



INTO THE WILD

At the ancient Cambodian temples of Angkor Wat, tourists marvel at the workmanship of a lost kingdom, oblivious to the creatures that once called the surrounding forests home. Overhunting by poachers left the dense jungle bereft of the wild animals that roamed the area, but a passionate group of environmentalists is now returning gibbons, langurs and more to their natural habitat in an innovative mission to “rewild” the ruins – and, in so doing, raise awareness of conservation issues

WORDS HOLLY ROBERTSON

“For years, zoos have talked about putting animals back where they came from, but very few ever did anything about it”



Left: A Cambodian gibbon named Tevy with new baby A-ping; (facing page) the jungle-swathed stone ruins draw millions of tourists each year, yet many of its sweeping forests are devoid of people – the perfect place to release animals back into the wild

my feet crunch down on a carpet of sunburnt leaves, strewn across the forest floor, and I can hear insects croaking through the trees. Tiny, delicate yellow butterflies flutter past, twirling and twisting through the air. When most tourists dream of a trip to Siem Reap’s jungle-covered temples of Angkor, this kind of magic is probably what they envisage: empty trails leading to crumbling ruins that appear through the mist; the heady smell of rotting tropical vegetation; the squawks and squeals of jungle animals.

The reality is usually quite different: more than two million tourists filed through the Cambodian temples last year, and it can be hard to find a quiet, solitary spot to reflect anywhere near the “big three” of Ta Prohm, Bayon and the resplendent Angkor Wat. Fleets

of buses carting Korean and Chinese tour groups clog the dirt tracks, while streams of travellers and locals line up to pose for selfies in front of the stones.

But on this day, my small group could almost be the only humans for miles. Alongside a band of passionate conservationists, I’m on the trail of a family of pileated gibbons living within the world-famous archaeological park.

It’s early in the afternoon, and we’re in the jungle near Ta Nei temple, east of the visually striking, multi-faceted Bayon temple. My anticipation is steadily growing – I’m told that the gibbons are more inclined to make an appearance in the morning – but worry that the encounter could elude me.

But within five minutes, a mother and baby appear from deeper in the forest, swinging through the canopy in tandem. Christened

Ping Peang, or “Spider”, the child plays by running up and down tree branches, occasionally hanging off its mother. Bred in captivity, the family matriarch has taken to life in the jungle with aplomb. “Beats the hell out of the cage, doesn’t it?” quips Nick Marx, of Wildlife Alliance, a Cambodian conservation organisation, as the pair of primates swing through the trees.

Wearing army fatigue trousers and an unbuttoned khaki shirt over a T-shirt bearing the name of his NGO, Marx is a craggy-faced, no-nonsense Brit who has lived in Cambodia since 2002. He is the head of wildlife rescue, and my guide to an afternoon witnessing a new, pioneering conservation project that is reintroducing endangered species into the forests surrounding Angkor Wat.

Among the heavenly apsaras and ancient

kings carved into stone bas-reliefs at the vast temple complex, monkeys, elephants, snakes and birds roam free. Interwoven into the stories of the Khmer empire, which at its height stretched across much of modern-day Thailand and Laos to the southern reaches of Vietnam, these animals take their place in the history of a sprawling civilisation.

For centuries, they – and myriad other species – inhabited the dense wilderness encircling Angkor. But widespread poaching during Cambodia’s civil war decimated animal populations. The jungle around Angkor was hit particularly badly – Marx describes the landscape as “sterile, dead” due to the dearth of animals – and, before work on this project kicked off, locals told researchers that the last time the gibbon’s distinctive call was heard was in 1985.

Since Marx touched down in the country, Wildlife Alliance has been on a mission to “rewild” this forest, working closely with Apsara, the authority that manages the World Heritage Site, and the government’s Forestry Administration to bring their vision to reality. A pair of endangered pileated gibbons – which are found in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos – was released at the end of 2013, and produced offspring a year later, which the team followed up with the release of a second pair.

Soon after we first spot the mother-and-baby team, the male gibbon that completes the trio appears. Hanging languidly from a small green tree, he is immediately recognisable by his shiny black coat. Females are white or grey, while it’s difficult to distinguish the sex of their young until they reach sexual maturity at between four and six years old.



