

MONKEY TRAINING SCHOOL AT SURAT THANI, THAILAND

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Harvesting of coconut is a tedious process which is commonly done by experienced climbers. Nowadays, as there are better avenues and remuneration for the same effort, young men are opting for other jobs instead of the risky job of climbing coconut palms. Consequently the palm climbing profession is slowly disappearing and finding a climber for coconut harvesting has become one of the problems faced by farmers.

A very efficient climber may climb as many as 40 palms of medium height per day or 20-30 tall palms. Such a climber may harvest 1-2 bunches per palm per day or 400-800 nuts per day.

In Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, the pig-tailed macaque, *Macacus nemestrina* is trained to harvest ripe coconuts. The animal becomes very skilled in their job and a wage earner of the family. An efficient monkey harvests about 1000 coconuts in one day which is more than a skilled human climber can achieve.

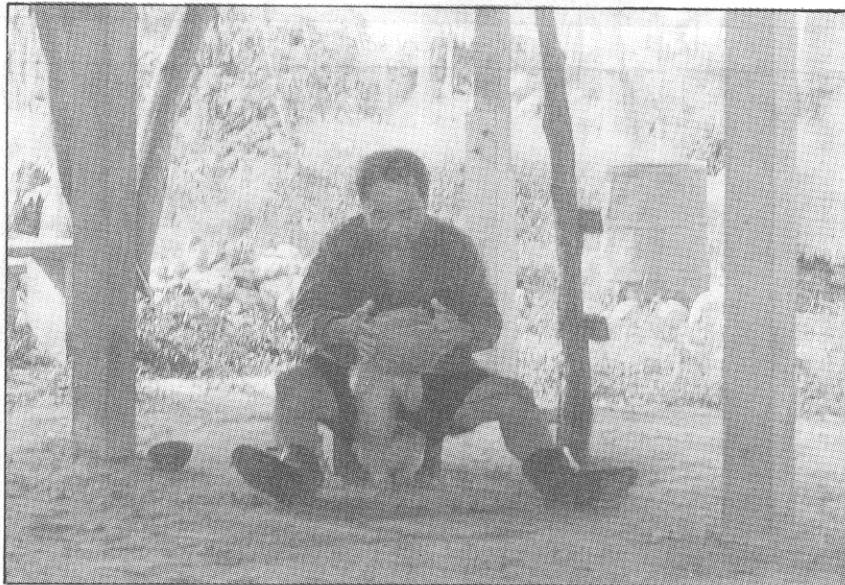
I happened to visit one of the monkey's training schools during my visit to Thailand. I was deputed to Thailand as South Asia representative for participating in the Workshop on 'Users' Perspective to Promote Multipurpose Users and Competitiveness of Coconut' and to attend the 'Annual CGRNAP (Coconut Genetic Resources Network for Asia and Pacific) Review and Planning Meeting of the ADB (Asian Development Bank) as-

sisted Coconut Genetic Resources Project' held from 28th September to 2nd October 1996. The meeting was sponsored by COGENT (Coconut Genetic Resources Network)/IPGRI (International Plant Genetic Resources Institute) and hosted by the De-

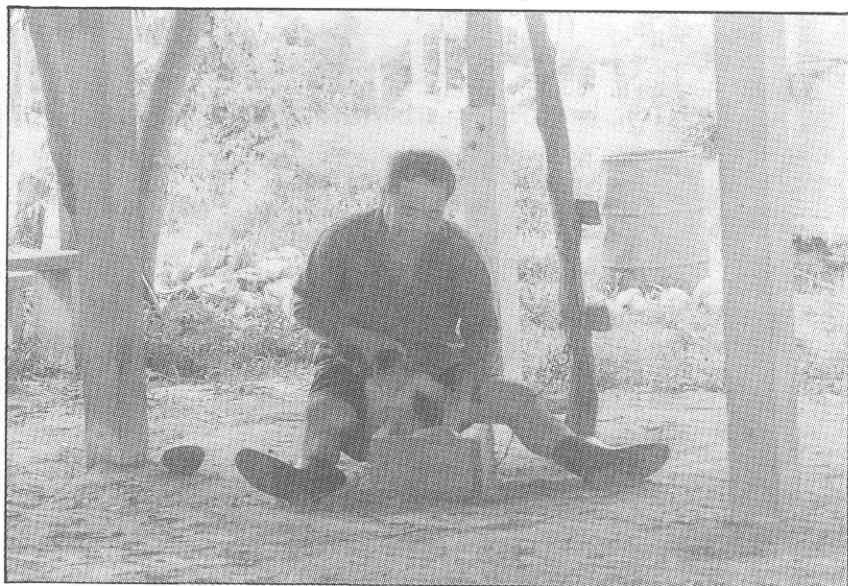
partment of Agriculture, Thailand.

