The Covid-19 pandemic is impacting us all, including Thailand’s tourism elephants; many have returned home. In Chiang Mai, there are many places that used to raise elephants for generations, such as Samoeng, Om Koi, Mae Cham, and Mae Wang districts. After the elephants returned home in recent weeks, veterinarians throughout Thailand (in private camps, at Thai Elephant Alliance Association (TEAA), Center of Elephant and Wildlife Research of Chiang Mai University (EREC), and Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC)) all agreed that they should visit the elephants and evaluate all factors that impact their welfare during the pandemic lockdown.

My work place is not far from Samoeng District and I know a lot of mahouts in the villages so Samoeng is the area that I first reached out to. It is not too far from one village to another but I need to spend a few days to meet all 22 elephants because most of the way is a dirt and bumpy road. My friend “Wit” is the best driver, he is able to remember all routes without any traffic signs and he can avoid all the potholes on the road for me so I could avoid the motion sickness. During my trip, the weather was hot with strong sunshine. A lot of dust and the stickiness of the wind left me exhausted, but the mahouts were so happy to talk and took us to see their elephants.

In this area, all of mahouts were Karen hill tribe so they spoke the Karen language, which I did not understand. Fortunately, Wit acted as my interpreter too! The elephants were kept in many different areas; some of them still live in camp, some of them live in the mahout’s backyard, some of them live in a nearby forest.

Most of the elephants had to be tethered because their mahout cannot be around them all the time and there were many crop fields and orchards that used chemical fertilizers or pesticides that would be harmful to the elephants. The mahout will always take his elephant for a long walk for foraging for a few hours each day.

The government does not allow anyone to free elephants in to the forests, as they tend to destroy the forest while foraging. The mahout cannot tether an elephant near a community water source to ensure that the water remains clean for human consumption. Thus the elephants were lucky if their mahouts can take them to a stream twice a day. I had seen to an elephant who was constipated due to the lack of water intake. The stream where the elephants were allowed to drink was low and dirty. After switching to a different stream and a shot of pain killer and supplement, the elephant was back to normal the next day. Like people, access to fresh drinking water is an absolute necessity for ensuring elephants stay healthy.

I believe the luckiest elephants are the elephants that live nearby their mahout’s house or backyard because they can drink water from the water hose. I saw a lot of children also
visiting elephants and feeding them fruit, including mangoes and bananas. It left me with a good impression of the Karen's culture; to be kind to animals was the main part of Karen life. These principles were in their routine life and they passed them through their children and many generations beyond, including the elephant care.

Most of elephants I visited were in good body condition score, but marks of blood-sucking insects were found all over their body. This could cause zoonotic transmission of disease as the village also has many kinds of animals, like chickens, buffaloes, cattle and pigs. Bringing the elephants home can be good for the mahouts, they can take care of the elephants while also take care of planting crops with their family. However, if the elephants get sick it will be difficult for veterinarians to approach, perform physical examinations, and give treatment. I have suggested all villages maintain an elephant medical box, build a treatment area (three poles for physical examination and treatment), and have 1-2 mahouts that can do some first aid.

Next week, I will go to Samoeng again to deliver the elephant medical box from the collaboration of TEAA, EREC, TECC, Asian Elephant Support, and the Elephant Healthcare Emergency Lifeline Fund. I will also check on some elephants that might need additional supplements and provide treatment for conditions as needed.

NOTE: One day after we left, the Rain Season had officially started, tropical storm with strong wind had blown mahout's roofs off of their house. One of the church was also badly affected. Thankfully, the elephants are alright. I hope that on the day of our return, there will not be rain, the roads will become too muddy and take longer time to reach the village (from 3 hours to 5 hours!).
Elephant in backyard
Pic: Elephant in natural environment
Pic: Elephant drinks water twice a day