



KUI BURI

RECREATING PARADISE



Written and directed by **Heinz Leger**
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1 x 50 min.
4K, 5.1 and Stereo

This is the story of a Garden of Eden, hidden deep within the jungles of Southeast Asia. A national park that's home to an almost unimaginable variety of animals. Not only noteworthy for its countless species, Kui Buri National Park in southwestern Thailand is also known for its abundance of large animals, like Asian elephants and wild bovines. The scarce gaur lives here, the world's largest bovine species, and it is also home to the smaller, ruddy banteng. At some time in the past, gaurs and bantengs intermingled, mated, and reproduced – a sort of caprice of nature. The result is an extremely rare hybrid – the Krathing Daeng – better known to the world as the Red Bull.

We are following one of these very special creatures, a newly born reddish calf with white ankles. Minutes after it was born and being licked dry by its carrying mother, she's now stumbling on her long legs through the high grass, trying to keep up with the herd that is heading for one of the big grasslands. There, it is going to meet the other giants of the park, the Asian elephant.

It's just after dawn when Ranger Yung sets out on his morning patrol from the park office. He has worked here for years and knows the animals' whereabouts at this hour. On his way to his first stop he catches sight of many of the park's residents. But today, his first destination is on the edge of a forest next to an expansive plain. Yung checks how the newly arrived, precious member of the herd is doing.

Big animals – big problems

Kui Buri looked very different back in the 1990s. At that time, farmers settled in the area and had created large pineapple and mango plantations. Like one of these famous Thai breakfast buffets, the abundance of fruits was irresistible to the elephants and the gaurs – trouble was on its way. It was no one less than then-King Bhumipol who made the effort of getting the situation under control. The well-being of the elephants was crucial to the king – after all, the elephant is Thailand's national animal; and so, Kui Buri became a national park.

Abundance of species

Kui Buri, located in the Tenasserim Range in southwestern Thailand, is full of dense mountain forests and expansive grassy plains – ideal habitats for animals of all sizes and species. In the dense shrub around a waterhole, barking deers are foraging on the lush vegetation. Unlike most deers, the tiny muntjac is a true omnivore; it not only grazes and browses, but it also feeds on eggs, carrion, and even small warm-blooded animals.

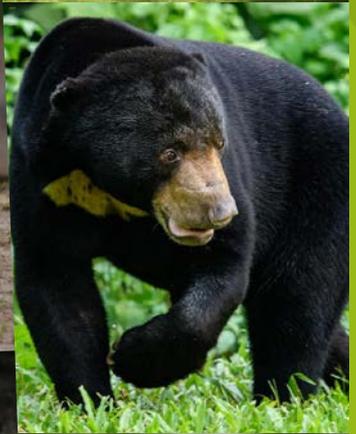
These little mammals and rodents are also the favourite food of the dhole, the Asiatic wild dog. Before embarking on a hunt, clans go through elaborate social rituals involving nuzzling, body rubbing and sexual mounting. Dholes are primarily hunting in the early hours of the morning. Though not as fast as jackals and foxes, they can chase their prey for many hours. During a pursuit, one or more dholes may take over chasing their prey, while the rest of the pack keeps up at a steadier pace behind, taking over once the leading group tires.

The canopy above the hunting pack is the realm of flamboyant birds and skilled monkeys. Lar gibbons are true acrobats – they appear to almost fly through the forest canopy. These apes also face the threat of massive deforestation of their natural habitat, to make room in many cases for monoculture plantations. But without trees, gibbons cannot survive – and many other animals are equally as dependent on trees for their survival ...

Home, sweet new home

Hornbills are impressive birds. Most noticeable, besides their colourful plumage, is their giant beak. They are also remarkable and famous for their special nesting behaviour. At the beginning of breeding season, hornbill pairs look for a natural tree hollow. The female slips inside the cavity, while the male closes the opening with drying mud, practically walling his partner in – until only a narrow slit remains open. For weeks it is the male's job to provide food to his partner and her young.

As their habitat in the shrinking forests becomes smaller and smaller, there are fewer and fewer trees with suitable, natural nesting hollows. That's why a research project tested a unique and very original alternative in Kui Buri National Park. Old, used wine barrels were mounted to massive trees. They are just the right size for the birds. The only thing the scientist had to do was to cut a hole in the barrel and point the opening to the east. And as luck would have it, a few of the hornbill pairs in Kui Buri have already accepted these unusual accommodations and have chosen to nest there.



Smart solutions

It is unusual ideas like these that make tailored protection measures possible and help animals. The next challenge was, how to keep elephants and gaur in the park with all the tempting plantations next to it? The rangers came up with the idea to build a bee-fence. Bee-fences are bee-hives linked with long ropes; so whenever one of these big animals tripped the wire, the bees would swarm and chase the intruders back into the forest. But there was one thing they hadn't reckoned with: whenever the lid of a beehive was opened, the local bee-eaters feasted on the more than welcome evening snack ...

So, the next solution to solve the problem had to be high-tech! A network of infrared-cameras was installed along the old bee-fence line, and as soon as an animal steps out of the park, a signal is sent to an Operation Centre. From there, rangers can track the elephants on the monitors around the clock and jump into action: Equipped with night-vision drones and firecracker they chase the raiders back into the forest.

The abundance of elephants and especially the rare Krathing Daeng might be the highlights of the national park, but with all its bounty of species, Kui Buri is a true success story; it's become a model for national parks worldwide.

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