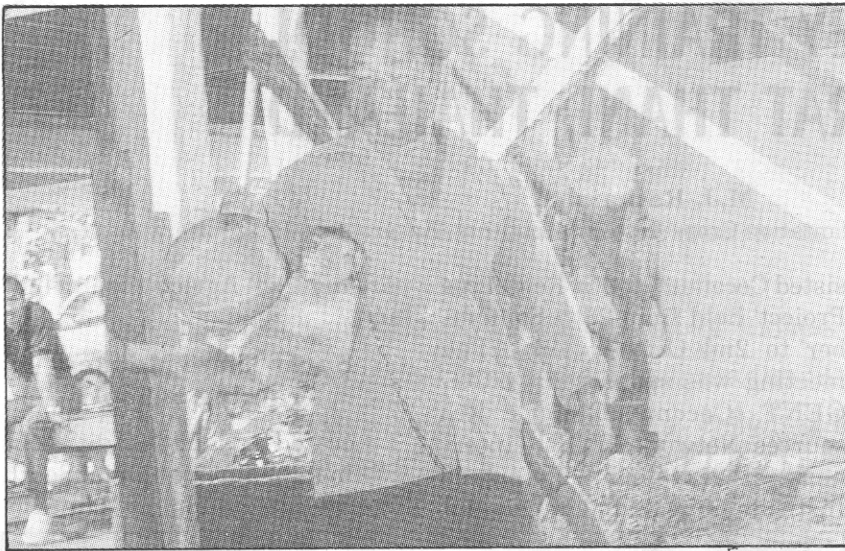
Surat Thani Monkey Training School

Located in Kanchanadit about 8.5 km from Surat Thani in South Thailand, the Monkey Training



Monkey at "training"





At 'nursery school'



At 'elementary school' - twisting coconut at a pole

School is supposed to be the only one in its kind in the world. Owned and solely operated by Mr.Sompun Saekhow, the Monkey Training School has been training the pig-tailed macaques to pick coconuts, for the last 21 years. Although a few others in Southern Thailand train monkeys domestically, Mr.Saekhow is the only trainer to have established a school where the monkeys live with him for several months before they are returned to their owners to work in coconut plantations. During the last 21 years, Mr.Saekhow has trained nearly 800 monkeys.

How does Mr.Saekhow train the pig-tailed pupils?

When a monkey first arrives at the school, Mr.Saekhow spends one to three months for observing the monkey and decides whether the monkey is trainable or not. Then he allows the animal to get used to the surroundings. If the monkey is considered trainable, the first and the most important step is to establish 'a proper learning environment.' This involves establishing a number of training areas where, each monkey will slowly learn the skills needed to pick coconuts. For example, Mr.Saekhow hangs only brown ripe coconuts - the kind each monkey will eventually pick.

During the 'nursery school' stage of the training, Mr.Saekhow arranges the monkeys, in groups based on the number of months they have attended the school and according to the skills they have already mastered.

However, most important is the atmosphere, said Mr.Saekhow. He is extremely patient and kind and never raises his voice or physically punishes the monkeys even if he is bitten by them.

