

Thailand's illegal dog meat trade

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by John Keeble

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John Keeble introduces 'Shadow Trade', a new film documenting the atrocious abuse, cruelty & illegality suffered by dogs to satisfy human appetites within Thailand, and beyond its borders.



Many people in Thailand are completely unaware of the cruelty occurring on their doorstep. Image copyright Environment Films.

“ This is not about cultural menu choices or the species of animal eaten ”

"He stands there - young, vulnerable and silent - while his whole body cries out in fear, waiting as the last seconds of his life tick away. He has no voice to protest, appeal for kindness, or tell the world of the abuse and suffering heaped upon

him. He is a dog - property, flesh to eat, and his skull shatters as the butcher's club descends again and again."

"Despite knowing what would happen at this primitive killing place in northern Thailand we watch in shock, and the cameras keep rolling for a film which will give him a voice, and let his brutalised body tell the world what is happening in the hidden, illegal world of the dog meat trade."

This harrowing first-hand account by journalist John Keeble sets the tone for an investigative documentary which, following a year-long investigation, he has made in conjunction with a Thai-based charity [The Soi Dog Foundation](#), and a London film company - [Environment Films](#). They have aimed to make a documentary with the potential for showing on TV channels around the world – but especially in Thailand.

It was a shoe-string operation, with the makers doing it for love of animals rather than money. The core costs were covered by five independent NGOs, with cash for the 'TV polish' coming from 276 people touched by a trailer which appealed for support.

The film, "Shadow Trade: The Price of Loyalty" is in the final stages of production before being offered to TV stations worldwide. It delves into the dog meat trades' twin worlds - the vicious smuggling operation to put dogs on the menu in Vietnam, and the hidden (and denied) world of killing dogs for Thai dinner plates. .

No one will be more shocked by the film than most Thai people, compassionate Buddhists who love dogs and don't believe that widespread dog eating occurs. Although prevalent amongst only a relatively small section of the population and some northern ethnic groups, it's enough to account for many thousands of dogs going through primitive rural killing places or being beaten to death and eaten by their owners.

In addition, many thousands more are 'collected' – including significant numbers of pets stolen from loving families – for trafficking across the Mekong, through Laos and into Vietnam, where a gruesome end awaits them. Some collectors even go into the capital, Bangkok, scooping up dogs from streets and temples.

It was this smuggling side that first drew a small but dedicated team into an alliance with John Keeble as the 'video investigator'. The Dogs Trust in London, Network for Animals in Switzerland, and Animals Asia Foundation in China joined the project, along with other organisations with both the knowledge and passion to tackle the issue.

Their combined efforts have achieved a balanced - but hard-hitting - documentary that will shine a light worldwide and in Thailand on the cruelty of the dog meat trade in all its manifestations. Handling such shocking scenes was a challenge in itself.

Indeed, Richard Elson, Shadow Trade's director, commented "I knew something about the situation before I went to Thailand with our cameraman, Ben Todd, but that was nothing compared with what I saw happening to

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the dogs in Thailand and Vietnam. A major challenge has been to convey this without showing harrowing footage that would shock viewers into turning away from the film. An example of that is the dog we saw killed; we had to convey what was happening without showing the actual killing."

Thailand is fast-tracking from a traditional, agricultural nation into a 21st century industrial one, and has its share of problems, from a bitter insurrection in the deep south to political confrontation in Bangkok. In the year of the investigation, the dogs' plight fell off the priority list and no funds for tackling the issue were allocated to the police or Department of Livestock Development. Furthermore, even though they're not livestock, dogs were made the DLD's responsibility, and despite its quarantine centres having no experience of dealing with large numbers of dogs.

How that all played out on the ground is revealed in the film, which uses the investigation to explore the tension surrounding the smuggling, the quiet rural butchering and home killing of dogs, and the heart-breaking tragedy of the government shelters. It also examines the attitude of most Thai people, and the protests that led to the new anti-cruelty legislation currently before parliament.

The brutal indifference of people involved in the trade is glowingly contrasted with the many good people trying to help the dogs. Some appear on screen; others carry on a quiet yet unremitting fight that included secretly helping the team show the world what was going on.

"We hope that exposing the situation will give people living in Thailand and those fighting the trade across the world more of a chance to demand action," said Ella Todd, executive producer of *Shadow Trade*. "This is not about cultural menu choices or the species of animal eaten, it is about the cruelty, illegality and running of criminal businesses based on the disrespect and abuse of animals."

The filming ranged across the spectrum, from those working within the trade to those fighting to stop it, to officials and volunteers trying to alleviate the dogs' suffering. Most filming was undercover; sometimes the team had to have an armed guard drawn in from animal activist supporters because the dog smuggling routes were often used by armed and dangerous drug smugglers.

While most of the documentary was filmed in Thailand, some was carried out in Vietnam, the tragic end of the line for smuggled dogs. The investigators posed as curious tourists for a 3.30am visit to the Hanoi suburb where dogs are killed by the score to supply the city's demand. Most of the scenes were too horrific to show in the film, with dogs killed in cages and processed nearby - while the other dogs watched as they waited their turn.

The power of a broad consortium - NGOs with knowledge, passion and people on the ground, a film company with ability and TV contacts, and an experienced journalist - combine to give the film an edge-of-the-seat tension that reaches into the trade's fissures.

Cherique O'Brien, *Shadow Trade*'s producer, said "Things start to change when people actually know about it, and we believe that television is the loudest way for the voices of these animals to be heard throughout the world. There is no better medium for a story like this to get into homes and into the public consciousness and that is what we need - to reach as many people as possible. So many, including people in Thailand, have no idea that this cruelty is going on, and by making as many as possible aware of this, our goal is achieved."

Two versions of "Shadow Trade" are being made. The English-language version will be offered worldwide and a subtitled Thai-language version will be aimed at informing the Thai population about what is happening. Campaigners hope the Thai version will energise more people into action to protect the dogs, but the filmmakers have been very careful not to produce a campaign film, but a documentary for showing worldwide on TV.

John Keeble is an independent volunteer media specialist in Thailand. He is a former Guardian journalist and publisher who has had a life-long interest in animal rights and welfare. He is also the presenter of the documentary which Environment Films are producing for The Soi Dog Foundation.

Websites:

Production Company / Trailer - www.environmentfilms.org

Charity website - www.soidog.org

Campaign website - www.tradeofshame.org

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