

An elephant herd at Kui Buri, due south of Belinda's study area. Photo: Suchin Wongsuwan

The wildlife protector

Belinda Stewart-Cox from Wiltshire is at the forefront of a campaign to protect Thailand's elephant population.

Stephen Giles finds out more

As someone who's spent much of the last 20 years camping in the largest surviving tract of forest in Thailand, it's surprising that Belinda Stewart-Cox feels the thing she misses most about Wiltshire is woodland. 'I love the woodlands here,' she says. 'They're so much rougher in Thailand. You can't beat open woodland.'

The great outdoors has appealed to Belinda from her earliest days. Her army childhood in Kenya and Malaysia is recalled in flashes of local culture and environment, or 'wild culture' as she calls it. Her parents retired to set up home in Brixton Deverill, Wiltshire, in the 1970s, a place that she calls home for a couple of fleeting visits each year.

Belinda's journey into the depths of the Thai forest took a circuitous route. She began her working life in publishing, before heading to college as a mature student to read human sciences at Oxford, which mixed anthropology with zoology and ecology.

'It's the most brilliant course,' she says, 'particularly if you go into conservation because, as anyone in conservation will tell you, it's not just about the animals, it's about people – about politics and socio-economics.'

In her final year at Oxford she travelled to southern China and encountered the endangered green peacock. She decided to put together a project to go and study these birds in another habitat in Thailand for a further three months after graduating. The project was delayed by a year and in the meantime she was offered a job working for Yorkshire TV as a researcher on a science and education show, where her boss was TV star Adam Hart-Davies.

Working with Hart-Davies was a joy, but Belinda didn't take to the world of television. In between contracts for Yorkshire TV, she went to Thailand to carry out her delayed study of the peacocks.

'I absolutely loved it,' she says. 'It was like having a love affair with a country. There's a certain point in life when you're not entirely satisfied and you go on an adventure and it just clicks. When I came back to England I was just so miserable, I couldn't wait to get back to Thailand.'

Thus began a 20-year affair which, like all relationships, has had its ups and downs. Belinda's first challenge was to help protect the peacock's habitat from a proposed hydro-electric dam which would have gutted the conservation area.

She explains: 'I was approached to help oppose the dam because I could argue against it in a technical way and write about it in English, to make the campaign international. Eighteen months later we won, against all the odds. In effect, this campaign was the birth of the conservation movement in Thailand.'



Elephant conservation network team co-founder Jittin Ritthirat with team members Namfon and Pa check the network's human/elephant conflict form. Photo: ECN-ZSL

A further battle against illegal logging was fought and won, before the Thai government eventually agreed to apply for World Heritage Status for the site in 1989. Belinda and her colleague Seub Nakhasathien wrote the nomination for the area, which is known as Thung Yai (big field) Huai Kha Kaeng (river of the strong lake).

Seub went on to become chief warden of the area. He acted to stop military operations in the area and end illegal logging, but in the complex political arena of Thailand this made him a marked man. While he had the support of locals, he came under intolerable pressure from higher powers. In 1990 he committed suicide.

This was a devastating blow for Belinda, but it also marked the start of a new chapter for conservation in Thailand. She explains: 'Seub was a very hard-working, sincere man. People wanted to do something in his name and they raised £500,000. I was asked to help establish a foundation. I'd worked closely with him for four years. I couldn't say no.'

The Seub Nakhasathien Foundation, was a major force for change in Thai conservation. While working with the foundation in 1998, Belinda started a project to examine human/elephant conflict in the peninsular known as Salak Pra (refuge of the monk). So what attracted Belinda to the elephants?



British Government official Barry Gardiner takes part in a dung assessment with Belinda Stewart-Cox and members of the elephant conservation network team. Photo: British Embassy Bangkok

'The peacocks were safe by then – World Heritage status saw to that – but the area as a whole was not safe. The buffer areas needed to be protected and the best symbol of the area as a whole is the elephant. Only 1,500 elephants remain in the wild in Thailand, with around 4,000 in captivity. Salak Pra has an elephant population of around 120.

'Because these elephants have been squeezed into an ever-diminishing area by a dam and by human settlement, they are in trouble as they raid crops. Their main water source, the River Kwai, is through fields of human agriculture, all of which is tasty to them. Their own habitat is being degraded, and they're cut off from a year-round access to water supply. The villagers revere the elephants and it surprises me how tolerant they are. But they don't want to lose their livelihoods.

'The elephant has a very particular place in Thai culture, but it needs a very large area. We need to protect the area, on the assumption that if you can protect it for the elephant you can protect it for anything.'

