



INTERVIEW WITH DAVID CAMPION

BANYAN TREE GROUP DIRECTOR CSR OPERATIONS



STO: *Can you tell us about your background and how you came to join forces with Banyan Tree?*

DC: I started off as a marine biologist and, after working in Central America, Australia and Indonesia I became more interested, not just for the pure science, but also the human reuse of the coastal environment because, obviously there are numerous issues between different stakeholders. That led me to study coastal management, which brought me to Ho KwonPing, or KP as he's known, the founder and CEO of Banyan Tree.

KP had a vision to open a marine lab at our Maldives resort in Vabbinfaru that would expand on the research projects that were at that time focussed on coral spawning and reproduction. So I went to the Maldives to help open the lab, which was a nice change being holed up in a five-star resort after working on fishing boats!

I have to admit, I was a little concerned that it was an exercise in greenwashing so I had only planned on staying a couple months. However, I was sold hook, line and sinker after meeting KP and hearing that, not only did he have the vision, but also the resources and the funds to bring it to fruition. That's when I decided to stay.

Because the Maldives was so successful – the guests were interested, it increased the quality of the hotel because we were working with the environment, we were bringing in specialisation with funding research from different places – we decided to replicate the model with Banyan Tree hotels. This process is still unfolding and we are excited to see where we can take it.

STO: *What is Banyan Tree's overall vision and values when it comes to environmental sustainability?*

DC: Sustainability is absolutely part of the company's DNA, if you'd like, which goes right back its first hotel in Laguna Phuket. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, KP and his wife Claire were looking for a vacation home when they came across Bang Tao Bay (site of Laguna Phuket). When Laguna Resorts & Hotels took over the abandoned tin mine at Bangtao Bay in 1984, the site resembled a moonscape.

As KP and Claire soon discovered, this parcel of land was the site of an abandoned tin mine, which meant the entire area was polluted with heavy metal toxins.

In fact, a 1979 Tourism Authority of Thailand study said that our site was "highly polluted due to in-land mining activities" ..." Although the damage was probably beyond repair, effort should not be spared to try to restore the environment". The UNDP one called our site a toxic wasteland devoid of potential for development.

For centuries, tin mining, along with the rubber and fishing industries, had made Phuket one of the wealthiest provinces in Thailand. By the late 19th century however, large-scale commercial tin mining operations had taken over and offshore dredging and land mining were destroying marine life and eroding the soil. After mines were depleted, the miners moved on, leaving many pockets of the island environmentally devastated.

Anyway, it took remarkable vision, determination and US\$200 million (then Phuket's largest ever single investment) to bring this ravaged wasteland back from the dead. Earth moving equipment levelled the tortured terrain and enormous quantities of fertilised topsoil were trucked in to allow replanting of hardy native plants, such as Casuarina and palm trees. Fruit and flowering trees were added to attract birds and wildlife whilst the lagoons, once mining craters, were stocked with marine life.

A sophisticated recycling system was built to handle refuse and sewage disposal and water treatment, eliminating the threat of pollution to the surrounding land and sea. And rather than tapping into Phuket's limited water supply, Laguna draws its water from several freshwater lakes to run through an onsite water treatment plant.

In addition to creating what now is a wildlife haven, Laguna Phuket also has bolstered employment after the tin mining community packed up and moved away. So, basically, the entire local labor force shifted from mining/extractive into tourism. In fact, some of our current Laguna Phuket associates spent time as kids (on what is now their workplace as adults) bringing lunch to their parents who worked at the tin mines.

From day one, both the social and environmental impacts of what we do as a company remains at the forefront of every development. Whenever we think of opening a new hotel, there is this search for the triple bottom line that includes economic, social and environmental success. What started as a singular project is now part of the company's DNA.

STO: *Where did Banyan Tree's interest in marine labs begin?*

DC: Launched in 2003, the Banyan Tree Marine Lab, Vabbinfaru, was the first privately funded resort to have a fully operational research and educational facility within its infrastructure. The Lab, which is designed to promote marine conservation and encourage sustainable use of marine resources, also promotes and researches locally endangered species such as Green Sea Turtles.

Since its inception, it has established successful working partnerships with various scientific and research organizations, as well as the government agency in Maldives and the country's local communities.

It is the belief of Banyan Tree Marine Lab that building working relationships within the conservation and scientific communities, we can gain a better understanding of our marine ecosystem and promote conservation of the Maldivian environment more effectively in addition to promoting the Maldivian product on a truly global scale.

STO: *What marine projects is Banyan Tree currently involved in?*

DC: Traditionally we have a strong focus on corals, coral preservation, and the El Nina events that are the genesis of our work. We've developed methods with various partners we collaborate with on how to rehabilitate coral reef systems and so what we want to start doing is assessing biodiversity in terms of species variety and abundance. We'll do this throughout our locations, keep a benchmark and then develop programs to help increase the strength of them.

We're undertaking this in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Thailand, which is part of the South China Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and Indonesia. And, even where we don't have full time dedicated research facilities or labs in Australia, we are looking to be active in conservation based on the templates and models we have developed elsewhere.

STO: *What have been some of Banyan Tree's outcomes you're most proud of to date?*

DC: One of the most satisfying things to see is when hotel management see the value of and invest in housing a Lab like our Maldives Marine Lab and Bintan Conservation Lab. From that point, we can start a more active engagement to better safeguard the environment and create value and benefits for the communities.

Then there's the nature reserve we put in near Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates, which is home to local desert wildlife such as Arabian gazelles, camels and oryxes. We've had some successes in the regional breeding program we're involved in and, once numbers have reached their threshold, additional national reserves will then be introduced.

STO: *What are some of the objectives you would like to see implemented over the next 3-5 years?*

DC: I would like to develop a more global or regional approach to our conservation initiatives, rather than site-specific projects. We have demonstrated with each of our centres that they have a positive impact on its immediate location – such as strengthening that particular hotel and bolstering employment for locals – but what we would like to do is have the efforts be more wide reaching and interconnected.

For example, we are developing a research program with our conservation partners here in Phuket and Thailand that maps the DNA of the Indian Ocean. The aim of this is to build up a genetic database that will be able to look at whether turtles, for example, still have the genetic diversity to survive without mutations.

Contacts

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