade. To tame the creatures, before the method was criminalised in 1995, they would take young elephants from wild herds. The calves would then undergo a process known as “breaking their spirit”. This involved the animal being tied up, starved and beaten before a “saviour” owner was introduced to it, pampering it and giving food to instil loyalty.

If they survived this, when the ropes were cut elephants tended to emerge newly obedient. “After taming, elephants became family members,” says 28-year-old Thao Nguyen Le Thanh, whose human family founded Ban Don Tourist Centre in 1998. “Every year owners make elephant birthday celebrations, and sometimes when the elephants die, they make tombs.”

Back in Yok Don we paddle in a river where Thong Ngan, a young male elephant, is enjoying a dip. He slaps the water with his trunk, snorting out wet trumpet sounds. As well as blatantly showing off, he is washing himself against the riverbed, I'm told.

Thong Ngan, whose name means “Gold Medal”, was moved to Yok Don in 2001. Park officials claimed this was because his wild herd came into conflict with humans,



GET THERE

To get to Yok Don National Park from Ho Chi Minh City, take an hour-long domestic flight or seven-hour daytime bus or a sleeper bus to the city of Buon Ma Thuot. From there take a one-hour taxi ride to the park (450,000 VND if booked through the park).

前往該處

從胡志明市前往Yok Don國家公園，可選擇乘坐機程一小時的內陸航班，或車程七小時的日間巴士或臥舖巴士，前往邦美蜀市。抵達邦美蜀市後，可乘坐的士（車程一小時）直達國家公園（如透過公園預約，車費為450,000越南盾）。



This page:
An elephant walking
with its mahout

左圖：
大象與象夫結伴而行

牠們會被綁起來、挨餓和被虐待，直至一位「救贖者」主人的出現，細心照料和餵飼牠們，從而培養歸屬感。不過，這個方法已在1995年列為刑事罪行。

如果幼象能夠捱過這一關，解開束縛後便會保持高度服從性。現年28歲的Thao Nguyen Le Thanh說：「被馴服後的大象，會成為家庭的一分子。」其家族於1998年成立邦敦遊客中心。「主人每年都會為牠們的大象慶祝生日，當有些大象死去，主人也會為其設墳。」

回到Yok Don國家公園，我們在河上泛舟，一頭名叫Thong Ngan的年輕雄象也在享受河浴。牠用象鼻拍打水花，鼻腔呼出濕潤的鳴聲，在河床上一邊炫耀自己，一邊洗澡。

Thong Ngan是「金牌」的意思，牠於2001年遷移至Yok Don國家公園，園方聲稱是因為其野生象群與人類發生衝突；不過，動物保護組織懷疑那只是多獲一頭象的藉口。一如區內其他被象夫囚養和訓練的大象，Thong Ngan也慣於負載耕具及讓遊客騎在身上，直至一個較具道德的嶄新模式出現。

這頭象精力旺盛，洗澡時就像頑皮的嬰孩般不斷撥水。Slagter解釋說：「研究人員認為，他之所以這樣喧鬧，是因為成長期間缺乏象群的學習榜樣。」此時，Thong Ngan正在向著我們潑灑河水。「牠已經20多歲了，但行為還像一頭幼象，真是一個巨寶寶。」

Slagter表示，取消騎大象之後的觀光模式，已經開始彰顯成效。她說，象群現在有更多時間進食，是「多樂省最圓潤

現在是時候作出改變。亞洲不少動物園因為環境惡劣，經常在社交媒體上受到抨擊，如此關注動物權益的氛圍，與20年前截然不同——當年騎大象活動首次引入該省，幾乎沒有任何反對聲音。

Gioi表示，Yok Don國家公園自2014年起推出「照顧」大象之旅，讓旅客親手餵飼和清潔大象。不過，參加者仍然會觸摸到大象，而園方也會為希望騎乘大象的人士安排活動。他說：「很多人都向我們反映意見，說不想再騎象了……我們得到亞洲動物基金的支持後，便徹底作出改變。象群其實不夠氣力乘載遊客，變革是必然的。」

