

EXPATSCENE ■ USNISA SUKHSVASTI

A wedding gift for charity

Royal nuptials boost campaigner's mission to protect Thailand's elephants

Belinda Stewart-Cox is high on the list of expats to look out for at the moment, since it was announced that her Elephant Conservation Network, based in Kanchanaburi, has been selected by Prince William and his fiancée, Catherine Middleton, as one of the recipients of their wedding charitable gift fund. The donation will be made through the Zoological Society of London (ZSL).

Her CV is impressive: the ECN webpage touts her as an “experienced conservation project manager and field researcher with special interests in human-wildlife conflict, ecotourism, community-based conservation, and local NGO development, arising from 17 years of multidisciplinary research, training, project planning and implementation in Asia (primarily Thailand), and Kenya. A skilful communicator with strong facilitation skills, good writing ability, a ready rapport with people from all spheres of life, and experience in publishing and TV production.”

UK-born Stewart-Cox earned a master's degree (distinction) in conservation and tourism from the University of Kent. It was as project leader of the Oxford University Green Peacock Project that brought her to Thailand in 1986.

It was during this time that she met the late forestry officer Seub Nakhasathien whose own battle to fight poaching in Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary eventually cost him his life.

During their time working together, Stewart-Cox help Seub prepare a paper to be submitted by the Royal Forest Department to Unesco to declare the pristine forest area as a World Heritage site, a status that would help protect the western forest complex.

Sadly, Seub didn't live long enough to see the results of his mission. The area was declared a World Heritage Site in 1991, a year after his tragic death.

The Seub Nakasathien Foundation was set up in 1990, with Stewart-Cox as its founding trustee and projects director. The ECN was subsequently set up in 1998 as part of the Seub Nakasathien Foundation, to implement a programme

of activities to tackle the dual challenges of elephant conservation and human-elephant conflict in and around the Salakpra Elephant Ecosystem, areas that comprise the country's largest population of wild elephants.

Life talked to Stewart-Cox on this recent recognition:

How do you feel about being listed as one of the recipients of the Prince William and Catherine Middleton wedding gift fund?

I was very surprised, pleasantly surprised, since it wasn't something I had applied for. All the recipients were selected by the ZSL, who chose seven projects helping elephants, tigers and rhinos. We are the only elephant conservation project in the group.

How will the gift fund benefit your work?

We are working on three key areas at the moment. First is to help the capacity and morale of forest rangers. They do a really important job for Thailand but being at the bottom of the government hierarchy means they are neglected. They do not receive any budget for equipment, such as boots, uniforms, backpacks, mosquito nets, cooking equipment, compasses, GPS systems or cameras, which they have to pay for out of their own pockets.

Secondly, we help quite a few villages around Salakpra area which had to be relocated when the Srinakarin Dam was built. They were promised piped water, but never got it, so they can't do fish ponds or irrigation of vegetable plots. They are dependent of forest resources, and we have to help them develop alternative livelihoods — provide training and find capital funding for projects such as mushroom farming, sewing circles, drying fruit, school recycling projects. This in turn helps reduce pressure on elephants.

Last, but not least, we help the local people prepare for climate change. The woodlands in Kanchanaburi become very hot and dry, so we've conducted research on how to restore degraded community woodlands using indigenous trees. We've established nurseries and helped them connect with other successful community woodland restoration projects around the country. We help



them make quality products from bamboo, so they can make 100 baht per piece instead of 1 baht for cut bamboo. I'm also a believer in study trips, where villagers can exchange ideas and learn from each other, rather than have a *phuyai* come and tell them what to do.

We are helping them improve our natural environment in our own small way. If people can learn to live with nature, then elephants can survive and the ecosystem can be sustained.

Any final comments on the wedding?

I'm so impressed that Prince William and Kate have chosen to ask people to donate to charities instead of giving them wedding presents. What would be even better is to have them eventually come and visit these projects one day!

