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feature



ELEPHANTINE MISSION

Antoinette van de Water talks about her lifetime passion and the unyielding fight to give the world's biggest land mammal a better life, writes Arusa Pisuthipan

Antoinette van de Water and elephants have several things in common, yet not in size or shape and all that.

"The most beautiful thing [about an elephant] is their social behaviour. They are sociable, but at the same time peaceful and gentle," van de Water explained on why she fell head over heels in love with these gigantic mammals.

"Elephants are also vegetarians," she added, laughing.

Coincidentally, these characteristics of the world's biggest land mammals are pretty much similar to those of van de Water herself. The 34-year-old is caring and amicable, and at the same time she is also gentle and polite. Van de Water is a strict lacto-ovo vegetarian, so taking the life of an animal let alone hurting one is the last thing she would ever do. One of the most obvious differences, however, might be that

van de Water is a soft-spoken type, while elephants are those born with trumpeting sounds.

A native of the Netherlands, van de Water is the founder of Bring the Elephant Home, a non-governmental organisation founded in 2004 with the objective to help create more homes and a better life for both wild and domesticated elephants in Thailand.

The story of van de Water notoriously made newspaper headlines in November last year after the English version of *The Great Elephant Escape*, a book she co-authored, was launched. The book, which was first published in Dutch, is about her journey to Thailand, how she got involved and her experiences with elephant rescues. The controversy, unfortunately, occurred when a Thai-language newspaper claimed that the co-writer had disgraced Thailand by writing stories and showing pictures on the cruelty being done to elephants,

especially during the mating season, in her book.

"Back then I visited Thailand and I was doing some research. I spent a lot of time with elephants and visited several elephant camps as I wanted to see everything about elephants with my own eyes. And while doing my research I witnessed them breeding. In my book I just described what I saw at that moment. I didn't even say that it was cruel. It was just my observation," noted the co-author.

Working as an animal activist was not the first thing van de Water chose to pursue in her life. Before ever coming to Thailand she had a good career working for a business company in Amsterdam, where she earned more than €4,000 (182,940 baht) a month. But she eventually left all that life of luxury behind and found herself on an aeroplane travelling across continents with a strong determination to work with and for animals.



PHOTOS: YINGYONG UN-ANONGRAK

The question though is why?

"The two jobs that I had always wanted to do when I was a young girl were to become an animal doctor or work for Greenpeace and save the world, you know, that kind of stuff," she recalled. "But as I got older, I was always good at making business plans. My dad always taught me that if you want something you have to make a plan. The first plan I ever made was at age seven when I wanted a dog. I thought I was good at doing this so I studied economics and specialised in marketing. And so in the meantime I sort of forgot about the passion I had when I was younger."

After graduation the young van de Water started her first job at a marketing agency, and it was during this time she also started to feel unhappy with what she was doing with her life. She felt she could no longer stand a society where people considered money, a big house and a nice car were

measures of one's value and happiness.

"It was the emptiness," she explained. "Everything was all about money. I had many clients and commercial companies and I had to make sure they could make more money to help them get more power — there was nothing good about it. I was in the office all day and all the talks with colleagues were all about money, who gets the biggest bonus and so on. Suddenly it was just too much. Everything in my life pointed in the wrong direction."

So she made a 180-degree turn.

Van de Water decided to let go of her commercial job, her house and her fast car to barter for things with a much slower pace of life — a bicycle and, most importantly, an activist job at an environmental and social organisation called Friends of the Earth in Amsterdam, where she functioned as a fund-raiser. This organisation, she conceded, considerably inspired her to

make a change in the world.

It was in 2002 when van de Water first set foot in Thailand. It was not just for travel, she said, but she was also looking for a place where she could make herself useful. She searched the internet and got in touch with the Elephant Nature Park, a nature sanctuary for traumatised elephants in Chiang Mai. Van de Water had worked as a volunteer at the Nature Park before flying back to the Netherlands to continue to work at Friends of the Earth. In the meantime, she founded Bring the Elephant Home as a side project. She came back to Thailand the following year to continue her volunteer work with elephants, and after that she could not live in her motherland any more.

"They [elephants] are really like humans sometimes, with all the emotions. When I was volunteering for the first time, there was a baby elephant that had just been rescued. I took care of the baby 24 hours a day, preparing bottles, feeding him, walking him to the lake. He's really like a baby, sometimes jealous, sometimes sweet. The social aspect of an elephant is also really beautiful."

Bring the Elephant Home, according to van de Water, focuses on helping to create a better future for Thai elephants so that these giants and humans can live together in harmony. And by "a better future" the founder means a world where both wild and domesticated elephants alike are given the chance to survive and have access to enough food to live in a habitat as close to its natural environment as possible.

What van de Water has been doing over the last few years is to promote the positive side of elephants instead of the negative aspects like the abuse, street begging and so on. Her job is to promote the beauty of the tuskers, show why they are so special and at the same time promote Thailand as an animal-friendly tourist destination. To do so, she has set up a number of activities and campaigns including a reforestation project, land buying, bicycle tours and creating networks with outside and local people who care deeply about elephants in order to ensure there's more space and more food for elephants throughout the Kingdom.

And right now van de Water is focusing on her community development project in Buri Ram province, in which villagers are encouraged to plant more trees. For every tree planted, Bring the Elephant Home will put money towards the newly created village bank account so that the locals can start up income-generating projects with a micro-loan from the village bank. And through reforestation, a good, natural environment with sufficient food for the elephants is created. Therefore, the project helps the locals both economically and environmentally — a good example of sustainable and animal-friendly living.

With her compassion for elephants, van de Water is strongly against elephant shows on offer at a fair number of elephant camps nationwide. While visitors enjoy watching elephants playing football, standing on their hind legs, painting or doing other unnatural movements, they do not realise that these poor elephants were forced to undergo torture training sessions to turn these wild creatures into obedient and tourist-friendly animals while able to perform unnatural side acts.

"When people make elephants do all these unnatural things, I think it sends a wrong message and poor example. Elephants have been used so much just to entertain people and that doesn't support elephants at all. They are not here to merely entertain us and we should respect them," commented van de Water, who received the World of Difference Award of Vodafone for her "Trees for Elephants" project in 2007 as well as a Terre des Femmes award of Yves Rocher Foundation for the "Trees for Wild Elephants" in Salakpra, Kanchanaburi province in 2008.



The problem facing elephants is much more serious than people realise

Van de Water is well aware of the problems that elephants face in Thailand, be it street begging, accidents, extinction, elephant exploitation, etc. Van de Water believes that one of the best ways to solve these problems is for Thai people to work together because, after all, these large creatures are a symbol of Thailand and are, undeniably, a huge part of Thai history and culture.

"The problem facing elephants is much more serious than people realise. Elephants are disappearing and that kind of story is never in the news. People read about elephants only when there are accidents, or when they are hit by a truck or something bad like that. But nobody really knows how many elephants there are left. One hundred years ago there were a lot of them. But within only a few years, their numbers have dramatically dropped. If nothing changes, they will be gone forever."

"And the problem here is that people don't even know how serious it really is. There is not enough collaboration among organisations, people and the government. We should work together to change this situation. It's a big challenge to change these problems and we have to do something now. I know all Thai people feel something special for elephants, so it should not be too difficult to get people active and motivated."