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# Cross-Platform Framing and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Examining Elephant Conservation in Thailand

Trisha T. C. Lin

*This case study investigates cross-platform framing process and framing alignment strategies of the world famous elephant conservation NGO. It examines how the intercultural adaptation facilitates the frame transformation against entrenched domesticated elephant traditions in Thailand. Besides web observation, this study conducted two field trips to interview the NGO staff and conservation experts, and observed human–elephant interaction. Enhancing the understanding of ecotourism, this study expands the framing theory by incorporating cross-platform and cross-cultural adaptation factors and provides insights of an effective Asian ecotourism model which transcends cultural differences and overcomes resistance by disseminating culturally sensitive and integrated framing strategies through various communication channels.*

*Keywords: Framing process; Framing alignment; Intercultural adaptation; Animal conservation; Cross-platform communication*

## Introduction

Once warriors on battlefields, worshipped as religious icons, and faithful laborers to loggers, Asian elephants share a close relationship with the Thai people, which is reflected prevalently in Thai culture and traditional beliefs. After the Siam era, domesticated elephants and their caretakers (known as “mahouts”) mainly employed themselves in the logging industry. Due to widespread deforestation and environmental exploitation, floods in 1989 caused massive landslides and mudflows and prompted the Thai government to ban logging (Ringis, 1996). Outlawing logging put 70% of domesticated elephants out of work (Kanwanich, 1998). Even though a few

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still worked in illegal logging, machines gradually replaced them (EleAid, n.d; Tipprasert, 2002). In addition, the loss of natural feeding grounds led to food shortages for these giant animals (Friedman, 1997). For survival, many mahouts brought their elephants to work for tourism, while some turned to street begging and selling overpriced fruit. Most of elephant handlers today are opportunists, exploiting elephants to make a living (Nagle, n.d). As unemployment and abuse affected many domesticated elephants, they face endangerment with a 3% annual decrease in population (Tipprasert, 2002).

Ecotourism, defined as responsible travel to natural areas for conserving environment and improving local people's welfare (Lindberg & Hawkins, 1993), may solve the social problems of endangerment and abuse for domesticated elephants in Thailand. In the 1990s, Sangduen "Lek" Chailert first introduced this concept to Thais, hoping to promote elephant conservation and free these domesticated giants from work. Locals initially held dubious or even hostile attitudes toward such an anti-traditional proposal. Through decades of persistent efforts in environmental communication, in 1995 Lek eventually founded the Elephant Nature Park (ENP), a 2000-acre sanctuary in Chiang Mai, and pioneered the adoption of abused domesticated elephants and implemented sustainable ecotourism in Thailand. Most establishments of soft ecotourism sell environmental attractions, accommodation, and various on-site services to tourists (Mühlhäusler & Peace, 2001; Weaver, 2002; West & Carrier, 2004). Adapting this concept to the Asian context, the ENP practices fit the criteria of nature-based, learning, and sustainable ecotourism (Weaver, 2002). The ENP ecosystem has saved more than 37 abused elephants, provided learning journeys for visitors, and improved local villagers' wellbeing. Its successful model attracts myriad eco-tourists worldwide with an annual increase of 10–15% in visitors' numbers (D. Chaidee, 2011). The Surin provincial government also works closely with Lek's NGO to solve street-begging elephant problems by building a similar ecotourism elephant village.

Elephants and Thais have intertwined and intricate relationships. Ecotourism may serve as a solution to conserve endangered Asian elephants and solve this deep-rooted and urgent social issue. Using the Elephant Nature Foundation (ENF) as a case study, this study conducted two field trips to interview Thailand's elephant conservation experts, examined the ENF's key figures, and analyzed its online and organizational communication. It investigated how this environmental conservation NGO utilized cross-platform framing strategies with considerations of intercultural adaptation in order to overcome cultural barriers, promote an Asian ecotourism model domestically and internationally, and thus generate positive changes in the lives of domesticated elephants. Theoretically, this study not only contributes to the understanding of ecotourism but also advances the framing theory by incorporating cross-platform and cross-cultural adaptation factors. Empirically, an Asian conservation model is revealed that uses culturally sensitive and integrated framing strategies to disseminate tailored conservation concerns through multiple channels to effectively reach and mobilize the local, national, and international audiences.

## Literature Review

### *Framing Theory*

The concept of a frame was first posited by Goffman (1974) as a “schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify, label, and interpret occurrences in life (p. 21). Later, the framing process is perceived to be “deliberative, utilitarian, and goal directed” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624). According to Fiss and Hirsch (2005), framing is a strategic process where communicators can create “specific meaning in line with [their] political interests” (p. 31). Kuypers (2009) also concurred that communicators could manipulate the framing process to encourage receivers how to interpret a situation.

Entman (1993) elaborated on the mechanics of framing as essentially involving “selection and salience”:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

The salience of information, according to Fiske and Taylor, increases the chance the audience will perceive, discern, process, and eventually remember it (as cited in Entman, 1993, p. 53). The effectiveness of the selected framing affects the number of people who are aware, the way they understand and evaluate, and their decision for action (Entman, 1993).

