

The 'Thinking Big' Elephant Project

Dr Maggie Esson¹, Andrew Moss¹ & Liz Pitchford²

¹Chester Zoo, UK

²Literacy Consultant, UK

Abstract

*Our Asiatic elephants (*Elephas maximus*) are a popular zoo exhibit and serve as a flagship for our insitu programme in Assam (the Assam Haathi Programme). The 'Thinking Big' elephant project involved primary schools from the socially and economically deprived district of Ellesmere Port, located close to the zoo in the north of England. Pupils and their teachers visited us to interview our elephant keepers, learn about our elephant herd and develop insight into the lives of people living in human elephant conflict zones in Assam.*

Schools reported low levels of literacy, and we developed a project to help raise standards of literacy, most especially writing. Pupils participated in teaching sessions in their schools where they were given a presentation of our work in Assam and profiles of our elephant herd in the zoo. Pupils prepared interview questions and met with our elephant keepers behind the scenes. Pupils then used this experience to develop persuasive texts, journalistic writing and diary entries. We surveyed and interviewed teachers, monitored pupils' work, recorded comments from pupils and their parents, and received feedback from our elephant keepers. Results indicate that pupils were motivated to write and teachers felt the pupils fully engaged with the project.

Project Description & Methods

Our Asiatic elephants, (*Elephas maximus*), (2.6), are a popular species in the zoo and their roles in the species collection plan are 'Insitu Ambassador' and 'Education.' Chester Zoo is a partner in the 'Assam Haathi Programme', a human/elephant field programme in Assam in Northern India, and both schools' and community education are key components of this project in-country. Chester Zoo staff are directly involved in this field project and consequently, our educators can speak with some credibility on this topic to schools local to Chester Zoo. Within our zoo catchment are areas designated as socially and economically deprived and we are keen to support schools in these areas. Teachers from some of these schools report low levels of literacy in 10 year olds (Year 5), especially amongst boys, and we sought to devise a point of engagement to motivate these pupils to read and write, and to help teachers raise standards of literacy.

The aims of the 'Thinking Big' elephant project were:

- To raise standards of literacy by engaging Year 5 pupils in a cross-curricular zoo-based activity
- To deepen pupils' understanding of the conservation work of Chester Zoo, both in the zoo and in the wider context
- To illustrate how we operationalize species collection plan roles through a schools' education programme using Asiatic Elephants as a case study

The 'Thinking Big' elephant project was devised in partnership with a schools' literacy consultant for our region and 300 Year 5 pupils and 50 teachers from ten schools participated over a period of six months. Background materials were prepared by zoo educators and these were designed to provide an overview of our Assam Haathi Programme, with a particular emphasis on how elephant

behaviour impacts on the lives of villagers, including children. We hoped that pupils would feel an empathy with their counterparts in Assam and this would provide a cultural insight.

Profiles of all our elephants, including behavioural and physical characteristics, were also produced to allow pupils to recognise individuals in our herd. The concept was that pupils would have an opportunity to compare and contrast attitudes towards our much-loved zoo elephants, with the fear and foreboding that wild elephants, raiding crops and destroying homes, can engender in Assam. We wanted to emotionally engage the pupils in order to inspire them to write.

We also wanted to offer choice in terms of the areas of the literacy curriculum that pupils chose to address: for example, researching using multi-modal texts, speaking and listening using interview skills, writing from different perspectives (a farmer, an elephant, and an Assamese child), journalistic reporting, and persuasive texts.



Life for children in an Assamese village. The smaller child's mother was killed by an elephant



The morning after a village elephant raid

Boys play dare-devil teasing a wild elephant



One focus of our work in Assam is addressing the issue of boys putting themselves in dangerous situations by teasing and using catapults to hurl stones at crop-raiding wild elephants in a show of bravado in front of their peers. We felt this would have a particular resonance with our Year 5 boys here in Chester.

