

Feature

# Bokeo schoolchildren beat the virus with a good book

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For several months schools and other centres of learning in Laos were closed during the Covid-19 outbreak but fortunately reopened at the start of September.

In Huayxai district, Bokeo province, the reading room of the Reading Elephant Laos' mobile children's library also opened its doors again. This means children can read and borrow books as usual, Monday through Saturday from 8:30 am until late afternoon, and participate in various fun educational activities.

Reading Elephant Laos is a registered private mobile children's library and reading room, dedicated to promoting reading among children and young people in Huayxai district. The project has been running for three years and the reading room in the district's town centre is frequented by children of all ages.

They can read books, do schoolwork, and have free English or reading lessons. Children can borrow reading books and school books to read at home. The project has an old pickup truck that it uses to drive to elementary schools in the district and organise book festivals. This allows children in remote villages to read books and stories. Games are also organised at the book festivals, and puppet shows spark further interest in stories and reading.

The project manager and founder, Mr Khamkeo Vongsavanh, told Vientiane Times the reading room had been closed since March due to the Covid-19 lockdown, but reopened in June. But staff and children are careful to comply with government guidelines on social distancing, wearing face masks and washing hands with sanitiser or soap before entering the room.

While the Covid-19 virus was spreading across the world, Reading Elephant Laos worked until March 17 when the Bokeo Provincial Office announced the lockdown, meaning no one could leave the village. The team decided to use the time constructively, deciding that preparations should be made and new ideas developed to continue the promotion of reading among the children of Huayxai district after the lockdown ended.

Staff read specialist books such as "Method for reading advertising activities" by Plan International, "The mirror of your children" (in Lao), and "Creating a reading room" (in Lao) as well as watching tutorial videos on YouTube on topics such as

making dolls for puppeteers.

The team returned to the reading room in May without opening the doors. They organised the bookshelves and arranged books by topic so the children could more easily find what they wanted. Thirty-five boxes of reading books were put together for remote village schools, after being donated by the German Embassy.

Suggestions for the use of the reading books in class and in children's free time were made and written down for the teachers. The boxes would be loaned to schools and exchanged when the bookmobile returned at a later date.

"On July 18, we reopened the children's reading room and informed children and their parents we were ready to get back to work," said Khamkeo.

"We suggested that parents come with their children so they could spend time together during the holidays and take part in useful activities such as listening to stories, watching puppet shows, painting, reading, and taking part in dance shows."

"Every day we have at least 30 children, mostly from primary schools," he added. "The reading room opens from 8am to 4pm and then closes as there are other games activities going on after 4pm."

Normally we have English chat sessions after 4pm, but right now there are no tourists so we don't have any native English speakers to take part in the chat sessions."

Last week a new three-wheeled vehicle finally arrived at Reading Elephant Laos' reading room. Thanks to a donation from the Georg Kraus Foundation in Germany, this electric vehicle with a box body could be purchased. It will now be prepared inside and out for use as a bookmobile in Huayxai and nearby villages.

When it is finished, all children at the 12 government-run primary schools will see the mobile with its funny



Boys display a map of Laos.



Children have fun playing and reading books.



Reading Elephant Laos visits a school in Huayxai district, Bokeo province.



Staff divide the books up into boxes.

elephant design in their schoolyards more often. Then they can read or borrow books during the long lunch break or after school and take them home.

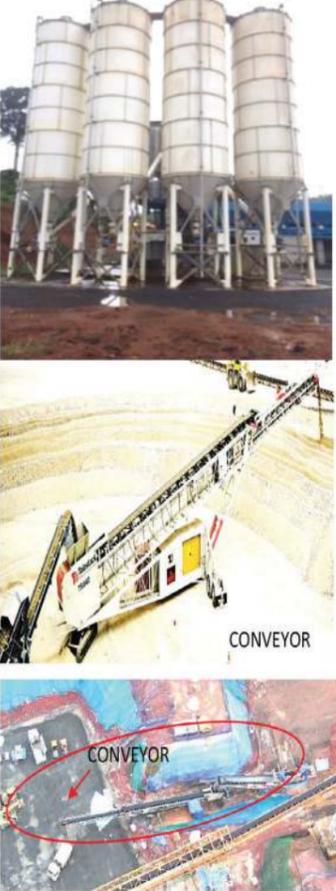
"We have made it our business to give all the children in the district access to books as often as possible. All students are encouraged to read and develop their learning skills. With our two bookmobiles we want to travel even more regularly to all village schools between Ban Xod and Ban Nampouk in the coming year," Khamkeo said.

Private individuals and companies in the region who would like to support the work of Reading Elephant Laos with donations are always welcome. Contact Khamkeo on 020 59515550 or visit [www.readingelephant.org](http://www.readingelephant.org)



The new electric mobile library.





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