Arguing that frame alignment is crucial for social movement organizations to reach out and mobilize individuals, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) identified four alignment strategies. First, frame bridging is to approach people who share similar sentiments but have no platform to express themselves; second, frame amplification is to invigorate interpretations by reinforcing values or beliefs and rallying people; third, frame extension is to broaden the target base by incorporating groups with no obvious stake in the issues; finally, frame transformation is the redefinition of issues by rejecting old values and introducing new meanings. However, if there are several opposing solutions to or interpretations of a problem, conflicting framing will occur and affect how the situation is enacted (Brummans et. al., 2008, p. 28).

Three core tasks in the framing process are identified by Benford and Snow (2000):

1. Diagnostic framing: organizations not only identify problems, but also attribute blame and responsibilities.
2. Prognostic framing: organizations articulate proposed solutions to problems identified or plans of refutations, and strategies to implement the proposed plan.
3. Motivational framing: organizations provide calls or rationales for engaging in ameliorative collective action and sustaining participation, utilizing four socially constructed four vocabularies of the motive: severity—the immensity of the issue; urgency—the pressing necessity for resolving problems; efficacy—the likelihood

of changes in the issue development; and propriety—social and moral justifications for taking action (Benford, 1993). However, little work has been done to examine how the four vocabularies lead to successful social mobilization.

### *Cross-Cultural Adaptation*

Cross-cultural adaptation is an inevitable process when introducing a foreign concept—like ecotourism—to a host society that has different entrenched traditions and beliefs. It is defined as “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” (Kim, 2001, p. 31). This study extrapolates the theory of cultural adaptation from an individual perspective to an organizational level when the ENF practices Lek’s elephant ecotourism that used to be foreign and unconventional to the Thai society. According to Kim (2001), the quantity and quality of individual/organizational communication activities in a new environment are crucial to the success of their adaptation.

Cross-cultural adaptation involves an interconnected, multidimensional system of interaction and communication between this individual/organization and the host environment (Beom, 2003; Kim, 2001). Intercultural transformation, the final dimension of cross-cultural adaptation, occurs as the key outcome of the process. It is influenced by five other dimensions: host communication competence, host social communication, ethnic social communication, host environment, and adaptive personality.

This study incorporates intercultural adaptation into the framing alignment and process to understand how the ENF introduced ecotourism—a Western concept—and used its concepts to appeal to and mobilizes local and international communities in order to cause positive changes.

### *Elephants in Thailand*

Thailand has a rich elephant heritage that dates back to ancient times. The Asian elephant is a central figure in Buddhist folklore and thus is important to Thai Buddhists who comprise 95% of Thailand’s population (Quill, 2005). Although these elephants are regarded as divine creatures and are thought to bring luck (Ringis, 1996), elephants are often exploited. While the Thai government has attempted to curb elephant exploitation, it has failed because of the difficulty in managing two different definitions for elephant populations: wild and domesticated. On the one hand, wild elephants supervised by the Forestry Department are protected under the Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act of 1992 (WARPA) from illegal trades. On the other hand, elephants born in captivity are overseen by the Agriculture Department under the Draught Animals Act of 1939. It legalizes the trade of domesticated elephants but the registration process has loopholes (Larson, 2009). Mercenaries illegally capture young elephants from the wild and register them as “born in captivity,” hence considered domestic (Larson, 2009).

Not only people have exploited the loopholes between wild and domesticated elephants, but also traditional mahouts have been replaced by opportunist handlers who know little about elephants and who have exploited them for lucrative profits in street begging (Nagle, n.d). These mahouts make an average monthly income of US\$488–975, two to four times of the salary earned by a college graduate (Lohan, 2002). This street begging, leading around 200 elephants roaming the streets of Bangkok, has caused social problems (Winn, 2009). As a result, The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) introduced several policies to eliminate street begging. The BMA's efforts were largely futile until the launch of the Chang Yim ("Smiling Elephant") project in August 2009. Its checkpoints prevented mahouts from entering Bangkok and effectively reduced the number of street elephants within a year (Winn, 2009). However, these policies failed to resolve the fundamental problems of Asian elephant conservation and protection.

The ENF and the National Elephant Institute (NEI), while upholding different beliefs about elephant conservation, are the most prominent NGOs seeking to protect Asian elephants in Thailand. The NEI, a government-run entity and the Thai government's primary consulting agency, encourages training elephants for touristic performance, like talent shows of painting and dancing as it asserts that tourism dollars are necessary to support elephants and mahouts. Consequently, conservation camps that offer talent shows and elephant rides become mainstream in Thailand's tourism industry. In contrast, the ENF advocates a natural elephant habitat and work-free lifestyle. Its mahouts tame the elephants using positive reinforcement instead of goading charges with hooks (Pom, 2009). To date, with an entire wall of newspaper and magazine articles, and over 50 documentaries, the ENF is one of the most prominent animal conservation groups in the world. With the NEI's rivaling ideology and Thais' preconceiving elephants as working animals, the ENF initially faced a harsh host environment for diffusing its ecotourism concept.

