



Our Hen House

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Interview with Dave Neale

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DAVE NEALE** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 222.*

JASMIN: Dave Neale is the Animal Welfare Director for Animals Asia, an organization founded in 1998 which is devoted to ending the barbaric practice of bear bile farming and improving the welfare of animals in China and in Vietnam. Animals Asia promotes compassion and respect for all animals and works to bring about long-term change. Based in the UK, Dave Neale travels extensively to head up Animals Asia's campaign to improve animal welfare at zoos and safari parks in China. He also works to increase general veterinary and animal welfare standards and promote animal welfare education in schools and in universities. After graduating in Environmental Science and Conservation Biology, Dave worked as an ecologist for a river restoration charity in England. In 2000, he embarked on a 12-month trip to Asia and South America, carrying out zoo investigations and reporting on welfare conditions at local marketplaces. During that year, he also spent three months working at a rehabilitation center for animals rescued from the pet trade in Bolivia. Dave lives with his wife, Amanda, an animal artist; their daughter Elsie and son Wilfred; and their rescued dogs, Kandi, Dudley, and Beany; plus, rescued hens, guinea pigs, rabbits, rats, and a gerbil. Learn more at [animalsasia.org](#).

Welcome to Our Hen House, Dave.

DAVE: Thanks very much for inviting me to talk with you.

JASMIN: Well, we are really interested in what you have to talk about. It's something that really blew our minds. Tell our listeners, to start, what a snake village is.

DAVE: Well, the snake village is a collection of businesses which attract people to come and basically drink what we call snake wine. It's a horrendous industry, really, when you've got a bunch of people which are basically sitting there watching snakes killed so they can drink either the blood or the bile from the snake.

MARIANN: Good lord!

JASMIN: Just when you think you can't exploit animals any further...

DAVE: Exactly. I know. It's kind of one of those things where you kinda have to pinch yourself to actually believe that it is going on, but it is. And when you're in one of these businesses within the village, it appears to be the most normal thing for anybody to do because everybody's there to do exactly the same thing.

MARIANN: And are all of these located in North Vietnam?

DAVE: Yeah, as far as we're aware anyway. These ones are just not that far from Hanoi, and so they're getting quite a lot of attention from people from Hanoi driving to them, either Vietnamese and foreign tourists as well.

MARIANN: So I know this is gonna seem like an odd question to people, but this is ultimately connected to Leonardo DiCaprio, right?

DAVE: Yeah, apparently so. Apparently it was part of the film *The Beach*, which I haven't seen. But yeah, it sounds to me, there seems to be a lot of links back to that. That's why people have become interested in doing this. Whether it still is now, I don't know, whether that's still the sort of main driver or not. But yeah, it's something which I think films, big Hollywood blockbuster films like that do have to take some responsibility when they're going to put things out which is involving animal cruelty, and take some responsibility for what then happens if people want to go out and do the same thing.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree with you. It's completely irresponsible that these film companies don't recognize the power they have. And apparently this is very popular among sort of adventure tourists in Vietnam and backpackers. Is that right?

DAVE: Yeah, it is. I mean, the majority of people which are there are Vietnamese, which are doing this. But it does seem to then attract a bunch of people that kind of see this as like a real way-out sort of thing to do. And yeah, we often see foreign tourists there partaking in this whole horrendous activity. And then often we'll pick up sort of blogs of people that have done it as well and are sort of promoting it as if it's some kind of amazing thing that they've done, often relating it to Vietnamese culture, which is just not really -- it's not really a cultural thing that people in Vietnam have done for many, many years. It's just something which people are doing now. But it's a very loose connection.

JASMIN: How do they get the snakes?

DAVE: The snakes are mainly bred. That's part of the village. There'll be sort of areas where the snakes have been bred, so there'll be sort of pits of snakes as well. Now, if you ask the villagers themselves and the breeders, they'll say that they breed all the snakes, enough snakes to sort of provide these restaurants and these businesses with enough snakes for people to eat. But it does appear to be a large number, so I suspect some of them are also being taken from the wild as well, though we don't actually have any evidence to back that up.

JASMIN: Snakes are certainly an animal that people love to hate. Do you have trouble getting sympathy for snakes who are being mistreated?

DAVE: Yeah, absolutely. You're right. It's much easier for a small, furry animal to be able to get sympathy for, whereas snakes, yeah, a lot of people already have some kind of, not hatred, but they're kind of scared of them a little bit. So yeah, I suppose that's why a lot of people don't really see this as being a problem. But people need to understand that these snakes can still experience fear, they can still experience stress. Importantly, they can experience pain and suffering just like other animals. And so this is the sort of message that we need to try to get across to people, to say, look, even if you're not seeing a snake doing

something which looks as though it's in pain, and it's not screaming when it's being killed in this way, it's still experiencing those things.