A striking, female silvered langur photographed in the Cambodian jungle



Above and below: Marx at Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center. The Wildlife Alliance founder is renowned in Cambodia for his passion and commitment to the country's environment; the magical Bayon temple (right)



A plethora of gibbon-attracting food – mangoes, rambutans, bananas and long beans – is placed on a wooden platform situated in a tree overhanging a narrow river. Before long, it has the desired effect: the apes gather in the branches for a snack, allowing wildlife rangers to observe their behaviour.

That these gibbons have found a new home in the Angkorian jungle is nothing short of extraordinary. The illicit trade in wildlife has drastically reduced Cambodia's animal population, with rising demand in China for exotic animal products fuelling the trade. Wildlife Alliance estimates that, globally, it is worth US\$19 billion annually.

"A poor family living in the forest and killing a wild pig is not going to do any damage to pig populations or wildlife," Marx says. "It's people going into the forest, blanket areas with snares

– hundreds and hundreds of snares that catch everything in the forest – that's done such damage. That's not just for feeding your family, and that's what must stop."

Lured to Cambodia by a job with Wildlife Alliance, Marx has dedicated the past 15 years to protecting his adopted country's forests. He readily admits he is not the world's most patient person – evident in his sometimes abrupt manner – and tends to shun Phnom Penh's expat scene, choosing instead to live near Phnom Tamao, pouring his energy into conservation projects. He is clearly unafraid of making enemies, saying in the past that his wildlife rescue team is "pissing people off" through its work, but remains undeterred.

Leaving the first group of gibbons behind, we travel to another area of the temple complex to check in on the newer family unit. This site,

near the Gate of the Ghosts, one of Angkor Thom's eastern portals, is rarely visited by tourists. Here, I am afforded an opportunity to get close to the second trio as they rush to a bowl of food hefted into the tree using a pulley system. These adult gibbons took longer to become accustomed to one another, Marx says, but now sit across from each other like a couple settling down to a restaurant meal. Their baby, A'pean – another kind of spider – is just one month old and the mother deftly supports her young in the crook of her leg.

"In time, we're hoping gibbons will migrate and breed, populations will increase, and we'll manage the project forever," Marx says. "We wouldn't be releasing gibbons within Angkor Wat; we are releasing them in the forest in Angkor Thom." He adds that the space constrictions and high density of

tourists means that larger animals such as elephants, and predators including tigers, won't be released. "Hopefully it will highlight conservation in Cambodia, and everyone – the government and the public – will view it as more important."

Government support of the project has been fundamental to its success. Wildlife Alliance also teamed up with authorities in 2001 to create the Wildlife Rapid Rescue Team, which counts members of the military and judiciary among its ranks. To date, the team has rescued more than 60,000 animals from the clutches of illegal wildlife traffickers, saving the creatures from a lifetime of mistreatment as pets or in zoos – or, in the case of those prized as delicacies, certain death.

"An awful lot of them can be released immediately if they're not injured and they've

"It's not these animals that we're working with that are important. It's their children and grandchildren, as it expands and gets more wild"

Other animals that once roamed the jungle surrounding Angkor

Indochinese tiger

Endemic to South-East Asia, the Indochinese tiger was once the region's apex predator, but decades of rampant poaching has severely diminished tiger numbers while rapid development has fragmented their traditional habitats. Still found in small numbers in Myanmar and Vietnam, the largest population of this critically endangered tiger exists in Thailand – it has gone extinct in Cambodia. Typically smaller in size than the Bengal and Siberian tigers, the Indochinese subspecies is a solitary animal that tends to travel over wide areas in search of prey such as sambar deer, wild pigs and banteng.

Green peafowl

Known for its magnificent plumage, the green peafowl is a large, flightless bird found in South-East Asia, particularly in Java, Indonesia, and southern China. Although it is closely related to the blue Indian peafowl, there is very little difference between the appearance of male and females, with both sexes sporting vivid green feathers. Kept as imperial pets in the region's palaces for centuries, in Cambodia this endangered bird is now confined to small pockets in the country's northern and eastern provinces. Wild populations have rapidly declined in recent years due to hunters killing them for food, their feathers and the pet trade.