## **Method**

Because ENF challenges the traditional ideology surrounding Asian elephants in Thailand, it makes for a fruitful case study. This study aims to answer the following research question: how does the ENF utilize framing strategies and cultural factors to justify its causes, refute existing ideologies, and adapt to Thai society? In September and December 2009, two field trips were conducted to the ENP in Chiang Mai. In order to investigate how the ENF uses framing strategies to promote and garner support for their elephant conservation and ecotourism proposition, this study interviewed stakeholders, observed the interactions in the ENP, analyzed the ENF's online messages (writing, multimedia content, interactivity) and examined how cultural factors affected the process. In-depth interviews were conducted with conservation experts and six key figures at the ENP—the founder, the park manager, a long-time volunteer, a tour guide, and two mahouts (Appendix). Each video interview lasted for about 30 minutes to an hour. Observing interpersonal and human-elephant interactions in the park was taken detailed notes.

For ethical considerations, the interviewees were informed of research purposes before seeking for their permission for filming and observation. We obtained consent forms for all interviews and observation. Additionally, the study observed and analyzed the ENF's online content (writing, photographs, and multimedia content) and presentation (layout and interactive features) when this case used online and social media extensively to disseminate its messages. For data analysis, this study used concepts from framing theories (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993; Snow et al., 1986) and Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation to examine the transcribed interview data, observation notes, and online content.

### Findings and Analysis

The analysis found a recurrent theme, ecotourism, in interviews and online messages, which is shared by the ENF's leaders, volunteers, mahouts, and visitors: ecotourism is seen as a solution to endangered elephants by providing them a natural habitat to live freely. This core frame matches the notion of harmony with nature and mirrors ENF's fundamental philosophy of treating domesticated elephants with love. The consistent and coherent messages are distributed via multiple platforms (i.e., mass media, new media, and face-to-face communication) to enhance the salience of information to impress, move, and convince audiences near and far.

Lek's journey from a young elephant lover to a noted conservationist plays a crucial part in the ENF's framing which supports courageous love for elephants regardless of conflict and dangers. In her adolescence, Lek traveled to the Thai–Burma border to help sick and injured elephants and raised funds to heal them. Later, her promoting elephant conservation and ecotourism was alienated by other elephant tourism and conservation camps. Things got even worse, when an ENF's volunteer leaked the film, *Pajaan*, about Thai traditional practices of breaking elephants into submission, to the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Upset Western animal activists called for a boycott of Thailand's tourism, which turned Lek into a national enemy and almost got her exiled from the country (Chailert, 2009). Facing life threats, Lek was forced to hide in Bangkok's motel for months (Thomas, 2009).

However, international media coverage brought a dramatic turning point in Lek's life which transformed her from a national traitor to a world-famous celebrity. *Time Magazine* first selected Lek as the 2005 “Hero of Asia” because of her hardship in conserving endangered and abused elephant. In dozens of worldwide documentaries and reports, she was framed as a legendary heroine who never gives up on her mission of elephant conservation and ecotourism in any tough situation. The positive international exposure also helped her receive generous donations from Western supporters and finally fulfilled her dream of building an elephant paradise.

At present, her ENP is a world-known natural park which attracted millions of global visitors. Lek's love for elephants continues to inspire people to take action for rescuing Thai domesticated and abused elephants from misery. Her volunteers and followers believe the ENF's persistence and resilience will overcome the challenges of

adapting the ecotourism concept to Thailand, even if it has conflicts with traditions in treating domesticated elephants.

### *Cross-Platform Communication and Framing*

The ENF employs the cross-platform strategy for frame bridging and seeks to attract people who care about elephant conservation and ecotourism. The stories of Lek and the ENF are disseminated through international documentaries, media reports, viral online information, and face-to-face storytelling. The extensive exposure raises awareness of Thailand's Asian elephant conservation problems, promotes the ENF's ecotourism as the solution, and encourages local and international communities to support its cause. Utilizing multiple platforms is effective to achieve the "frame bridging" effect, as different media can reach different target audiences with various impacts. This helps the ENF's salient framing to be understood or accepted by mass media audiences, Internet users, and park visitors at local, national, and international levels.

*Framing in global media.* Over the years, Lek and the ENF have been featured in myriad international and Thai newspapers and magazines and over 50 documentaries produced by CNN, Fox, Animal Planet, National Geographic, and so on. International media coverage is the key contributor to construct Lek's heroine image, letting her voices be heard by Western supporters and thus gathering resources to establish the ENF. Documentaries are found the most effective medium to introduce this unique elephant park to the world, when most visitors gave feedback about their awareness of ENP by watching documentaries (Chailert, 2009). Besides, positive local media coverage gives the ENP a good image and promotes its conservation activities. Thomas, the ENF's long-term volunteer, noted that local media warmed up to ENF: "We've had almost every Thai TV channel come here to do some kind of documentary or interview or something about Elephant Nature Park" (2009). These framing messages facilitate the NGO's growth and empower it to shape entrenched local elephant cultures.