MARIANN: Yeah, can you tell us just briefly, like, pretty much what happens to these snakes, some of the things they go through?

DAVE: Yeah. Well, some of them have their venom glands removed -- that's often done without any anesthetic -- so that they can't actually bite people when they're being presented or workers there. But when they're actually presented to the public who are buying them, basically they'll be brought out. There'll be a couple of people. Somebody will bring out some glasses with some rice wine vodka in. And then the second person will bring out the snake, and then with a knife basically, the snake will be held around the neck and the tail, and then one of the workers will just cut the snake open. They usually remove the gallbladder first, and then that's opened up and the bile from that is put into the rice wine vodka glasses for people to drink. And then they'll remove the heart, which is then still beating, and it will be then presented to somebody for them to eat. Incredibly horrific to watch.

MARIANN: I suspect this has some kind of myth associated with it about masculinity?

DAVE: Yeah, absolutely. I suspect so. We've never really looked into it in that much detail, but there's a lot of men that are involved in doing this. And yeah, you can imagine the conversations that people are having as well whilst they're kind of getting drunk and watching this happen. But it is just absolutely horrendous.

JASMIN: Now, I don't know if I really care very much, but there are some pretty serious health implications for the jerks who are doing this, right?

DAVE: Yeah. Dealing with any reptile, there's always the risk of salmonella, whether you're actually just touching reptiles or whether you're actually consuming parts of the reptile. So yeah, again, we haven't got any sort of information or statistics to back up that people are becoming ill from doing this, but there is always that health risk, which maybe somebody doesn't care about the welfare of the animals or even the conservation of snakes if snakes are being taken from the wild, then at least we can kind of try to get people on the fact that there is a health risk to doing this.

MARIANN: So how is Animals Asia going about tackling this issue?

DAVE: Well, for us really, at the moment, what we're trying to do is just to get people to make people aware of it and to make people aware of the suffering. So by doing that, we've basically produced some leaflets which are documenting this and showing some of the real graphic images which we've taken from the snake villages, and we're distributing those in both the Vietnamese and in English, around some of the major sort of tourist areas within Hanoi, so the backpackers, hotels, and things like that, just trying to get people to see what it's all about, rather than sort of getting carried away with talking to other tourists who might say, "oh wow, this is a great thing to do," or getting involved in tour operators that promote going to these places and say, "oh yeah, you'll have a great day out." If people actually see it for what it is, then maybe they'll think twice and think, "well, I'd never really thought about this but it is pretty sick."

JASMIN: And how can our listeners learn more about it on your website?

DAVE: Yeah. We're gonna have some information on our website. Just go and have a look at the animalsasia.org. Find out a little bit more about the work that we're doing on this, but also all the other programs that we're involved in in Vietnam.

MARIANN: You know, I just want to emphasize again before we leave you that as you pointed out, this is not really a traditional part of Vietnamese culture. I know that traditional Asian medicine sometimes does use snakes, but this is really a perversion of that. Is that correct?

DAVE: Yeah, absolutely. I don't know how long it's been going on to this scale, but it certainly isn't that long, within the last couple of decades or so. It's just people that have realized that they can make some money out of snakes and are then promoting it to both Vietnamese and to Western tourists, so it certainly isn't a cultural thing. And I would say that the majority of people in Vietnam would be against this practice, so this is something I think people should realize when they're traveling or thinking about getting involved in this kind of horrible practice.

MARIANN: Yeah, it really is. And even for snakes that are used in traditional Asian medicine, you work with real practitioners and try to help them move away from that. Is that correct?

DAVE: Yeah, absolutely. Our work in Vietnam actually started looking towards ending the use of bear bile in traditional Asian medicine. And so, our workers within Vietnam are working very much within the traditional medicine community, who are wanting to move away from using animal products, particularly bear bile, but also snakes as well, and noting what traditional medicine is really about, using plants et cetera. And so yeah, we're very much involved in that, working at the highest level with the traditional medicine associations in Vietnam that will come out and say that these things should no longer be happening.

JASMIN: Well, we are so grateful to you and to Animals Asia for continuing to educate us about these issues that even people like us and people who listen to our podcast who are, I like to think, the ones who are enlightened about animal issues, this is still really mind-blowing. And of course, we'll continue to get the word out there. And please, stay in touch with us about your future happenings over at Animals Asia. I'm just so grateful to you for taking the time to speak with us about this important campaign, Dave. I really appreciate it.

DAVE: Thanks very much indeed. Thank you.

JASMIN: That was Dave Neale. Learn more at animalsasia.org.