Leopard cat

Roughly the size of a slender domesticated cat, the leopard cat resembles a pint-sized leopard, although the fur colour and markings of each subspecies vary widely. The most broadly distributed of all small Asian cats, their range extends from the Philippines and Indonesia to as far as the Indian subcontinent and eastern Russia. Classified as of "least concern" in terms of threat of extinction, this protected species is nevertheless under threat from hunting for their fur, as well as for food and as pets. Solitary carnivores, leopard cats feed on rodents, lizards, birds and insects.

only been in captivity a short amount of time, but the gibbons that we confiscated – and continue to confiscate – are all very tame, because they’ve usually had their parents shot or killed, and the babies are hand-raised,” Marx says. He points out that the baby gibbons tend to be less tame than their parents, making mother-raised animals at Wildlife Alliance’s acclaimed Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center, south of Phnom Penh, excellent candidates for release. At any one time, about

Early on, there were cases of visitors trying to lure them down from the trees using food. Rangers now use supplementary feeding to keep the primates away from humans. “We don’t want too many visitors in the early stages coming to see the gibbons, or to do bad things like trying to get the gibbons down and feeding them – or even hunting them,” says Marx.

It’s not just gibbons that have been released into the jungle around Angkor. Three Germain’s silver langurs – monkeys endemic



1,200 animals of all shapes and sizes reside in the facility.

The NGO has three sites where it sets rescued wildlife free: one in the forest surrounding Phnom Tamao, another in the southern province of Koh Kong and, of course, Angkor. “This is one big step which hopefully might focus people more [on conservation],” Marx says of the Angkor project. “Aside from anything else, it might put greater value on rescued wildlife, captive wildlife. For years, zoos have talked about putting animals back where they came from, but very few ever did anything about it. And we are. We’re not the only ones, but not many do.”

Although alert tourists may be lucky enough to hear a gibbon’s distinctive call – it can be heard from a kilometre away – they are being discouraged from interacting with the apes.

to South-East Asia – were reintroduced in 2014, while four palm civets, wild cat-like mammals which are not endangered, have also been set free in the forest.

On motorbikes we hurtle through the jungle near Preah Khan temple – similar in design to Ta Prohm, but with jumbles of ancient stones piled in courtyards and fewer trees encroaching on the structure – to view the langur troupe, two females and a male, distinguishable by their manes of silver hair. It has not been an entirely smooth transition for these langurs, which although classified as endangered are found in Cambodia in relatively large numbers. First, one of the male gibbons chased the langurs from their initial release site and the group split up twice, but were eventually brought back together

Three other projects aimed at rewilding habitats

Tasmanian devil project in Australia

These days, the Tasmanian devil can be found only on Australia’s southern island, but was once found across large swathes of the mainland. It is thought that hunting, the introduction of the dingo (a wild dog) and climate changes all contributed to their extinction there. Conservation groups are now pushing for the reintroduction of the Tasmanian devil to the mainland, as a fatal facial tumour disease is killing off the population in Tasmania with no known means of prevention or cure. However, the proposal is yet to gain widespread political support and may remain a pipe dream for some time to come. rewildingaustralia.org.au/mainland

Rewilding Europe

With the aim of “making Europe a wilder place”, the people behind this vast undertaking plan to rewild one million hectares of land across the continent by 2020. Ten areas have been selected for the project, including Lapland, western Iberia, the Danube Delta, the Central Apennines and the Eastern Carpathians. As well as bringing back wild horses, the last of which died out in Europe in the early 1900s, bison are being reintroduced to several regions. It will also connect areas where rewilding is being carried out by implementing revegetation schemes. rewildingeurope.com

American Prairie Reserve

Once one of the most ecologically rich landscapes on Earth, prairies are now one of the most threatened. The American Prairie Reserve is an attempt to create a complete prairie ecosystem in the northern US state of Montana by conserving and restoring animal habitats, while also reintroducing wildlife. Once completed, it will become the largest nature reserve in the United States. A key tenet of the scheme is to boost the numbers of wild bison living in the reserve. Tens of millions of bison, North America’s largest land mammal, roamed the continent when Europeans first arrived but nearly vanished in the late 1800s due to overhunting, and now number just 20,000. americanprairie.org



Left: The magnificent, multifaceted Bayon temple; (previous page) the park's most famous ruin is the vast Angkor Wat, surrounded by complex moats that were used to irrigate the ancient kingdom's rice and other crops



Above: Nick Marx (right) with workers from the government's forestry department, Sarin (left) and Looert (centre), who helped with the gibbon project in its early days

by rangers. Then, one of the females became pregnant but the baby tragically died.