How a Thailand woman fought with traditions and established the ENF through life threats and hardships and how she and her organization make consistent efforts to run the unique elephant park and rescue the abused domesticated elephants are intriguing subjects that draw universal human interest. That is why the ENF continuously catches attention and gets exposure on mass media in Thailand and other countries. When the ENF constantly appears in global and local media, it is impactful to bridge, amplify, and extend its framing of elephant ecotourism to a larger number of audiences, especially when the messages are produced by trustworthy professionals and distributed by prestigious media outlets.

*Online framing.* Borderless online media not only have a viral effect in disseminating the ENF's framed messages to international communities but also cultivate virtual relationships with existing and potential supporters. As language is a critical communicative tool, the ENF's web messages are in English to facilitate the



engagement of international audiences. The online platform effectively bridges the frame of ecotourism elephant conservation among elephant lovers and broadens the target base to ecotourists and environment conservationists with no direct stake in issues of Thailand's endangered and domesticated Asian elephants.

Frame amplification occurs when users read ENF's organizational stories online. The personal and emotion-laden writing style resonates with the public emotionally which serves to amplify the ENF's frames and move readers to take supportive action. Elephants' stories—their sufferings and hardships in particular—are made available on the ENF's websites with the hope of evoking readers' sympathy. For example, when describing an elephant blinded by her owner for submission, the website writes, "Her body was covered with infected wounds and scars from past beatings. She had tears running down from her blinded eye and empty socket" (ENF, n.d). These elephants are personified to increase their emotional connection with readers. Moreover, the ENP's websites published posts stating how the rescued elephants happily live in the park, reinforcing the notion of living harmoniously with nature and animals. The website's messages strengthen the ENF's cause, invoke supporters' sense of injustice against exploitative mercenaries, and position elephant ecotourism as a noble and best solution.

Thirty-five kinds of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blog, Youtube) are utilized to foster the ENF's viral marketing, form a like-minded online community, and maintain ties with its supporters. The frequently updated content in the ENF's e-newsletters and social media reinforce the belief that sustainable ecotourism is the best remedy to endangered domesticated elephants. Instead of passively viewing, the ENF's supporters and visitors can upload pictures to the online photo gallery and voice out via social media. More than 300 user-generated videos related to the ENP are available online, sharing personal experiences about this elephant paradise. By encouraging online participation and interaction, the ENF creates and cultivates a borderless virtual community who shares concerns about domesticated and abused elephants and feels attached to the NGO. The positive e-word of mouth helps convince people to believe in ENF's cause and make contributions.

The ENF describes itself on Facebook as a "group for the prevention of cruelty [*sic*] to Asian Elephants in Thailand" (ENP, 2010d). Over 4000 members constantly post messages and photos to reveal their passion for elephants and write about their ENP experiences. Sometimes, they use it to raise funds for elephants. Nine-year-old Jack wrote:

I want to make an elephant photo exhibition on Facebook and sell the photos to raise money for the elephant I am going to save. I have some really cool photos already. . . I would like to save a baby elephant who is street begging. (Lanting, 2010)

Besides, the ENF sends daily tweets to inform members of the latest happenings in the park, in order to keep supporters updated and connected. The tweets are written in an informal tone to portray the ENF's cheerful atmosphere. For example, "Jokia (elephant) tries to give some kisses to visitors who offered her fruit. She give a kiss many time but not at a right one" (ENP, 2010b) and "Fah Mai (elephant) drinks then

tries to splash water on visitors, but she cannot because she does not have enough water for a trunk-full” (ENP, 2010c). These tweets give the impression that both humans and elephants are having fun and enjoying themselves in the park. This perception is consistent with the ENF’s frame—an elephant paradise where elephants do not have to work, but lead carefree lives in their natural habitats.

*Framing in face-to-face communication.* Face-to-face interaction with the ENF staff or elephants is persuasive to cause frame transformation which redefines the domesticated elephant issues and modifying the old Thai beliefs by incorporating new ecotourism meanings. Lek’s first interpersonal communication triumph resulted in her obtaining generous financial support. One day a rich Texas man who was involved in African elephant conservation visited Lek. Impressed by Lek’s passionate conservation work and her beliefs in elephant ecotourism, he donated a huge amount of money for the ENP’s establishment (Noi, 2009). Similar things happened when many park visitors including Hollywood stars and ordinary elephant lovers came to this park. Seeing is believing. The ENP provides day trips, overnight visits and long-term volunteer opportunities for people to understand the ENP’s ecotourism practices. It helps transform the old frame of domesticated elephants. After interacting with elephants, Lek, or ENP’s staff, they were convinced or moved and thus became loyal supporters by contributing to funding, volunteering work, or talents.

First-hand experiences with elephants in ENP are most powerful in changing entrenched mindsets and transforming the framing. It takes time for the ENP’s ecotourism elephant conservation education to get adopted in Thailand. Currently, most ENP volunteers were foreigners, because the locals gradually understand concepts of ecotourism and animal conservation (Pom, 2009). That is why Lek consistently invited local schools and other elephant conservation or touristic groups to witness the interaction between mahouts, elephants, and visitors in the park. After years of efforts, the ENP now reaches out to an increasing number of Thai people.

