

**Review: Chasing the Dragon's Tail: The Struggle to Save Thailand's
Wild Cats**

By Alan Rabinowitz

Reviewed by László Nemes
University of Debrecen, Hungary

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Alan Rabinowitz. *Chasing the Dragon's Tail: The Struggle to Save Thailand's Wild Cats*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2002. 247 pp. ISBN 1-55963-980-6 (paperback). US\$17.00. Recycled, acid-free paper.

In 1986 a 33-year old American biologist, a protégé of the legendary George Schaller and with already a considerable field experience in research on animal behavior (jaguars of Belize), was asked by a leading Thai wildlife protection officer to do similar research on wild animals of Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in western Thailand near the Burmese border. This research would contribute toward organizing a more effective program aimed at protecting Thailand's threatened wildlife. After some hesitation and a consultation with Schaller, Rabinowitz accepted this unexpected request and started a pioneering project of studying wild feline species and other animals in the jungles of Thailand.

After some fatal (or even tragic) failures, the work got on its proper way and became an exciting two-year long scientific adventure (Rabinowitz's research team used the usual methods: analysis of feces and scrapes, and following the tracks and the movement of some radio-collared individuals). Alan Rabinowitz's newly republished book is an extremely entertaining, though often contemplative, description of his whole enterprise. He talks about cats and their conservation, tribal people, people of villages and cities of Thailand, his own feelings about his situation-his insecurity, despair, loneliness, as well as his determination and life-changing experiences. This book is not just about leopards and tigers and not just about science. It is no less about people, human cultures, Thailand, Buddhism, spirituality-and Rabinowitz himself.

No doubt, by reading this book nobody will gain any, even minimal, expertise in the behavior of wild feline species or any other animals (a remarkable exception would be some valuable information about civets). Rabinowitz fails to provide either general information about behavioral ecology of various big, and not so big, wild cats and the behavior of particular individuals he studied or a detailed picture of the state and prospects of wildlife conservation in Thailand. Nor does he report any scientific breakthrough. In fact, one may feel that she learns more about Rabinowitz's girlfriends, Buddhist monk friends, regular accidents or even

the Thai habit of smoking opium than his scientific activity and the animals. In these areas Rabinowitz's book lags far behind accounts of such field scientists as George Schaller, Jane Goodall, Cynthia Moss, Joyce Poole, Dian Fossey, Hans Kruuk, Hans Kummer, and Bernd Heinrich. But this book does offer its own moral: it shows very clearly how rudimentary our understanding of the animals of Southeastern jungles (especially in comparison with African big mammals and primates) is.

This will surely disappoint some readers. However, with all of these provisos in mind, I think that the general reader will find *Chasing The Dragon's Tail* a highly enjoyable reading from which she or he will become acquainted with a colorful and passionate personality and an exotic world, and will get a vivid impression of the daily routines, difficulties, and romantic elements of real scientific work-what wonderful things science can do. And what may be more important after all, Rabinowitz turns our attention to the uppermost importance of protecting our natural inheritance all over the world.

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László Nemes <nemeslal@hotmail.com>, Dept. of Behavioural Sciences,
University of Debrecen, Hungary.