

FEATURE:
Buddhist Tiger Temple
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BOB ABERNETHY, anchor: There's a Buddhist monastery in a remote part of Thailand which has become a haven for various species of wounded animals, including tigers -- tigers that are in their cages only part of the time. This sanctuary reflects the Buddhist concern with the environment and with reincarnation. Lucky Severson visited the tiger temple.



Video

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LUCKY SEVERSON: The Bible tells of a time when the lamb will lie down with the lion. But here in rural Thailand, it's the deer, the wild boar, the peacock, the water buffalo, along with many other species, living in peace with the tiger. The man who made this improbable harmony possible is not a believer in biblical prophecy. Phra Acharn Chan is a Buddhist monk who never dreamed he would be a guardian to so many of God's creatures. His unlikely twist of fate began 27 years ago when a doctor told him he had a very short time to live.

Abbot PRA ACHARN CHAN (Buddhist Monk): The doctor said to me I have a blood cancer -- leukemia. And I said, "Okay, I'm good luck because you and everybody in the world doesn't



know when you are going to die but I know by myself I am going to die soon, so I have to do the good thing very quickly."

SEVERSON: He decided to become a monk and after a time, became the abbot in charge of this remote monastery. But as civilization invaded rural Thailand, the wildlife drifted into this sanctuary. First there were birds, then wild boars wounded by local hunters. Eventually, the abbot

SEVERSON: The abbot says at first he could only read the animals' body language. Now he says he understands what they're thinking.

(To Abbot Acharn Chan): Do you feel that you can communicate with these animals?

Abbot ACHARN CHAN: Yes, I can communicate with the animal, and animals have the power to stay with me also.

SEVERSON (To Abbot Acharn Chan): So you can communicate with each other?

Abbot ACHARN CHAN: Yeah.

SEVERSON: The tiger sanctuary is becoming popular with tourists from around the world, like French Canadian Guy Charlebois, who thinks the prevailing views in the West towards animals can be traced to religion.



GUY CHARLEBOIS (French Canadian Tourist): I think it comes through religion a little bit that God created man and that he created animals too -- what's the word in English -- for the pleasure of humans? Well, I didn't digest that too well. I think all of us are all equal, and I think we have to respect nature.

SEVERSON: Many tourists come for the unique experience of getting up close and personal with wild animals, and they can do that here.

Unidentified Boy: He's still a wild tiger. Actually he can bite and hunt and kill you anytime.

Abbot ACHARN CHAN: It's chicken bones for the tigers.

says, the boars trusted him to care for them. Then they wandered off, only to return months later in even greater numbers.



Abbot ACHARN CHAN: They come with a big group. I'm happy, you know. I say to them, "I feel very happy -- I see you alive, but you bring a big group -- how can I do?" You know what I mean?

SEVERSON: After the boar, it was a wounded tiger, and then villagers brought him another. There are now more than 15 tigers. These five-month-old cubs were born at the monastery.

It's difficult to describe the atmosphere of this place or the devotion to the animals of the abbot, the monks, and their helpers. The young man the monks call "boy" says it's because the animals know this is a place of peace.

Unidentified Boy: Because I think they all know this is safe for them. There's no hunting, nothing. They can trust in the people in here because all the people, they come in the monastery -- they have just only the peaceful in their mind and are wanting to feeding them, not wanting to kill them. They know by themselves.



SEVERSON: Usually the abbot assigns certain monks to care for certain tigers because he believes they have similar personalities. Storm, for instance, hates perfume, while Rainbow is a real diva who thinks of herself as beautiful. Cloud is the leader because he's the biggest. Sunshine is very happy right now, the mother of five-day-old cubs.

Dr. Somchai, a veterinarian who manages the tiger monastery, says the abbot cares for the animals as he would for humans because of a basic principle of Buddhism -- reincarnation.



Dr. SOMCHAI VISAMONGKOLCHAI (Veterinarian): We believe that the tiger here used to be the monk, used to be our friend, our family, brother, sister, monk. And we

or the abbot or the monks inside the tiger temple used to be the tigers. So, we are the same mind and spirit even if different in body, in shape, in form.

SEVERSON: In other words, say Buddhists, the body, whether it's an animal or human, is not important. It is the spirit within the body that counts.

Dr. VISAMONGKOLCHAI: If you have a power of love, a power of happiness in your mind, you can do everything.

SEVERSON: And there is another way of looking at it. If the monks here don't take care of the tigers that may have been humans in their previous lives, the monks could be reincarnated themselves as an animal.



Abbot ACHARN CHAN: If we are the human, if we do something mistake, we can become the animal also. If we do good, we can go to the angel.

SEVERSON: It pains the abbot that for now he is forced to keep the tigers in cages, for at least part of the day. But he and Dr. Somchai have a plan, a very expensive plan: to build a sanctuary called Tiger Island, financed by contributions. They've already started digging the moat.



Dr. VISAMONGKOLCHAI: First, I would like to set up here to be a rescue center. Second, education and research. And third, breeding for rehabilitation. And fourth, ecotourism for helping the tiger conservation project.

SEVERSON: The approach to conservation here in this remote part of Thailand is much different than the approach in America. In the U.S., it's physical -- the environment around you. Here, it begins with the spiritual. The Western world's focus is on preserving wild places and the animals that inhabit them. Here, the land is not so significant. What's important is protecting the spirit within the animals, and protecting the spirit within the animals has its own reward.

Dr. VISAMONGKOLCHAI: If you save the animal life, it in turn -- it means save your life. If you do the best for the other life, it will in turn -- the best of qualities of life you will earn as well.



SEVERSON: The mission here to protect the tigers has a sense of urgency. Tigers have been disappearing at an alarming rate. They are now one of the world's most endangered species. There are only about 7,500 remaining in the wild worldwide.

(To Dr. Visamongkolchai): Do you think it's possible that in another 50 or 100 years there won't be any tigers left in the world?

Dr. VISAMONGKOLCHAI: If you think about the material reasons, you think about consumerization, this means everything industrialized. You cut a big tree, and you do the infrastructure in building everywhere, and you destroy the forest. That means no home for the wild animal.

SEVERSON (To Dr. Visamongkolchai): So future generations may only see tigers in books?

Dr. VISAMONGKOLCHAI: I think so.



SEVERSON: At the end of the day, the abbot takes the tigers down a canyon for a photo op. It's not that he's selling out to commercial interests. He wants contributions so he can build Tiger Island. But what he wants most is to convince his fellow man that the world will be a lesser place without these magnificent beasts.

For RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY, this is Lucky Severson near Kanchanaburi, Thailand.