#### *Framing Processes*

The findings showed that the ENF has consistently applied a coherent set of frames across platforms (i.e., interpersonal, mass media, online media) which identify concrete problems and solutions and urge supporters to take action. The non-linear framing processes are distributed by various communication modes.

*Diagnostic framing.* The ENF explicitly identified the endangerment of elephants as the problem. The views expressed by the staff’s interviews mostly corroborate with their online messages, such as near-extinction of Asian elephants and the abuse or malnourishment of street elephants (Elephant Nature Park [ENP], n.d.b). Thomas (2009) conveyed similar information:

We have 50,000 Asian Elephants left on the entire planet right now. . . So if we don’t start making some major changes. . . we may in the next 50 years not have any left and that would be the most horrifying thing and the worst crime humanity could ever do to a species.

According to Benford and Snow (2000), organizations attribute blame and responsibilities in diagnostic framing. The ENF believes the demise of Asian elephants in Thailand results from street begging and touristic conservation activities (e.g., talent shows, performance, trekking). Its webpages pointed out several groups to be blamed for, including owners of street-begging elephants, hotels, and entertainment complexes having elephants to attract tourists, government bodies, influential persons' greed seeking more land, illegal loggers, poachers of ivory, and deluded people who kill elephants as a form of sport (ENF, n.d.b). Street-begging caused many elephants to not only die from car accidents, food poisoning, and pollution, but also suffer eyesight and hearing problems due to the city lights and noise (Chailert, 2009). Besides, Pom (2009) thought the way other camps trained elephants to do tricks was cruel when most of the domesticated elephants suffered injuries from practices, performances, and overwork.

According to Benford and Snow's (2000) elaboration on prognostic framing, movement organizations usually refute their opponents' proposed solutions and attempt to advocate their own. The ENF interviewees framed touristic activities as problems in elephants' endangerment to be rectified.

... in western countries, circuses are dying out. . . What people want is a real eco-experience. . . They wanna see elephants living naturally. . . hope that most mahouts will see that it's actually easier for them, rather than trying to control your elephant all the time, and making it dance, and making it do these tricks ( Smith, 2009).

In response, other elephant conservation camps and street-begging mahouts criticized that the ENF's ecotourism was crazy not to make money out of working elephants, but release them into the wild (Smith, 2009). The majority of conservation camps are in favor of circus shows where elephants perform tricks, paint, and play musical instruments. NEI's advisor Lair defended these activities as being essential to tourism and fostered elephant conservation (2009):

In the conservation of domesticated elephants in Thailand, tourism is everything. There's very little traditional employment left . . . nothing [...] logging, transport, warfare, these are all gone. So literally, the only legal work remaining for elephants in Thailand is tourism.

Even if animal shows are crucial part of Thailand's tourism industry, not many tourists or locals are aware of the cruelty or danger of trainings that elephants undergo to learn performances (Pom, 2009). Mahouts usually used chains and hooks to tame the animals, and did not even allow elephants to socialize with one another (Smith, 2009). Noi, a long-term ENF volunteer, said forcing elephants to paint or perform was "terrible" (2009). In general, the ENF believes that elephants "trapped in the traditional elephant tourist industry, have a bleak future," due to low survival and reproduction rate (ENF, n.d.e). The ENF's conflicting framing challenges Thailand's traditional views toward domesticated elephants and popular touristic activities and emphasized its ecotourism model as an optimal choice to attract tourists.

*Prognostic framing.* The ENP's prognostic framing is to propose the solution to the endangerment of Asian elephants: to provide a refuge for domesticated elephants, restore the rainforest through tree planting programs, preserve local culture, educate visitors and act independently for the well-being of elephants (ENP, n.d.a). Lek (2009) explained the ENP's unique characteristics:

Most elephants here already got abused and very high percent when they arrived here, they have mental issues... We treat them with love. We [do] not allow even our staff here to have hook or beat them for no reason. We [do] not . . . force them to do anything not [natural]. They don't have to do any trick, no riding, and no performing.

Other ENF's interviewees also disagreed with elephant labor and unnatural working lifestyles. Noi, the ENP tour guide, indicated: "Most of the elephants at here, before we rescued them, they have very bad experience from humans already. So we don't want them to work anymore. We would like them to have a better life" (2009).

Other than constructing an elephant sanctuary, Lek (2009) strongly believes that law is the answer to rescuing abused elephants. In addition to urging policymakers to protect elephant rights, the ENF keeps communicating with local villagers, Thai society, and international communities to gain support.

*Motivational framing.* According to Benford and Snow (2000), movement organizations provide motivational framing as compelling accounts for taking individual and collective actions. Severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety are the four factors frequently utilized in motivational framing to stimulate action (Benford, 1993; Benford & Snow, 2000). Severity and urgency of elephant conservation issues appeared frequently in interpersonal interaction with the ENP's interviewees and the NGO's online messages. Words like "present numbers [of endangered Asian elephants] have dropped to an alarmingly low level" (ENP, n.d.b) are used to stress the severity of endangerment of the Asian elephants.

