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The fuss over Thai elephants misses the point

Tanya Plibersek
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THE OUTCRY about eight endangered Asian elephants from Thailand being offered brand-new, state-of-the art homes in Australian zoos is bizarre, considering the human rights and environmental challenges Thailand faces.

Poverty in parts of Thailand has led to a booming sex trade, exploitative working conditions and the environmental destruction that threatens the survival of elephants in the wild.

There's no point worrying about individual elephants unless we're prepared to support Thailand in its efforts to reduce poverty.

Asian elephants are endangered. There are about 1500 wild Asian elephants in Thailand. Another 2800 live in captivity and often have a miserable existence working in logging operations or tramping, footsore and frightened, through night markets to earn a few dollars for their owners as a backdrop in tourist photos.

The eight elephants coming to Australia will be better cared for than when they lived in work camps.

Elephant habitats are shrinking daily in Thailand as a result of rapid economic development, poor pollution control, illegal logging and rural poverty. At the end of World War II, 80 per cent of Thailand was covered by rainforest. Now it's about 15 per cent. Remaining populations of wild elephants should be protected.

Taronga and Melbourne zoos are already operating five Asian elephant conservation projects in Nepal, Sumatra and Thailand. Facilities which protect populations of wild elephants should be supported for the sake of the elephants, and also because they can provide an eco-tourism income for a family or a community.

Having a breeding population of elephants in zoos is not contrary to efforts supporting wild populations. It is an insurance policy - a type of gene bank - set up in case the species dies out in the wild.

Taronga has played a vital role in the conservation of other animals, including the black rhinoceros, corroboree frog, bilby and Sumatran tiger.

Taronga and Western Plains zoos also educate 100,000 schoolchildren every year. Well-run, humane zoos teach children to love and respect animals.

Environmentalists in Thailand and Australia would be better off using their energy to protect the habitats that are needed for animals such as elephants to breed successfully in the wild.

There is no point in stopping a few elephants leaving Thailand if the forests are logged and the rivers are poisoned, and the elephant population can't live successfully in the shrinking areas that are left.

Poverty is the driving force for environmental destruction in many countries. Australia was guilty of the same short-sightedness decades ago. (Some would argue we still are.) Until we reduce poverty, it seems a bit rich to be lecturing about elephants.

Some Thai farmers are so poor they sell their children. Some are told that their children will be working in restaurants or other businesses. Other parents surely know what future awaits them. In one town,

Pa Tek, 70 per cent of families have sold at least

one daughter into prostitution. Prices vary from

\$US114 to \$US913 - the latter figure equal to almost six years' wages in Thailand.

Estimates about the number of children working in the sex industry in Thailand vary from 30,000 to 200,000.

Many of the adults who fuel this industry are overseas travellers. Australians who sexually abuse children overseas can be charged under Australian law. Yet since this law was enacted in 1994, there have been only 12 convictions.

It seems bizarre to be preoccupied with the fate of eight elephants when Thailand faces challenges such as environmental destruction on a grand scale, and a sex industry that relies at least in part on the exploitation of children.

The shocking treatment of a cargo of 55,000 live sheep stranded on the Cormo Express in the Persian Gulf in 2003 prompted an outpouring of emails and letters to members of Parliament.

The treatment of those sheep was disturbing and showed that Australia should preferably be exporting slaughtered and processed meat, rather than live animals.

Also shocking is the contrast between the hundreds of emails about those sheep, and the mere dozens most MPs received after the sinking of the SIEV-X in October 2001 and consequent drowning of 353 people.

Do we really care more about animals than people?

It's good to treat animals humanely. It's more important to treat humans so.

Tanya Plibersek is an ALP member of Federal Parliament.

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