

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Field Report
Look for the Wild Animal Label
By Brandon Keim

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FIELD REPORT

📍 *Asian elephants use tea plantations as corridors between fragments of natural forests that remain in Assam, India.*

Look for the Wild Animal Label

The Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network makes a business case for protecting Asian elephants.

BY BRANDON KEIM

Of the world's 40,000 Asian elephants, 10 percent live in the forests along the border of Bhutan and northeast India. So do millions of people. They coexist uneasily, with an expanding human footprint occupying the animals' habitats and migration routes. Of particular concern are the region's tea plantations: Elephants passing through fall into drainage ditches, are electrocuted by faulty fences, and are poisoned by eating fertilizers.

Farmers don't necessarily want to hurt animals. It's just a part of doing business. "[The farmers] say, 'We'd be happy to do more for elephants, but we're working on slim margins. We need more money,'" says Lisa Mills, a biologist at the University of Montana, whose work in Bhutan in the early 2010s first drew attention to the importance of the plantations in protecting the elephants.

In 2016, Mills contacted the Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network (WFEN), a US-based nonprofit that has become a destination for conservationists and entrepreneurs who want to protect wild animals. Drawing on Mills' research, WFEN drafted guidelines for tea growers in the region, certified their first plantations in early 2017, and brokered a sales agreement with the Lake Missoula Tea Company in Montana. Their customers now have the option of purchasing tea with WFEN's Elephant Friendly imprimatur. For the farmers, protecting elephants is now part of the business model.

Other sustainability-oriented certification systems, such as Rainforest Alliance or Fair Trade, might sport language about biodiversity or divert proceeds to conservation,

but WFEN is unique in its detailed, expert-driven emphasis on wildlife. Elephants aside, the menagerie of species protected by WFEN include jaguars in Costa Rica, giant ibis in Cambodia, Madagascan lemurs, and Palawan water lizards in the Philippines—some three dozen species altogether, on habitats amounting to 46,000 square miles, an area roughly the size of Pennsylvania.

"It's not necessarily automatic for consumers to think, 'When I'm eating my chicken salad, did a coyote die? Did a puma get poisoned in the making of my wool sweater?' It's not really visible," says Julie Stein, WFEN's executive director. "Our goal was to make this kind of thinking more mainstream."

A NEW KIND OF TRADEMARK

Wildlife Friendly evolved out of Predator Friendly, a group of like-minded ranchers focused on livestock production in the western United States and Canada. WFEN relaunched in 2009 as a standalone nonprofit

with an expanded scope: not just ranchers finding ways to coexist with wolves and coyotes, but anyone looking to do business without harming wild animals.

Then as now, there was no shortage of labeling systems intended to provide market-driven environmental regulation. Despite their proliferation, though—according to the Ecolabel Index, there are presently 464 such labels—they tended to exclude wild animals. Welfare labels focus on domestic or farmed animals used for production, not the well-being of creatures affected by business activity; biodiversity-promoting labels don't usually get fine-grained with species. There are exceptions, such as Dolphin Safe tuna and Bird Friendly coffee, but WFEN wanted to focus on a wider range of animals. "There wasn't a group looking specifically at high-biodiversity areas where there were endangered species and communities coexisting," says Ann Koontz, vice president of WFEN's board.

Certification systems also tended to be too general in their requirements. "We needed something that reflected the species we're interested in," says biologist José González-Maya, who helped draft Jaguar Friendly coffee standards for growers in a key agroforestry corridor between nature reserves in Costa Rica. Among the stipulations is securing free-roaming domestic animals, thus averting jaguar predation and conflict. It's the sort



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of crucial detail not found in other labels, says González-Maya.

The Elephant Friendly and Jaguar Friendly projects demonstrate a common theme in WFEN's work: Most of their certifications occur in so-called working landscapes, rich in both human activity and animal life, often adjoining protected areas. Working landscapes and the people making a living within them are a focus of contemporary conservation, and for conservation to succeed in such quarters, it needs to include people whose livelihoods are in the balance.