The ENF's framings shown in interpersonal and online communication demonstrate its great confidence in implementing elephant ecotourism. On the ENF's websites, many stories illustrate how supporters have contributed to elephants' well-being in order to boost their morale. For example, its online news section regularly posted articles that depicted happy new lives of the abused or injured elephants after their rescue (ENP, 2010a). The websites' ease of participation also builds supporters' sense of self-efficacy. "How You Can Help" webpage lists ways in which people can contribute to elephant conservation, like adopting elephants, buying medical kits for the herd, and planning fundraising campaigns for the park (n.d.c). The ENF's strategic web design makes it easy for readers to donate or reserve a park visit at a click of the mouse. It uses phrases such as "join us" and "be sure to check out" to encourage netizens to take action. Besides, propriety offers participants moral duty and reasons why they should support the ENF's cause. In general, the ENF's strategic framing employs a two-pronged approach: first, emphasize on the endangerment of Asian elephants, highlighting the severity and urgency of the problem; and second,

use the framing strategy and website design to enhance readers' and supporters' efficacy to take action and further reinforce their support with propriety.

Moreover, the framing of user-generated content (UGC) messages tend to serve as effective motivational framing as viewers believe peer evaluation and comments more than organizational framing. The viral distribution of UGC can bridge, amplify, and extend the framing. Although UGC's framing is beyond organizational control, the ENP's is overwhelmingly positive. Among 2,820 ENP-related Youtube videos, most of them were posted by visitors and volunteers who intended to share their joyful memories with elephants, like feeding and bathing activities. Social network sites and blogs also have various user-created texts, photos, or videos praising this park. Three hundred and fifty-three reviewers in TripAdvisor rated the ENP as the No. 4 top attraction in Chiang Mai. Even though it is difficult for the NGO to moderate UGC, as long as its multi-platform framing strategies work coherently, the UGC messages are likely to echo its organizational framing in defining problems (diagnostic framing) and providing solutions (prognostic framing).

#### *ENP's Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation*

Cultural adaptation plays a significant role in the framing process from diagnostic framing and prognostic framing to motivational framing. This study analyzes how the ENP's elephant ecotourism adapts itself to the Thai society based on cultural adaptations (Kim, 2001) three relevant dimensions: Thailand's host environment, the ENP's adaptive personality, and its intercultural transformation.

*Thailand's host environment.* Understanding the host environment is the first step to define the problem and diagnose the framing. Western countries lubricate the ENP's process of adaptation by providing financial and moral support, as the ENP's cause is closer to their beliefs in animal rights and protection. Although the ENP attracts thousands of visitors worldwide, it is not as popular in its host country. Centuries of domesticated elephant traditions and recent prevalence of money-oriented tourism have dominated its elephant culture, whereas treating elephants with love and no work is an alien notion. When other elephant tourism camps regarded the ENP as an enemy who advocated the inappropriateness of training elephants for performance or touristic activities, the local society expressed doubts in the ENP's environmental programs (Chailert, 2009). Liar, the NEI's advisor, said the majority poor cannot afford this "sentimental luxury" of loving and spending money on animals, instead of taking care of personal basic needs (Lair, 2009). He pointed out only a few upper- and middle-class Thais supported elephant conservation due to media influence. In addition to media exposure, the ENP also emphasizes educating the locals by inviting tourists, students, and experts from other elephant camps to experience its ecotourism practices. Lek (2009) stressed the importance to improve Thailand's educational system to raise local concerns about domesticated elephants and promote the concept of sustainable elephant ecotourism.

Lek (2009) understood that not many Thais shared her altruistic intentions to rescue the endangered and abused elephants, so she extended the framing to incorporate various groups' interests in the bid to gather support for her projects. For example, she transformed the ENP's neighboring villagers' suspicious attitudes and resistance to nowadays' collaboration after incorporating their living and work into the ENP ecology. Besides, most mahouts in the ENP took up the job for economic reasons (Mong, 2009). Monetary rewards are utilized to extend the eco-friendly tourism frame, encouraging mahouts to abandon harsh elephant training and street-begging activities. Adopting the ENP's model, Surin's elephant village project is offering mahouts steady income and lodging to lure them to bring street-elephants back, reunite with families, and co-construct the ecotourism ecology. Surin's governor believed this elephant village would become one of the must-see attractions in Thailand, like the ENP (Mungcharoenporn, 2009).

*ENP's adaptive personality.* Lek's awareness of cultural differences between the Thai and the West plays an essential role in leading the ENP's adaptation. She understands that it is crucial to disseminate frames in ways that the host environment can accept. The heavy backlash from the *Pajaan*-film incident taught her an important lesson of conforming to local cultures. When dealing with locals, the ENF takes a soft and discreet approach in line with Thai cultures in order to continue its elephant conservation work and change the host society gradually. Thomas, who has volunteered in the ENP for six years, believe Lek's culturally sensitive approach contributed to its successful adaptation in Thailand.

