

Elephant Aid International Chain Free Corral Project



Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary - BLES
Sukhothai, Thailand



Submitted by BLES
October 7, 2018

Introduction

Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary - BLES, located in Sukhothai, Thailand offers sanctuary to 13 rescued elephants. The tourism program at the sanctuary allows small groups of tourists to observe the elephants grazing, socializing, and displaying natural behaviour within 750 acres of forested land. The eight females and five males at BLES spend their days in the forest, under the observation of their mahouts, and then return to their Chain-Free Corrals in the late afternoon when the mahouts finish their working day. Now, nine elephants at the sanctuary live completely chain-free, two of them being bulls.

Timeline

BLES was the first facility in Thailand to implement Elephant Aid International's solar-powered fence technology. The first three corrals were built in August 2015, and following their success, the next three corrals were built in January 2018. In addition to these six enclosures, each of which is 2-3 acres large, BLES also used extra fence material to build two day-time corrals, that are much smaller, but are effectively used for holding elephants while mahouts are having lunch or cutting supplementary food.

Features

The overall success of this technology and infrastructure at BLES is owed to the design and overall plan, created before construction by BLES Founder, Katherine Connor, BLES mahouts and EAI Founder, Carol Buckley. It is easy to observe that as long as the elephants have everything they want and need within the corrals, desire to break out of the fencing is limited, or not observed at all.

It is important to note that the main corrals at BLES are strictly used for holding elephants overnight, and that their function would not be as effective should the elephants be left in that space during both day and night. Several of the corrals at BLES have a source of water to allow independent bathing and drinking, others have hardy, fast-growing elephant grass planted in them to give the elephants the opportunity to graze overnight, and each of the habitats are large enough that the natural foliage and trees within them regenerate quickly, so they are always lush, green and never barren.

Maintenance

The fences are not difficult to maintain, and only require occasional repairs, usually during the rainy season when storms are frequent. Other maintenance involves constantly cutting the grass around the bottom wire of the fencing. The BLES team has found that hiring a tractor truck once per week to clear supplementary food waste and dung is an effective and low-cost method of keeping the corrals clean.

The solar panel and battery system have not required any maintenance, and is an eco-friendly and efficient method of powering these systems. BLES is located in a remote area of Thailand, and we experience frequent power cuts that sometimes take long lengths of time to address, so the solar cell and power storage system are highly beneficial to BLES.

Reasons for Success at BLES

The corrals are managed by the BLES mahouts, and the individual mahouts know it is part of their role to maintain the corral that is frequently used by their elephant. This involves checking the power levels, cutting the grass, and frequently checking the perimeter of the corral to ensure it is not in need of repair. We predict that if there was no direct accountability for the individual corrals, that damages would render the fences ineffective, and they would be left unused.

As well as this, the elephants at BLES spend nights in their social bond groups, meaning that their desire for social interaction is fulfilled throughout both day and night, detracting from desire to break out of the corral to get to companions.

An abundance of natural foliage and supply of supplementary food for grazing, as well as a water source for drinking and bathing, meet the elephants' physical requirements and keeps them occupied and content in the corrals. We predict that a lack of autonomous access to food and/or water would enhance the elephants' desire to break out of the corral.



Finally, the fence materials were imported to Thailand, so in BLES's case, having an on site back stock of wire, posts, and connectors has been an integral part of keeping the fences operating, and fixing them in a timely manner should they get damaged. The BLES mahouts

manage and organize this back stock, constantly communicating with the team regarding quantities of remaining parts.

Case Study #1: Tong Jai



Tong Jai, who lived at BLES for over 10 years before passing away at the age of 75, is a prime example of how EAI's Chain-Free Corral project can drastically improve the welfare of captive elephants. A highly-traumatized, ex-logging bull with a history of aggression, Tong Jai was even able to remain chain-free in a 3-acre corral during frequent and irregular musthing periods. He spent a great deal of his time mentoring and teaching 9-year-old Mee Chok, social interaction that benefited Tong Jai both mentally and physically. The corrals allowed these bulls to remain together overnight, free to behave in a way that nurtured both Tong Jai and Mee Chok.

Though this approach might not work for every captive bull, the combination of skilled, dedicated mahouts and the EAI fence technology allowed Tong Jai to live each day, chain-free, for the final years of his long, hard life.

BLES is a sanctuary that takes pride in ethical management of captive bulls, and the introduction of the Chain-Free Corrals has offered several bulls, like Tong Jai, the freedom to express natural behaviour in an environment that is safe for both human carers and other elephants.

Case Study #2: Wassana, Pang Dow and Lotus: “The Gossip Girls”



Wassana, Pang Dow, and Lotus are three middle-aged female elephants who were rescued and relocated to BLES separately, but have since become inseparable.

Before the fences were built at BLES, these three best friends would spend their days together, but had to be secured on long lengths of chain nearby each other at night. EAI's Chain-Free Corrals have given the gossip girls the freedom to express natural behaviour and remain in their bond group even after their mahouts have gone home for the day.



The BLES team has observed The Gossip Girls taking turns sleeping and standing over each other throughout the night, behaviour seen within wild elephant herds, that captive elephants rarely have the opportunity to demonstrate. Mahouts who have slept near the habitat areas have even mentioned hearing these three best friends splashing in the mud and water before the sun has even come up.

The freedom of self-determination is a priceless gift to give captive elephants, and the Chain-Free Corral infrastructure has allowed BLES to offer this to The Gossip Girls and other rescued elephants at the sanctuary.



Opportunities

While BLES has seen great success with the corrals, we have learned many things along that way that have allowed us to now use them most effectively for the elephants and team at the facility.

For example, we have developed a protocol for introducing elephants to the fences for the first time. Some elephants at BLES are elderly and have spent their entire life being secured by an ankle chain at night, so even though the corrals offer improved welfare, they are still quite a significant change in the elephants' routine. The BLES team has found that elephants will try to break through the fence on their first night in the enclosure, and therefore, we have learned to always have a mahout on standby at the sanctuary for an elephant's first night in the enclosure, checking on the elephant every few hours throughout the night. To teach the elephants not to play with the fence from the very beginning, we increase the power on the system for the first

few nights, and then return to the normal level once the elephant understands. When other facilities adopt this technology, it might add to the effectiveness of the overall program if an EAI representative can provide tips and instruction like this before elephants are introduced, and remain at the facility for the first few days of use to provide support and suggestions to the mahouts and staff there.

Also, while the fence system is easy to maintain and fix should it break, we have found that tusks do not conduct electricity and one of our young tuskers was able to break the fencing, even after we observed him experience the shock from touching the wire with his trunk first. Every elephant is different, and while some of the tuskers at BLES never used their tusks to break the fencing, a teenage male figured it out on his first night.



Further, BLES is able to manage the corrals at the sanctuary, owing to a dedicated team of mahouts and a strong desire to maintain the infrastructure. However, it would be beneficial to other facilities and even BLES to some degree to have an EAI representative within the region to be going to the project sites, giving tips, ensuring the areas are maintained, hearing issues and resolving them, ordering extra fence supplies as back stock, and even coordinating visits to successful project sites with interested elephant camp owners.

Conclusion

The team at BLES is proud to be a model of the Chain-Free Corral project, and hope that other elephant facilities in Asia will follow in taking this step towards a higher standard of elephant welfare.

The fences have become a permanent fixture of the sanctuary's routine for both the elephants and mahouts, and BLES will continue implementing this technology at the sanctuary and encouraging others to do the same.

