

Evaluation of an Animal Welfare Campaign: “Bring the Elephant Home” – A Campaign for Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Thailand

Introduction

The elephant (*Elephas maximus*) is the national symbol of Thailand and its sacred image can be seen throughout the kingdom as testimony to its central role in the history and culture of the Thai people (van de Water, n.d.). Despite this, the elephant in Thailand is an endangered species. A century ago there were approximately 100 000, domesticated elephants in Thailand, the majority used in the logging industry. Today they number approximately 2600 (Godfrey and Kongmuang, 2009). To protect the remaining forests the Thai government banned logging (1989), resulting in 70% of domesticated elephants and their mahouts becoming unemployed (Tipprasert, 2001). Faced with poverty the owners then used their elephants to generate income by begging from tourists in cities, by illegal logging or in tourist camps for trekking and performing (Lohanan, 2001; Lakanavichian, 2001; Ratanakorn 2002; Lohanan 2002; Lair, 2002). Neither The Beast of Burden Act (1939) nor The Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act (1992), are relevant to the domestic elephants' situation, lacking sanctions against cruelty, particularly in work -- essential to any meaningful reform (Lair, 1999; Godfrey and Kongmuang, 2009). Consequently, government agencies and conservation groups have proposed a new bill to clarify the status of the elephant in Thailand and to protect both wild and domestic animals. The bill has met opposition from businesses enjoying the support of local and national politicians (Sukpanich, 2009). Many NGOs have been set up to help the conservation of the Thai elephant (Ratanakorn, 2002). My focus is on the campaign, Bring the Elephant Home (BtEH).

Bring the Elephant Home (BtEH) Campaign

In 2002, Antoinette van de Water was a volunteer at the Elephant Nature Park (ENP), an elephant sanctuary in north Thailand for the rehabilitation of rescued elephants (figure 4). In stark contrast she saw the conditions endured by the street elephants (figure 1) and, witnessing a baby elephant begging – illegally – on the streets of Bangkok she resolved to start a campaign. In 2004 she registered Bring the Elephant Home foundation in the Netherlands and began fundraising (table 1).

In 2005 she bought her first two street elephants (table 1) who, with a rescue team, embarked on an educational tour from Bangkok to the ENP (figure 2). The tour, to publicise the plight of street elephants, included elephant lessons at local schools, art competitions and meeting local government officials.



Figure 1: Juvenile elephant living on city streets (van de Water, 2007)



Figure 2: Bringing the first two elephants home (van de Water, 2007)

Encouraged by the success of the tour and the extensive media coverage the next phase of the campaign began. Antoinette realised that the biggest problem for wild and domesticated elephants was the lack of food and space caused by deforestation (which also brought the wild elephants into conflict with local farmers). Trees for Elephants was launched and by July 2009 144,000 trees had been planted (table 1) van de Water, n.d.).

The campaign further protects the future of domesticated elephants by providing support for mahouts and their families, who depend on the elephants for their survival. Together with The Population and Development Association (PDA) projects are being set up in villages to enable them to become economically self-supporting. The whole community works together, caring for the elephant and developing elephant-friendly environments, where tourists can experience living close to elephants in a home-stay situation. Additionally, villages are paid to plant trees, the money going into a village development bank, enabling them to start projects and generate income (van de Water, n.d.).

Table 1: A history of the growth of the campaign 2004 - 2009

2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the Elephant Home foundation registered in Holland.
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrity singer Heather Nova becomes ambassador for the campaign. • First two rescued elephants bought.
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational tour begins from Bangkok to ENP. • National Geographic, Discovery and Animal Planet channels begin to broadcast fundraising TV commercial. • Extensive Thai and European media attention. • Successful launch in Holland of the book, <i>Thaise olifanten van de straat</i>, about the tour, written by Antoinette van de Water and Liesbeth Sluiter. • “Adopt an Elephant” programme started.
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land purchased from donations. • Film made by Nature Conservation Films (NCF) of the first two rescued elephants’ journey to rehabilitation sold to Animal Planet for worldwide showing. • NCF awarded the Roscar award for BtEH documentary. • Antoinette van de Water won an impressive financial award in a Vodafone-sponsored contest entitled “World of Difference” for innovative proposal to plant 100,000 trees for elephants in one year. • Another elephant rescued and taken to ENP. • Educational “Chang-Chang” tour to present different aspects of elephant culture.
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Elephant Parade” (life-size art elephants) in Rotterdam raised money and awareness. BtEH one of the sponsored projects. • Preparation for first tree-planting in Khao Yai. Tree nursery construction underway. • 100,000 trees planted over five locations. • First elephant, Nok Noi introduced to elephant island near Baan Pai Noi. • Nursery establishment for Trees for Elephants completed.
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antoinette van de Water won the “Terres des Femmes 2009” environmental award for “Trees for Elephants” campaign with a substantial financial reward. • Official book launch in Thailand for <i>The Great Elephant Escape</i>, opened by a Member of Parliament, with great media attention. • New land purchased for ENP. • Rescued elephant, Sri Prae joined Nok Noi on elephant island. • 1,000 trees planted at Elephant World, 11,000 in Salakpra wildlife sanctuary, 20,000 on Elephant Island. • New BtEH television commercial launched.
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Bike for Elephants” tour planned to raise funds for ENP and create awareness about the plight of Thai elephants.