Lek actually is caught between two worlds . . . she is very educated and a little bit westernized to a degree where she has more western ideas about how traditions can be changed, how ideas can be changed . . . but when it comes down to her dealing with the people, she then has to revert back to a more passive approach because [the Western way] would create more problems. (2009)

As such, the ENP's solutions to elephant conservation are discreet and gradual, befitting the local cultures. Even though the ENF disapproves of animal shows and street-begging, it expresses views without denigrating others. According to Lek (2009), criticizing others is not part of Thai culture: "Something in our country, we can't speak. So we can't criticize. We can speak behind camera [off the record]." Spreading her words through volunteers, Lek stressed that defaming and highlighting negatives would only result in more enemies or legal troubles but would not save elephants.

*Intercultural transformation.* The intercultural transformation of the ENP's ecotourism elephant conservation is not only reflected in its improving relationships with the local community and Thai society but also shown in the changes of the ENP's foreign volunteers and local mahouts.

When the ENP set up in Chiang Mai, the local community initially protested and held hostile attitudes, and even threatened to harm the elephants (Chailert, 2009). This clash primarily resulted from the villagers' worries that sharing a river with the

ENP would affect their fishing as they sometimes employed poison, electric shock, or explosives. Apart from locals' preconception of working elephants and a vague understanding of elephant ecotourism, the cultural divide between the Western and Thai cultures caused this rising tension (Thomas, 2009). As politeness is highly valued in Thai culture, when the ENF told people that their traditional elephant treatments were "not really so nice" and the training methods were outdated, it was understandable why Thais were "not so crazy about this place" (Thomas, 2009).

To solve the problems of the hostile local community, Lek and the staff took a soft and culturally sensitive approach to persuade the villagers to co-construct a win-win ecotourism that would benefit all. They spent three years forging a bond with the locals by assisting them to set up shops, providing training in making handicrafts and massages, and offering free English lessons. To improve the villagers' life, the ENP also built a temple, a community centre, a library, and a bridge for children to go to school. Over the years, the neighborhood villages have adapted to the lifestyle closely tied to the ENP ecotourism ecology. Some villagers helped with planting trees for elephants and even chased outsiders away. Today, the villagers no longer refer to an elephant as "it," but rather talk about the gentle giants as their friends (Chailert, 2009).

Understanding local cultures, Lek and the ENF's staff are culturally sensitive in dealing with Thais. Thomas, an American volunteer, recognized the necessity and effectiveness of using a Thai's subtle way to save face and then change the locals gradually:

As a Westerner now living in Thailand for six years, I've had to also completely adapt and understand that dealing with things in a Western manner are not going to move things forward at all . . . if you get very aggressive and impolite and in their face, they are just going to like, shut down, and not listen at all or just be so horrified and embarrassed . . . If you put people on the spot and make people lose face, you'll become more in the wrong than the person who actually is doing something wrong. (2009)

Smith further applied Lek's cultural approach in communicating with mahouts involved in the Surin elephant village in order to change their entrenched mindsets toward domesticated elephants:

Obviously I'm a Westerner, so I'll always be perceived as an outsider . . . What I do understand is that the Westerners who come and bring the money for these mahouts genuinely want to see the elephants living naturally and healthily, and that's the angle that I take, that's the approach, and that's seen the most success too . . . Most mahouts, once I've talked to them about it . . . once they've seen it, also agree with me. (2009)

Within the ENP, Lek demonstrated her elephant treatment by setting an exemplar. Some mahouts initially insisted on using hooks to control elephants and laughed at Lek's behavior, such as her kissing elephants. In order to convince mahouts, Lek sat among the elephants with bare hands. Seeing that a woman was brave enough to do that, these males finally threw away their old instruments (Chailert, 2009). On the one hand, self-demonstration works well to change mahouts' entrenched mindsets to

accept the ENP style of treating elephants with love. On the other hand, the ENP sets rules to prevent any staff from abusing elephants (Chailert, 2009).

The process of intercultural transformation occurs when ENF's ecotourism elephant conservation and practices encounter Thailand's entrenched domesticated elephant culture. Through various multi-platform and culturally sensitive framing strategies, Lek and her staff gradually transform mahouts' old traditions of harsh treatment towards elephants, educate the public about not watching animal talent shows, and further embrace the ENF's elephant ecotourism. This frame transformation strategy integrating with intercultural transformation change the ENP's mahouts, foreign volunteers, neighboring villagers, the Surin project's participants, and visitors.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This case shows different perspectives toward ecotourism between Thailand traditions and Western cultures. Unlike other touristic conservationists using elephants to perform or provide services, the ENF proposes to raise elephants with love and to live harmoniously with nature. Its unique ecotourism model benefits elephants, mahouts, local villagers, and Thailand's tourism. This NGO is sustained by park admissions and donations which are used to buy abused domesticated elephants, hire mahouts, and maintain the ENF's operation. Its elephant ecotourism is framed as the best solution to save endangered domesticated elephants. In order to promote this alien concept, cross-platform and cross-culture framing strategies are implemented to disseminate the salient framing persistently to overcome conflicting views and change entrenched customs.

