

*A new community-based project is paying small-scale fishermen 10 baht (32 cents) per kilogram of discarded nets, or about every one or two, to recycle them into items from push sticks to face shields and disinfectant bottles*



A worker prepares old fishing nets before a recycling process to create protective gear

# Net gains: Thai project turns fishing nets into virus protection gear

Reuters | Rayong, Thailand

Thai fisherman Anan Jaitang used to pile tattered nylon fishing nets on the beach after hauls of wriggling crabs tore them beyond repair, but most of the nets wound up in the sea, threatening to entangle turtles and choke coral reefs.

Now, Anan and others have an alternative that's not only lucrative and environmentally friendly but will help Thailand battle the coronavirus pandemic.

A new community-based project is paying small-scale fishermen 10 baht (32 cents) per kilogram of discarded nets, or about every one or two, to recycle them into items from push sticks to face shields and disinfectant bottles. "If no one bought my fishing nets, they would just pile up like a mountain," says Anan, who goes through about 36 nets every quarter, fishing in the east coast province of Rayong.

He is among more than 100 artisanal fishermen from four coastal villages in Thailand's east and south to have joined the project, run by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF).

With 50,000 small fishing vessels and 10,000 commercial ships, Thailand has one of the world's largest fishing industries, and is also one of its top marine plastic polluters.

Hundreds of endangered sea animals wash up on Thailand's shores every year. About 74% of sea turtles and 89% of dugongs stranded on the beaches between 2015 and 2017 had been injured by nets left or lost in oceans, official Thai figures show.



An employee works on new products including protective gear

About 640,000 tonnes of fishing nets end up in the ocean globally every year, becoming "ghost gear," the United Nations says.

## Net gains

In addition to tackling Thailand's stubborn pollution problem, the project offers a rare all-domestic solution to a global challenge.

Thai design company Qualy is buying most of the fishing nets being collected by EJF.

Its recycling and manufacturing operations are based in Thailand, unlike similar projects in other countries that ship nets abroad for recycling.

Workers at Qualy's recycling factory in the central city of Ayutthaya wash the nets before feeding them into a shredder that yields blue nylon granules to be mixed with colourants and melted down in product moulds.

During the pandemic, Qualy has

shredded 700 kg (1,500 lbs) of nets to make face shields, alcohol spray bottles and push sticks for elevator buttons and ATM machines to avoid contact.

"We've sold over 100,000 push sticks already during the coronavirus pan-



**During the pandemic, Qualy has shredded 700 kg (1,500 lbs) of nets to make face shields, alcohol spray bottles and push sticks for elevator buttons and ATM machines to avoid contact**



An employee works on new products including protective gear for COVID-19 made with upcycled material from old fishing nets

demic," said marketing director Thosaphol Suppametheekulwat.

He declined to give financial details but confirmed the net recycling operation was profitable, with sales in Europe, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

"Buying the nets supports the fishers' livelihoods, and we can make new products out of them," Thosaphol said. "It's even better when it also helps save our environment."

## Helping hands

The Thai government has welcomed the initiative.

"Any efforts to remove the nets from the ecosystem is welcome," said Ukkrit Satapoomin, the director of Thailand's Office of Marine and Coastal Resources Conservation.

EJF said the project had collected

more than 1.3 tonnes of used nets since a pilot phase two months ago, and plans to expand it to all seaside provinces by year-end.

"It's really important and urgent that we tackle this problem," said campaigner Ingpat Pakchairatchakul.

"Local communities are very environmentally-conscious already, but they just need helping hands from other sectors."

For Anan, the fisherman, the project has not only brought extra income, but put a smile on his face at the thought that his trash contributes to a worthy cause.

"I've seen the products, and I'm proud of my materials," he said, after seeing a push stick made from recycled nets.

"At least it helps the society and saves the environment."

# Botswana reports mysterious deaths of hundreds of elephants

Reuters | Gaborone

The number of elephants found dead in Botswana's Okavango Panhandle has risen to 275 from 154 reported two weeks ago, the government said.

Authorities are investigating the unexplained deaths over the past months. Poaching has been ruled out as the carcasses were found intact.

"Three laboratories in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Canada have been identified to process the samples taken from the dead

elephants," the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources, Conservation and Tourism said.

In early May, Elephants without Borders (EWB), a conservation organisation, reported that its own aerial survey showed elephants of all ages appeared to be dying.

"Several live elephants that we observed appeared to be weak, lethargic and emaciated. Some elephants appeared disorientated, had difficulty walking, showed signs of partial paralysis



A dead elephant is seen in this undated handout image in Okavango Delta

or a limp," EWB director Mike Chase said in a report.

"One elephant was observed walking in circles, unable to change direction although being encouraged by other herd members."

In the report, EWB put the death toll at 356 and Chase said urgent action was needed to establish if the deaths were caused by disease or poisoning.

Africa's overall elephant population is declining due to poaching but Botswana, home to

almost a third of the continent's elephants, has seen numbers grow to 130,000 from 80,000 in the late 1990s. However, they are seen as a nuisance by some farmers, whose crops have been destroyed.

President Mokgweetsi Masisi lifted a five-year ban on big game hunting in May last year but the hunting season failed to take off in April as global travel restrictions meant hunters from many coronavirus-hit countries could not enter Botswana.