When the training actually begins, Mr.Saekhow places a

wooden box between his knees at a safe distance away from monkey. The box contains a metal rod through the centre with a coconut attached in the middle. This is intended to teach the monkey how to pluck a coconut from the stem to which it is attached. For the first week, Mr.Saekhow simply twists the coconut for half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon, which the monkey watches. Over a series of days, Mr.Saekhow gradually moves close to the monkey until it feels comfortable with him. Sitting close by he begins to pat the animal while twisting the coconut.

The second step involves, guiding the monkey's paws to the coconut. Mr.Saekhow holding the paws in his hand permits the monkey to actually touch the coconut with both of its front paws. This training lasts for about 20 days.

The third step involves attaching the monkey to Mr.Saekhow with a belt and instruct it to 'pick'. After this routine is established, Mr.Saekhow attaches a coconut to the monkey's resting pole and the monkey still attached to Mr.Saekhow's belt, learns to twist the coconut off of the pole. Once the monkey is used to this, Mr.Saekhow removes the belt and uses only a guide rope. For the next two months, the monkey will practice this step with Mr.Saekhow, gradually increasing the level of difficulty so as to approximate the actual conditions found when picking from a tree. Once the monkey has mastered the picking, it is said to have passed the 'nursery school'.

During the 'elementary school' stage of training, the trainer takes the monkey out of the training school to a bamboo pole, where coconuts are to be picked.



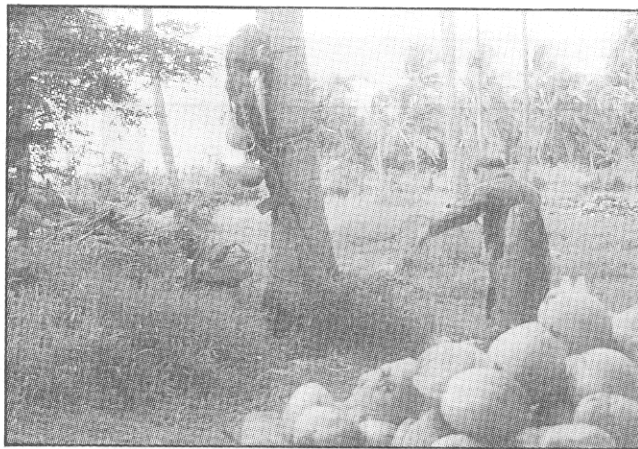
Helping to load & unload coconuts



The monkey then repeats the 'twisting technique', which it has learned in 'nursery school' to make coconut fall off from the pole. Once the monkey can comfortably climb the pole, Mr.Saekhow trains the animal to jump from one bamboo pole to another without climbing down. During this time, the monkey is also taught how to fetch the fallen nuts which may be lying too far, including those fallen in a pond or a stream. While giving such training to the monkey, Mr.Saekhow trains the owner how to handle the monkey prop-

erly. Once mastered, the monkey is said to have passed the 'elementary' school. The monkey can then pick between 700-1200 coconuts a day, providing the owner with quite a handsome income.

Some monkey, however, may continue its study in 'Junior High School' which may take as long as six months. During this stage, each monkey learns how to load and unload coconuts into a vehicle, how to peel coconuts, how to load the peeled coconuts into bag, how to help coil its own rope etc. Such skills save the owner considerable time and labour



Climbing coconut palm

helping the owner to avoid the chronic backaches which so often plague the workers in this field.

The fees for training a mon-

key varies from 3500-4000 Thai Bhat (US\$ 143-163).

Over the last 10 years, the Monkey Training School has be-

come popular both in Thailand and overseas and now-a-days an average of 200-300 tourists visit the school every month.

PUBLICATIONS ON COCONUT

PERIODICALS

1. Indian Coconut Journal (English Monthly)
2. Bharatiya Nariyal Patrika (Hindi Quarterly)
3. Indian Naliker Journal (Malayalam Monthly)
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3. Processing and Marketing of Desiccated Coconut in India
4. Handbook on Coconut Palm
5. Domestic Marketing of Coconut Products in India
6. Coconut Recipes Around the World
7. Coconut Guide 1994
8. Integrated Pest Management in Palms

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