不過，動物權益分子或許會說，這改變來得有點遲疑。近

年，騎大象活動在亞洲其他國家引起激烈迴響，最終促成一系列非侵擾式大象觀光活動。2006年，柬埔寨的大象谷計劃正式面世，宗旨是「讓牠們自由漫步」。寮國的大象保育中心於2011年成立，大約30頭大象於受保護森林裡棲息。而在2000年代中期，泰國清邁附近的大象自然公園則推動淘汰大象表演，專注照料這群動物。

據Slagter表示，越南之所以落後於亞洲鄰國，部分原因是該國的大象數目相對地少。越南現時約有80頭大象被用作騎乘、農耕或在動物園展示，相比起泰國的數千頭要少得多。

多樂省的人民習慣使用大象工作，這項根深蒂固的傳統，解釋了為何該省尚未成為動物權益的橋頭堡。邦敦遊客中心

展示少數民族墨儂族的本土文化。在那裡，我看見一頭名叫H'Tuk的38歲雌性大象揹著象轎，被鎖鏈綁在樹旁。牠身邊滿是排泄物，遊客都將牠當作自拍佈景。

不遠處是Vua San Voi的塑像。他是多樂省邦敦其中一位最早期的象夫，於1937年逝世，畢生擁有近500頭大象，故此譽為「大象之王」。塑像呈現的他，肩膀上搭著一些鎖鏈；而附近牆上的照片，則顯示墨儂族人跨坐在象背上的情景。

傳統上，墨儂族人運用大象在鄉郊地區搬運農耕工具，過去十年則改為提供遊客騎乘活動。為了馴服大象，他們會將幼象從野生象群中帶走，讓幼象經歷一個「挫敗」的過程。

“The elephants’ skin is healthier and they have fewer parasites because they can dust themselves”

大象的皮膚現時更健康，牠們也不時進行沙土浴，減少身上的寄生蟲

although animal rights groups suspect this may be an excuse they used to gain another elephant. Like many other captive elephants in the region, having been trained by a mahout, he carried farm equipment and gave rides before the new, more “ethical” model began.

He’s boisterous, splashing like a hyperactive toddler at bath time. “Researchers think he’s noisy because he didn’t grow up with herd role models,” says Slagter, as Thong Ngan sprays us with river water. “He’s in his twenties but you’d expect this from a younger elephant – showing how big he is.”

Slagter says the effects of the no-riding model are already showing. Having more eating time the elephants are, she claims, “the roundest in Dak Lak”. Gioi says “fattest”. Slagter laughs, adding, “It’s natural – fattening for dry season. Their skin is healthier and they have fewer parasites because they can dust themselves.”

Yok Don is not Nelly Nirvana quite yet. Mahouts still ride the elephants’ necks, bareback. Some still insist on wielding metal-tipped bull hooks to help control their animals, much to Slagter’s annoyance, and at night each elephant has one foot attached to a tree via a 40-foot chain. This allows them to feed all night, but the long-term plan is



This page:
Vu Duc Gioi, head of tourism at Yok Don

上圖：
Yok Don 國家公園旅遊
主管 Vu Duc Gioi

的象」。而Gioi就用「最肥胖」來形容牠們。Slagter笑著補充：「增加體重迎接旱季，是最自然不過的事情。現在，牠們的皮膚更健康，也不時進行沙土浴，減少身上的寄生蟲。」

不過，Yok Don 國家公園依然沒有進步空間。象夫仍會直接騎在象背上，有些堅持使用裝有金屬尖刺的棍子來控制大象，這點讓Slagter尤其反感。入夜後，每頭象的其中一條腿都會透過40呎長的鎖鏈拴在樹幹上。這種安排讓牠們整晚都能進食，但長遠的目標是設立夜間圍欄區，讓大象無拘無束地走動。

無論如何，大象保育已獲得

正面的開端。隨後，以英國為基地的Olsen動物基金會向Yok Don 國家公園捐贈13,000美元，補償取消騎大象活動首年的收入損失。園方認為，隨著越來越多旅客反對騎大象，他們對非侵擾式觀光滿有信心，讓公園不用獲取資助也能收支平衡。

Slagter說，當地政府對此深表支持。越南現在只有大約100頭野生象和80頭馴養象，令當局甚為憂心。任何能夠提高大象繁殖率的措施，他們都無任歡迎。根據公園巡邏員稱，該國近30年來，從未試過在馴養的環境下成功繁殖幼崽。

Slagter表示：「繁殖大象並非亞洲動物基金的首要任務。



OTHER ETHICAL WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

其他野生動物道德旅遊體驗

Biosphere Expeditions, Maldives

This non-profit organises conservation projects in various locations. In the Maldives, you can help marine biologists study and protect the Maldives’ coral reefs and whale shark population.