The certification standards crafted by scientists like González-Maya and Mills, while originally devised for a particular locale, can be applied elsewhere. For example, Mills hopes people protecting African elephants will seek certification. To this end, the researchers' expertise is shared within WFEN's network. That allows WFEN to multiply their efforts far beyond a paid staff of five people. "We operate lean," says Koontz, "but because we're leveraging all the different connections, we're able to have a significant impact."

The gold standard for verifying that tea growers and the like follow certification guidelines involves inspections by independent auditors. And that is expensive—organic certification, for example, can cost several thousand dollars, and some forestry certifications hit five figures. "It would knock out most of the types of groups we're targeting," says Koontz, and WFEN itself doesn't have enough funding to cover it.

Though WFEN does send trained third-party certifiers to visit ranchers in North America, elsewhere they arrange visits by local conservation groups and members of their network. "We've tried to come up with a system that's as rigorous as possible, at a much lower cost, therefore making it accessible to a broader group of producers," explains Ray Victorine, president of WFEN's board and director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Conservation Finance Program.

In industry argot, this is known as high second-party certification. To Adrian Treves, head of the Carnivore Coexistence lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a

former WFEN board member, third-party certification is still ideal. "Consumers who are scrutinizing how products are made want more evidence, more information, more confidence," he says, and without third-party verification, "there's a natural tendency to take shortcuts."

Treves concedes the expense, though, and Victorine insists that the high second-party system isn't so different: Local conservation groups are deeply committed to their cause. Their region-specific knowledge can also come in handy. Mills says that her Elephant Friendly certification teams have engaged with locals working on elephant issues and conservation biologists with a knowledge of the animals' habits, which informs monitoring of elephant movements and helps them anticipate potential conflict hot spots.

"We had one certifier from a major third party say, 'You can be even more robust that way,'" Koontz says. "There are ways to game the system with auditors. They don't know the sites. We have trusted parties who know the sites."

MORE THAN MONEY

While many producers may be nice to wildlife simply because they like animals, certification offers a chance to earn more money from consumers who pay extra for Wildlife Friendly goods. There's no guarantee that purchasers will pay a premium, though, and producers could also try to market themselves as animal-friendly without going through formal WFEN certification. WFEN needs to offer more than money.

Krithi Karanth, a conservation biologist whose research on plantations in India's Western Ghats led to her cofounding of the Wildlife Friendly-certified Wild Kaapi coffee company, says WFEN offers "a larger global perspective on how you get people to buy into" the idea of conscientious consumption. WFEN leverages its network—not just conservation biologists, but sustainable business specialists and other producers—to provide shared expertise and help with development, from issues with animals to supply-chain and production questions. "If I talk to someone

having a problem," says Stein, "I can pass that on to as many people as I can."

WFEN also tries to arrange meetings among producers, conservationists, and purchasers. Even if these don't lead to business deals, they're an opportunity to share business intelligence: A company that buys wool, for example, can advise ranchers on the finer points of their fiber preferences. When cosmetic company Aveda started buying paper produced by a Wildlife Friendly enterprise in Nepal, says Koontz, "they were giving us critical product advice and quality feedback. If you have to pay for that expertise on the open market, it's expensive."

In setting up those deals, WFEN is careful to find purchasers who will be patient and reliable. A steady relationship, says Koontz, can be even more important to producers than a price premium. Some research has also found that certification programs relying on fiscal incentives can alienate producers who feel they're being condescended to, as if their only interest was immediate payouts rather than professional development. WFEN's development-oriented approach might help soothe those tensions.

As WFEN matures, Stein says, they've considered splitting into two divisions: for-profit as well as nonprofit, with the former focusing on marketing, supply chains, sales, and wholesale distribution. For now, that idea remains hypothetical. The focus is on growing their network. "People are now saying, 'I'm a biologist, I want to start a business,'" Stein says. "Or, 'I'm a fashion designer, I want my business wildlife-friendly from the start. Can you help me?'"

As for Elephant Friendly-certified tea, small early orders were followed by a wholesale deal. Mills says a large grocery store chain may soon source the tea for its own in-house brand.

"I think there's no limits," says Mills when asked whether Elephant Friendly teas are a niche product or something that could scale to commodity levels. "It's going to be financially viable for the farmers. And the more consumers hear this story, the more they'll ask, 'Does my tea harm elephants or not?'" ■