(van de Water, n.d.)

The BtEH campaign started with one objective: to rescue street elephants. Through its success and worldwide recognition it has grown into an animal welfare campaign benefitting not only the elephants and their environment but also the people of Thailand.

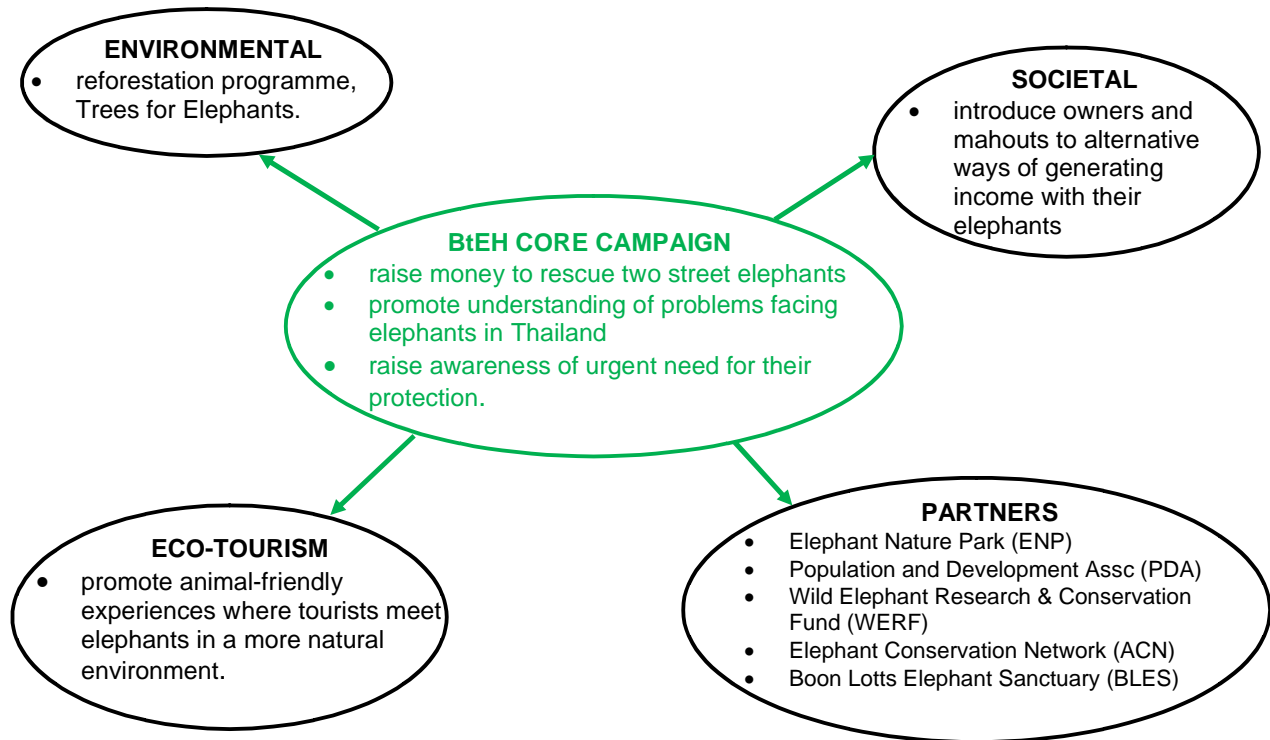


Figure 3: Diagram to illustrate the growth of the BtEH Campaign



Figure 4: The founder of BtEH, Antoinette van de Water with one of her rescued elephants (van de Water, 2007)

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