

The pride of Coconut U.

Thailand monkeys bring home the bananas

By SUTIN WANNABOVORN
SURATHANI, Thailand (Reuter)
Graduates of Somphon Sack-
how's coconut-collecting
school are cheap and effi-
cient, never go on strike and
never complain about the
food in the staff canteen.

Somphon, who has been
running his school for the last
26 years, says his trainees are
becoming increasingly impor-
tant to plantation owners fac-
ing a growing shortage of la-
bor.

The students are all mon-
keys.

"Spread your hands, 'look
nui' (young son)," Somphon
quietly told a class of monkey
students. "Hold the coconut,
look nui," he urged softly.

"To train these animals,
you have to be stupid and pa-
tient. I admit it, I'm stupid.
Stupid people are more pa-
tient," the 54-year-old Som-
phon explained.

Somphon's monkeys are
taught to shimmy quickly up
coconut trees and distinguish
between ripe and unripe nuts
when they reach the top. They
must then learn to twist the
nuts until the stem breaks and
let them drop to the ground.

The monkeys are also
trained to swim so they can
pick floating coconuts out of
swamps or rivers.

Somphon said a trained
monkey is 10 times more effi-

cient than a person, picking
300 to 500 coconuts a day from
the tall trees and a lot cheap-
er.

"Working monkeys are
very cheap they cost no more
than 10 baht (40 cents) a day,
but make millions of baht a
year," he said.

Somphon says he earns
3,000 baht to 5,000 baht (\$120
to \$200) for each monkey he
trains, which takes three to
five months. Plantation own-
ers bring the animals to him
for tuition.

"My students have contrib-
uted a lot to the coconut in-
dustry, which is facing prob-
lems due to a labor short-
age," he said.

Throughout rapidly grow-
ing Thailand, workers are
drifting from the land to bet-
ter-paid jobs in towns and cit-
ies.

Somphon said almost half
of the estimated 1,200 working
monkeys in Surathani Prov-
ince's coconut plantations
graduated from his school.

An owner of a local coconut
plantation said the monkeys
played a major role in helping
owners harvest their crop.

Surathani produces 250 mil-
lion coconuts a year, generat-
ing income of 500 million baht
(\$20 million), he said. Annual
coconut production in Thai-

land is 1 billion nuts.

Somphon's monkey training
school is a tourist attraction
for locals and foreigners.
There have also been lucra-
tive spinoffs.

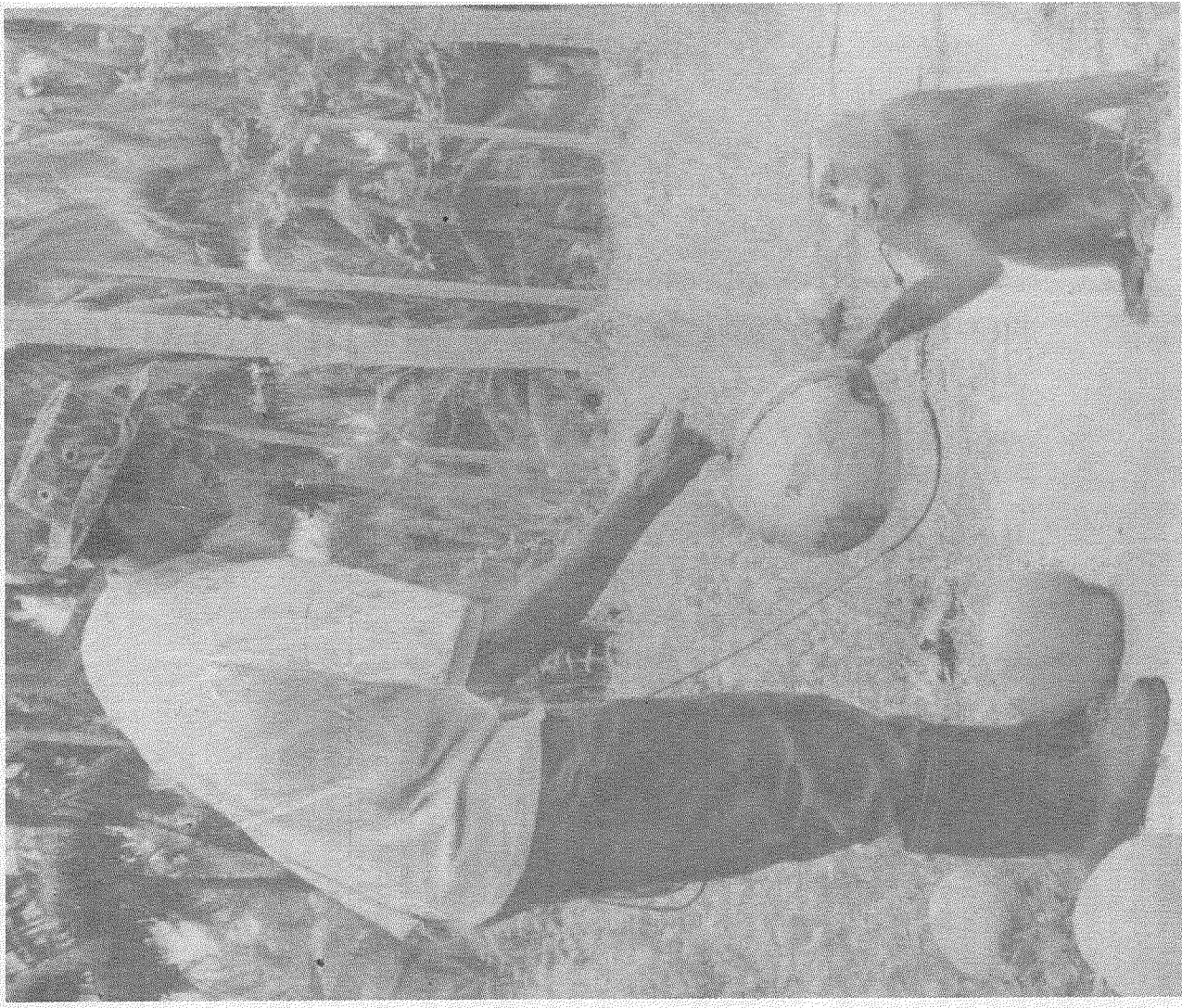
Kai Nui, Somphon's favor-
ite monkey, and 13 of his col-
leagues appeared in a recent
television advertisement, but
Somphon, who codirected the
filming, declined to reveal
how much he earned.

He said several movie pro-
duction companies wanted to
have his monkeys in their
films, but so far he has turned
down the offers because the
roles did not suit their charac-
ters.

Somphon says most of his
monkeys are caught in the
wild but argues that he is indi-
rectly helping to preserve the
species by training them to
work.

"The monkeys are more
valuable after they have been
trained, and their owners
have to love and take good
care of their animals, who
earn income for them," he
said.

The pigtailed monkeys
have a life span of about 25
years. Most of the animals
Somphon trains are between 3
and 6 years old, and they go
on to work in the coconut
plantations for an average of
15 years, he said.



SOMPON SAEKHOW trains a monkey to collect coconuts at his training center in Surathani, Thailand. REUTER PHOTO