The ENF has made good use of a mix of communication tools to bridge, amplify, extend, and transform the framing of elephant conservation, which reach and change various audiences across geographical boundaries. These framed messages are disseminated consistently and coherently in mass media, websites, and social media, as well as face-to-face communication. The findings show international media dramatically affect Lek's social image and distribute the ENF's cause and practices to local and global audiences with trustworthiness, while borderless online communication and social media which allow interactivity, communal support, and participation are utilized to reach and mobilize like-minded persons across the globe. Mass media framing and online framing are used to create frame bridging (approaching people with similar sentiments of elephant conservation), frame amplification (reinforcing the beliefs of saving domesticated elephants by adopting the ENF's ecotourism model), and frame extension (broadening global target groups like ecotourists or environment conservationists).

Comparatively, face-to-face communication with the elephants and the ENF staff provides persuasive power to change small groups' perceptions and behavior. The unforgettable direct interaction with elephants is powerful in encouraging visitors to support the ENF's practices. Such human–elephant or interpersonal communication is effective in both framing transformation to change old mindsets and motivational



transformation to urge for action. The cross-platform framing strengthens the credibility and reliability of the ENF's framing. It explains why foreigners living thousand miles away can identify with the ENF's cause, empathize with the situation of domesticated elephants, and generously contribute to this NGO by donating money or other means.

The ENF's online and offline messages can be categorized as diagnostic framing (defining the problem as widespread abuse and endangerment of elephants), prognostic framing (encouraging people to support the ENF's activities as the best solution to aid elephant conservation), and motivational framing (using messages of severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety to call for action). This study points out that although opinions in UGC and reviews are hard to be under control, positive responses are effective for motivational framing used in winning Internet users' trust and calling for action. The viral distribution of UGC can be used to bridge, amplify, and extend the framing.

However, framing alone does not ensure Thai society's acceptance of the organization and its novel ecotourism concept. When dealing with the Thai community, recognition of local cultures are essential in persuading and communicating with the locals. This study examined how Lek and her foundation adapted its Western-style advocacy work to the context of Thailand, where disagreements and confrontation are seldom openly expressed for the purpose of face-saving. Lek and her staff's soft persuasion and cultural sensitivity contributed to the ENF's success in adapting its ecotourism practices to the host environment gradually. This NGO not only collaborates with the locals to gain acceptance from the communities and Thailand society but also works closely with foreign volunteers to gain both Thai and global support.

It is noteworthy that Lek manages a culturally diversified workforce, consisting of both locals and Westerners, to help her with ongoing projects and the running of the park. According to observations, the two different groups work seamlessly together as one to pursue Lek's vision. This unique teamwork puts Lek in the perfect position to transfer the set of Western ideas to the locals and thereby create an intercultural synthesis on elephant conservation issues. The ENF is indeed a model for other Asian conservation groups to emulate in utilizing a joint workforce of local talents with Western counterparts, which is beneficial for spreading culturally sensitive but effective messages to reach and mobilize different target groups through multiple channels.

The effective framing strategies coupled with good management of cultural factors led to the ENF's social mobility power in generating positive changes in conserving domesticated elephants and changing abusive behaviors (e.g., street-begging elephants and talent shows). Through years of effort, Thai society has gradually begun to accept elephant conservation and ecotourism concepts that had previously created a national uproar. The ENF's reputation as an advocate for elephant conservation is enhanced, thereby allowing it to partner the Surin government to build the elephant village and consult the government on national elephant-related issues. These accomplishments provide a good foundation for the ENF to further its cause.

This qualitative case study of a prominent animal conservation NGO provides rich empirical data and insightful analysis on its successful ecotourism model of using cross-platform framing strategies with cultural sensitivity to effectively communicate its concerns, propose solutions to local, national, and international audiences, and urge for action. Theoretically, it contributes to the understanding of ecotourism and expands the framing theory by incorporating communication modes and cultural factors. The frame alignment strategies (Snow et al., 1986) are also incorporated into the ENF's cross-platform and cross-culture framing process (Benford & Snow, 2000). The experience with animals/nature, new media communication, and cultural framing provide new insights beyond what traditional framing theory offers us. Empirically, this NGO demonstrates an Asian conservation model that achieved effective environmental communication domestically and internationally by utilizing a joint workforce to create multi-platform framing tailored for different audiences and cultures.

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**Appendix: Interview List**

Interviewee	Designation/Occupation	Date/Time
Bochu	Mahout (ENP)	29 September 2009, 8.30am
Daeng Chaidee	Staff (ENP)	10 October 2010, 8pm (Email)
Jeff Smith	Project Manager for Surin Project (ENP)	9 December 2009, 10.30am
Jodi Thomas	Long-term volunteer (ENP)	29 September 2009, 4pm
Mong	Mahout (ENP)	10 December 2009, 1.50pm
Noi	Tour guide (ENP)	28 September 2009, 4pm
Pom	Lek's assistant (ENP)	29 September 2009, 10am
Richard Lair	Advisor at Thai Elephant Conservation Centre	11 December 2009, 4pm
Sangduen Lek Chailert	Founder, Elephant Nature Park (ENP)	10 December 2009, 3pm
Thongchai Mungcharoenporn	Chief Executive at Surin Provincial Administration Organisation	15 December 2009, 9am