馬爾代夫 Biosphere Expeditions

這個非牟利機構於多個地方舉辦生態保育項目。在馬爾代夫，你可以透過該項目協助海洋生物學家研究及保護該國的珊瑚礁和鯨鯊群。
biosphere-expeditions.org

The Dorsal Effect, Lombok

This project helps fishermen previously involved with the shark’s fin trade find an alternative source of income: by hiring them to take tourists out for snorkeling and beach-hopping boat trips.

印尼龍目島

The Dorsal Effect

這項目旨在幫助過去從事魚翅貿易的漁民覓得另一種的替代收入來源。他們會受僱於該項目，負責帶領旅客出海浮潛，或者接載旅客遊船河，前往島上多個漂亮沙灘觀光。

thedorsaleffect.org



Left to right:
Statue of Vua San Voi, one of the original mahouts in Ban Don county; free-roaming elephants enjoying mealtime

左至右：
Vua San Voi的塑像，他是多樂省邦敦其中一位最早期的象夫；大象自由漫步，同時享受進食時光

to create night enclosures in which they can walk untethered.

It's a positive start and Olsen Animal Trust, a UK-based animal welfare organisation, has given Yok Don US\$13,000 to compensate it for the loss of earnings ditching tourist rides will cause in its first year without them. Park officials say that with more and more tourists being aware about the detrimental effects of elephant riding, they are confident that the non-invasive tours will soon be financially sustainable without subsidies.

Slagter says the government is supportive. With authorities concerned about there being only around 100 wild elephants in Vietnam, in addition to around 80 captive, measures that could increase the chances of elephant breeding are welcomed. Park rangers say that there have not been successful captive elephant births in the country for 30 years.

"Breeding isn't high on Animals Asia's priority list," says Slagter. "But we're convinced that if we provide good welfare it'll happen." For now the locals seem happy

to keep trying. In Ban Don Tourist Centre a mahout giggles as he shows me a video on his phone of his elephant H'Tuk being mounted by Thong Ngan.

New calves may not be arriving yet, despite these "romantic" scenes, but the ripples of Yok Don's new model are being felt. Managers at neighbouring elephant attractions have consulted Yok Don staff about improving elephant welfare. Gioi says that with the park being government-run, the change will help increase the chances of a full elephant-riding ban being implemented in Vietnam one day. "I'm confident it could happen," he says.

Just before leaving the park I ask Slagter why she feels bonded to these animals. She closes her eyes, leaving an elephant-sized pause before sharing her answer. "What we put them through... how we worked them, how they were broken," she says. "They still tolerate us and don't seem to hold grudges.

Find out more by visiting yokdonnationalpark.vn

但我們相信，如果能夠改善牠們的福祉，這點始終總會實現。」到現時為止，當地人似乎樂於繼續嘗試。在邦敦遊客中心，一位象夫笑著向我展示一段手機短片，片中他的大象H'Tuk正被Thong Ngan騎著。

儘管出現如此「浪漫」的情景，但新生命的出現或許仍言之尚早。不過，Yok Don國家公園的嶄新運作模式，已在區內泛起漣漪。附近一些大象景點的管理人員，向Yok Don的員工請教改善大象福祉的方法。Gioi表示，由於Yok Don國家公園由政府營運，這項轉變將有助推動越南全面取締騎象活動。「我有信心這天終會來臨。」他如是說。

離開公園前，我問Slagter為甚麼對這種動物特別充滿感情。她閉上眼，停頓了好一會才開口說話，那一刻公園四周蟬鳴不斷。「人類讓牠們飽受煎熬，利用牠們，令牠們心力交瘁。」她說。「但牠們仍然百般忍耐，不帶任何怨恨。人類應該向大象好好學習。」

Yok Don國家公園官網：
yokdonnationalpark.vn

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