The literacy consultant, teachers and their pupils participated in introductory sessions in the schools and this included preparatory work for zoo visits. During the zoo visits, pupils, in groups of 30, met with our elephant keepers, (briefed by our educators) in a behind the scenes visit. Interesting, this visit did not include any special access to our elephants, but did include access to one of our indoor paddocks while the elephants were outside. The keepers provided insight into their elephant management routine, including a demonstration of aspects of protective contact training. This included taking temperatures using a thermal imaging device, and sensing the power of elephants by rolling a boomer ball. These activities served to turn the experience into participatory learning and clearly inspired the pupils.

Pupils used their pre-prepared work to interview keepers and it was obvious from levels of concentration, that the keepers had a real impact on the pupils, including being seen role models. Keepers also appreciated that pupils had put some effort into preparing for the meetings and there was a sense of interest and excitement. Following this visit, teachers reported that they had sufficient materials to develop cross-curricular schemes of work that lasted a whole term in some cases.

Outcomes & Evaluation

An online evaluation survey was conducted with the participating teachers, and informal feedback was also collated from pupils, parents, carers and our zoo keepers. Written work from children was collected to evidence literacy attainment.

Some schools also chose to develop the theme into an art project, researching and reflecting the rich and colourful culture of Assam, including the Hindu tradition of honouring the deity 'Ganesha', whose elephant head makes him easily identifiable. This body of work resulted in the schools staging an art and literacy exhibition in the zoo.

Teachers were unanimous in their praise for the project, often citing the real, hands-on experience as a great catalyst for improved literacy. "Our literacy work could be written from real experiences, not just research"; and "Being allowed access to the elephant enclosure made everything very real". 62% of teachers responding to our survey reported that the 'Thinking Big' elephant project became part of a scheme of work and the zoo visit was not viewed as a stand-alone school trip.



Demonstrating how to take an elephant's temperature



Sensing the power of an elephant by rolling a heavy boomer ball

71% of teachers had visited the zoo before on a school trip, but recorded additional benefits as 'going behind the scenes' and having a focus. "The visit was much more focused, work had been done prior to the visit which was a huge benefit. The work that was done after the visit in literacy was amazing." The enthusiasm of the pupils was also highlighted by teachers as a great positive and that this improved learning. "Children's enthusiasm and levels of interest were greatly increased and they wanted to learn more. It encouraged independent learning". We asked teachers if this zoo visit had changed their understanding of what our zoo could offer school groups and 100% responded in the positive. "Being able to take part in a project like this gives far greater purpose to a visit and could lead to a greater number of shorter 'focused' visits rather than a one off 'visit to the zoo'."

In the feedback that keepers provided it was clear that they also enjoyed participating in the project and understood the value of this type of interaction "...it was easy to see that they [the pupils] had really thought about the elephants as individuals with personality which can make a real connection for people". Wider benefits of the project were also reported by some parents. "My child, who normally says he 'does nothing' in school, kept us listening for over two hours about elephants". One pupil, with behavioural difficulties and who is assigned a one-to-one carer, was included in the school trip after some discussion. The carer later reported the positive benefits of participating in the zoo visit. "The child I work with one-to-one has responded so positively, showing very few of the negative behaviours he normally displays in school".

Conclusion

The 'Thinking Big' elephant project shows the benefits that animal keepers and educators working closely together can bring to enrich learning opportunities in zoos. Opportunities like this one, to develop relationships across disciplines in zoos, yields benefits for educators. We feel we know more about the management of our elephant herd as a result of

planning this project and this learning will have other applications in our learning activities. We feel we have a stronger relationship with our elephant keepers and that they have a deeper insight into how effective zoo education can be and the part they can play in this.

We demonstrated that our elephants in the zoo can act as powerful ambassadors for our field programme in Assam. The charisma of the species and the privilege of stepping behind the scenes and engaging in conversation with our keepers provided the catalyst the pupils needed to engage them in reading and writing. As a result of this we feel we have planned and delivered an education initiative that fits well with the species' role in the collection.

The value, that zoo educators becoming involved in field programmes brings, is multi-faceted. Speaking from direct experience brings credibility and authenticity to teaching practice. Direct experience can provide educators with the insight to provide more than an explanation of conservation science. It can afford deeper insights into the lives of real people, the human dimension of conservation: and achieving deeper levels of engagement with our zoo visitors is what we all aspire to.



Maggie Esson & Liz Pitchford with the Assam Haathi art exhibition at the zoo