As we wind our way through the forest, rain hammering down onto the canopy, Marx explains that his team has also seen this several times at Phnom Tamao, and the langurs' breeding attempts were later successful. While it can be disheartening, he says it's imperative to take a long-term view of the project's progress. "It's not these animals that we're working with that are important. It's their children and grandchildren, as it expands and gets more wild."

Wildlife Alliance plans to expand the project further. Two muntjac deer, a reddish brown mammal found in parts of South-East Asia, are being held in a large enclosure at Angkor while they adapt to their surroundings, a process that can take several months or longer. Another pair of gibbons will be placed in a release cage before the end of the year, although they will also need time to acclimatise. Marx also hopes to release sambar deer, green peafowl and small carnivores such as leopard cats. Watching the langurs disappear back into the canopy, Marx reflects on the accomplishment of returning once-caged animals return to their natural habitat: "It's the best feeling in the world." ●

***Donate to Wildlife Alliance's Rewilding Angkor project by visiting wildlifealliance.org**

นักท่องเที่ยวส่วนใหญ่มาชมภาพการมาเยือนนครวัดว่า คงจะเป็นโบราณสถานที่ตั้งตระหง่านอยู่ท่ามกลางป่าที่ปกคลุม แต่ความเป็นจริงแล้ว ที่ไม่ได้สงบอย่างที่คุณคิด ทุกปีมีนักท่องเที่ยว 2 ล้านคนมาเยี่ยมชม โดยเฉพาะบริเวณตาพรหม นครวัด และบาเยน นักท่องเที่ยวพากันถ่ายเซลฟี่ที่หน้าปราสาท แต่สำหรับเรา การมาเยือนครั้งนี้แตกต่างออกไป เราเข้ามาดูศูนย์อนุรักษ์สัตว์ป่าบริเวณรอบนครวัดกัน

บริเวณรอบๆอาณาจักรนครวัดนั้น มีทั้งฝูงลิง ช้าง นก และงูอาศัยอยู่ แต่ช่วงสามสิบปีก่อนที่มีการล่าสัตว์จำนวนมาก ทำให้ประชากรสัตว์เหล่านี้ลดลง คุณ นิค มาร์กซ์ หัวหน้ากลุ่มเอ็นจีโอ "ไวลด์ ไลฟ์ อัลไลอันซ์" จึงเป็นหัวเรี่ยวหัวแรงในการฟื้นฟูป่าแถบนี้ขึ้นมา เริ่มต้นด้วยการปล่อยครอบครัวชะนีใกล้สูญพันธุ์ให้อยู่อาศัยจนออกลูกออกหลาน หลายครอบครัว

คุณนิคกล่าวว่า หากครอบครัวที่ยังไร้เข้ามาจับหนูป่าแต่เพื่อเป็นอาหาร ก็จะไม่กระทบต่อประชากรหนูป่าหรือสัตว์ป่าโดยรวม แต่ถ้ามีคนเข้ามาทำบ่วงดักสัตว์ทั่วทั้งป่า มันทำให้เกิดการสูญเสียเป็นอย่างมากและพวกเขาต้องหยุดการกระทำนี้

การอนุรักษ์ครั้งนี้ได้รับความร่วมมืออย่างดีจากภาครัฐ จนถึงวันนี้พวกเขาสามารถช่วยเหลือสัตว์ป่าได้กว่า 60,000 ตัวจากการลอบค้าสัตว์ป่าเพื่อไปอยู่ในสวนสัตว์หรือไปเป็นอาหาร ปกติแล้วหากสัตว์ป่าที่ถูกช่วยเหลือมาไม่บาดเจ็บ ก็สามารถกลับเข้าคืนสู่ป่าได้เลย แต่สำหรับชะนีแล้วมักถูกจับมาตอนเป็นเด็ก ทำให้มันเชื่องมาก ต้องดูแลให้โตก่อนปล่อยกลับเข้าป่าได้

นอกจากชะนีแล้ว ทางโครงการยังปล่อยอีเห็นและค้างคาวเข้าสู่ป่าอีกด้วย และมีแผนการปล่อยสัตว์อื่น ๆ อีกมากมายเข้าสู่ป่า ระหว่างยื่นดูค้างคาวเข้ายอดไม้ไปนั้น คุณนิคกล่าวกับเราทั้งหมดว่า เป็นความรู้สึกที่ดีที่สุดในโลกที่สามารถนำสัตว์ที่ครั้งหนึ่งเคยถูกกักขัง กลับคืนเข้าผืนป่า บ้านของพวกมันได้