

Jerry Davis: Laotian in Wisconsin's outdoors on fact-finding mission

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Chanthasone Phommachanh (Olay) and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources field warden David Youngquist prepare to observe wildlife and talk with hunters in Dane and Iowa County last month.

JERRY DAVIS, For the State Journal

Chanthasone Phommachanh (Olay) came to Wisconsin this fall to see for himself what is possible when large, wild animals and humans are in daily sight of one another.

Olay immediately was impressed when driving through Dane and Iowa counties when he could see white-tailed deer in fields and along the roads.

The saola, one of the animals Olay is working with in Laos, is almost never seen.

Some, including saola, of Earth's rarest creatures live in Laos, Olay's home country. But this is not the only animal Olay is hoping to conserve. But how?

Saola are among the rarest large animals on Earth. They became known to Western scientists in 1992, and are a genus of bovids—grazing animals including bison, cattle, goats and other ruminants.

Adult saola weigh about 200 pounds, stand three feet tall, and are 60 inches long, about the size of an immature white-tailed deer. Both sexes have two slightly curved horns that could reach two feet.

Saola have limited habitat in mountains dividing Vietnam and Laos, but are of enough interest in Laos and around the world to have become the subject of the Saola Working Group (SWG), a unit of the Asian Wild Cattle Specials.

Saola, in addition to being critically endangered, are virtually unknown, particularly their ecology. Phommachanh has studied saola for several of his research projects required of advanced college science degrees.

A local Iowa County man, Bill Robichaud, is an experienced field biologist who has worked in Southeast Asia for several decades. He was instrumental in having Olay come to United States and then Wisconsin while attending professional meetings this fall.

Robichaud works for Global Wildlife Conservation, and is funded as coordinator of the Saola Working Group, part of the International Union of the Conservation of Nature.

Robichaud spends several months each year in Laos with Olay.

While here, Olay spent time with a local Department of Natural Resources field warden, David Youngquist. In addition to discussions, Olay rode with Youngquist as he contacted and conversed with hunters and anglers, and checked licenses and other regulations.

“The major problem with the saola in Laos is not habitat loss, but illegal hunting, not for food for native people,” Robichaud said. “It’s organized wildlife hunting and trade. Understanding saola in Laos has to be better if the wildlife in that country is to be saved.”

Research and seeing how conservation enforcement are done in United States is of interest to Olay.

“I hope to get ideas and exchange ideas with the local warden as a start,” Phommachanh said.

When in Laos, Olay and Robichaud spend time in the field where they have found signs of commercial poaching.

“There are six million people in Laos, but 100 million in Veitnam,” Robichaud said. “Even though the saola are not targeted by poachers, they are being driven to extinction because of non-specific snares.”

Olay and Robichaud don’t look at the hope of saving saola and other species as impossible but rather that extinction is guaranteed by not trying.

The trip to U.S. was a beginning, seeing examples in U.S., in Wisconsin, where what may have seemed impossible at first, were successful.

“I believe Olay asked some good questions when we were in the field,” warden Youngquist said. “We were able to swap conservation ideas and give him and his people a vision of what is possible here.”

“Wow, the wildlife I’ve seen over here in Wisconsin,” Olay said. “It’s amazing how close they are to people.”

While in Wisconsin, Olay also visited the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo.

A Pulitzer Prize finalist book, "The Last Unicorn: A search for one earth’s rarest creatures," by William deBuys (2015), tells the saola story.