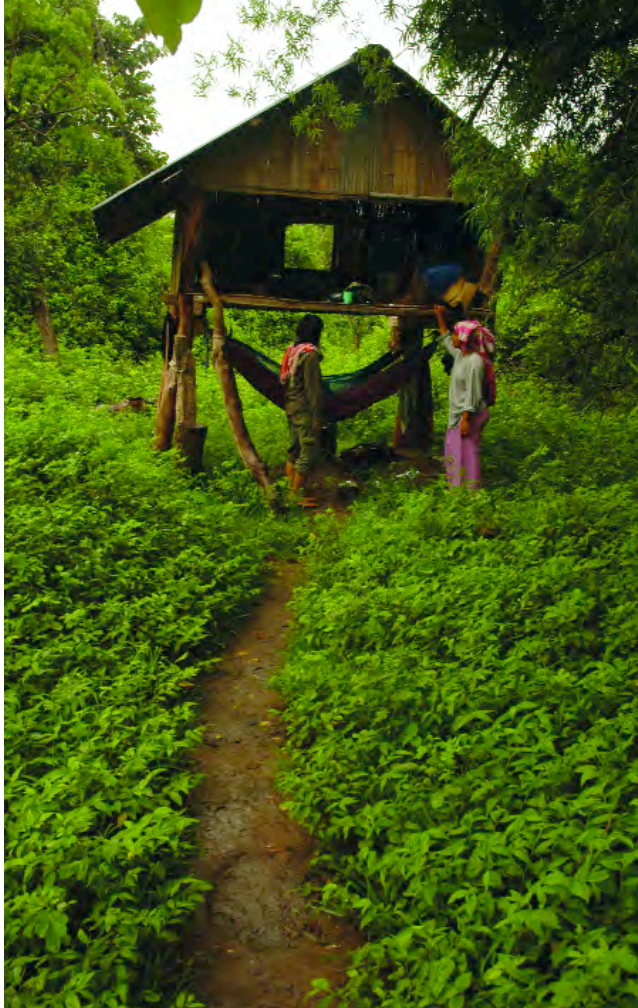
When Belinda left the foundation after nine years, she asked her colleagues if they wanted to join her in a new independent body continuing their work on human/elephant conflict, which they did. That is how the Elephant Conservation Network came into being.



A moment of rest for Belinda Stewart-Cox. Photo: ECN-ZSL



Village Monitor Mr Somchai measures the damaged area of a sugarcane field. Photo: ECN-ZSL



The hut under which Belinda and her team slept in hammocks to avoid a rainstorm - note the elephant footprints on the path. Photo: ECN-ZSL

Belinda says: 'We got funding for a three-year project to do the preliminary work, interviewing people in the area to find out what they thought about elephants and what the biggest tension was. Then I applied for British Government Darwin funding along with a UK partner in the shape of the Zoological Society of London. That has been the most brilliant partnership for us, because it gives us an institutional home. They were looking for an Asian elephant project to support because they have Asian elephants in London Zoo and wanted to support in-situ conservation.'

Belinda feels strongly that in order to tackle this local problem it has to be seen to be a Thai initiative. Consequently, it is a real grass roots project, staffed in part by villagers from the affected area. To establish the true scale of the problem, Belinda's five-strong team established a complete historical record of crop-raiding in the affected area. They appointed monitors in 15 villages, who report to Belinda's team whenever there is a raid.

By measuring the frequency and calculating the economic costs of each raid, Belinda's team began to find out exactly what was happening and when. They also conducted seasonal surveys in the forest to assess the time of year when crop raids are more likely.

In fact, the only thing missing from the team's monitoring is the elephants themselves. 'We don't often see the elephants,' Belinda explains. 'They can be very hostile as they've been harassed so much. As a general rule, if you can see one, you're too close.'

In the future, Belinda's team will be finding ways to help protect crops, either by reducing the cost through crop protection measures,



Elephants cool off in a pond at Kui Buri. Photo: Suchin Wongsuwan

or working with villagers to introduce community-based tourism which mitigates the loss of income.

As for her own future, will there come a time when Belinda moves on from her adopted home? 'I've been in Thailand for 20 years and I've been talking about leaving for 16 of them,' she laughs. 'I've now got to the point where I'm really pleased with this partnership with ZSL and great funding through the Darwin scheme.'

'This initiative we've got going is worthwhile, human/elephant conflict is growing and we're working at the cutting edge. If we can find a solution that works it's a solution that can be tried elsewhere. An awful lot of what we're doing is about people. I love elephants, but it's not all about them. People make the difference.' ▼

Below: The tell-tale sign of elephant prints in a field outside Salak Pra. Photo: ECN-ZSL

