

Sacred Wildlife

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The Heart of Africa



Wildlife Photographers Website

This profile is dedicated to the brave and compassionate work of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in East Africa. Their unwavering devotion and commitment to the conservation and well being of the African Elephant has changed the plight of this wondrous, sentient mammal from dire to hopeful. Their mission rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing back into the wild orphaned, injured or ill elephants is a moving and glorious testimony to the depth of the human heart and undaunted dedication to the soul of the African Elephant.

These ancient African giants are highly intelligent, social, emotional and sensitive mammals. After years of research and scientific observation it has been shown that elephant's social structure and familial bonds are similar, if not deeper, than the bonds developed among human beings. There are deeply stirring accounts, by such scientists as Joyce Poole, Cynthia Moss and Dr. Dame Daphne Sheldrick, of elephants weeping and expressing grief at the loss of their calves, matriarchal leaders and other herd members. There are recorded behaviors of near spiritual proportion: the tender fondling of bones belonging to a dead family member by a surviving family member, or the mutual touching of herd members trunks on the dead carcass of another herd member. Mothers have been observed standing over their dead calves for days on end refusing food and water until their mourning is confirmed by time. Calves frequently die of heartbreak from the loss of their mothers and abuse by human beings. One of the most profound insights is that "suffering" and "loss" are the experience of a self-reflexive mind. There is no doubt that elephants experience suffering, loss and betrayal and express it in complex, emotional behaviors similar to human beings.

There are also great displays of affection and mutual respect rarely viewed in the social structure of humans. Joyce Poole, internationally known expert on elephants, states, "I have never seen (wild) calves 'disciplined.' Protected, comforted, cooed over, reassured and rescued, yes, but punished, no. Elephants are raised in an incredibly positive and loving environment. If a younger elephant, or in fact anyone in the family, has wronged another in some way, much comment and discussion follows. Sounds of the wronged individual being comforted are mixed with voices of reconciliation."

Extended family is the foundation of elephant herds and mutual respect and admiration bond all individuals from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom. In fact, there is no bottom.....there appears to be only mutual reciprocity and devotion. The well being of the entire herd is considered by all and a symbiotic relationship is natural and instinctive. It is truly a beautiful sight to see the great depth,

emotion and love these animals feel for their family, herd and even for humans they come to respect and trust. The elephant, along with several species of primates, are one of the few mammals that can bond and imprint with humans, yet maintain their wild status. This is why the rescue and rehabilitation of wild elephants and, in some cases, release back into the wild has been so successful.



African elephants live predominantly in the central and southern parts of Africa (Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, and northern parts of South Africa) where the large open savannahs are. Elephants are grazers and prefer open country and need a tremendous amount of space and browse. To date, the forest elephant is found in the tropical rainforest zone of west and central Africa, where relatively large blocks of dense forest remain. The savanna elephant occurs in eastern and southern Africa, with the highest densities found in Botswana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia and South Africa.

According to the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), the African elephant once ranged across most of the African continent from the Mediterranean coast to the southern tip. It is thought there may have been as many as three to five million African elephants in the 1930s and 1940s. However, in the wake of intensive hunting for trophies and tusks, elephant numbers fell dramatically throughout the continent in the 1950s. In the 1980s, for example, an estimated 100,000 elephants were being killed per year and up to 80% of herds were lost in some regions. In Kenya, the population plummeted by 85% between 1973 and 1989.

In 1989, the African Elephant was added to the international list of the most endangered species. At this time there were about 600,000 remaining, less than one percent of their original number. Today there are only about 300,000 African Elephants remaining and this is a hopeful estimation. Sadly, significant elephant populations are now confined to well-protected parks and reserves. However, less than 20% of elephant range is under formal protection leaving the African Elephant and its habitat vulnerable to extinction.

THE VITAL ROLE OF THE ELEPHANT IN AFRICA

The elephant is the heart beat of Africa. This mystical, powerful, but fragile mammal has roamed the African savannah for thousands of years and represents the freedom and beauty of the African continent. In and of itself the African Elephant is an ancient jewel to be protected and preserved for reasons including, but beyond biodiversity and biological science. The elephant represents a depth of perception, emotion, self-awareness and devotion not always witnessed in the animal kingdom.

Elephants are considered a Keystone species in the African landscape. Without them, numerous other species in the food chain would perish. Vegetation and habitat would be greatly impacted because elephants pull down trees, break up bushes, create salt licks, dig waterholes, and forge trails. Other animals, including humans, like the pygmies of the Central African Republic, depend on the openings elephants create in the forest and brush and the waterholes they dig.

According to the AWF, even elephant droppings are important to the environment. Baboons and birds pick through dung for undigested seeds and nuts, and dung beetles reproduce in these deposits. The nutrient-rich manure replenishes depleted soil. Finally, it is a vehicle for seed dispersal. Some seeds will not germinate unless they have passed through an elephant's digestive system.

Elephants are also vital to eco-tourism in South Africa. Many parks and reserves generate millions of dollars in revenue from the viewing and studying of African Elephants. They are a favorite subject of everything from the camera lens to the wildlife biologist.

POTENTIAL EXTINCTION: THE POACHING PROBLEM

The greatest threat to the survival of the African Elephant is man. For thousands of years the African

Elephant has negotiated drought, lack of browse, violent weather changes and Nature's cycles of life and death, yet the one element the African Elephant has been unable to endure is the violent encroachment of man.

According to Save the Elephants, hunting has been a major cause of the decline in elephant populations. Elephants became prized trophies for big-game hunters after Europeans arrived in Africa. More recently, and more devastatingly, hunters have slaughtered elephants for their ivory tusks. The ivory trade became a serious threat to elephants in the 1970s.

Due to sudden oil shortage causing the world economy to sputter, ivory became more valuable than gold. In fact, ivory has been called "white gold" because it is beautiful, easily carved, durable, and pleasing to the touch. Most of the world's ivory is carved in Japan, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries, where skilled carvers depend on a supply of ivory for their livelihoods.

As the price of ivory soared, poachers became more organized, using automatic weapons, motorized vehicles, and airplanes to chase and kill thousands of elephants. To governments and revolutionaries mired in civil wars and strapped for cash, poaching ivory became a way to pay for more firearms and supplies.

In 1989, the worldwide demand for African Elephants had declined somewhat thanks to the 1989 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) ban on ivory. This measure was taken in response to the widespread decimation of nearly half the African elephant population that took place in the preceding decade. Unfortunately, in 1997, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) voted to partially lift ivory trade sanctions and to allow Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia to sell stockpiled ivory to Japan, where there is a major ivory market. This slight loosening of the ivory ban has rekindled poaching throughout the elephants' range and continues to leave the African Elephant vulnerable and moving toward extinction.



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As late as 1997, Michael Fay, an elephant researcher with the Wildlife Conservation Society, was flying his small airplane over a remote forest clearing just outside the Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in northern Congo when he spotted a cluster of elephant carcasses. Deciding to investigate further, Fay returned the next day by helicopter, accompanied by a television camera crew. Fay, who had worked with Cynthia Moss and the African Wildlife Foundation to help establish the park in 1993, found a scene of slaughter: there lay more than 300 elephant bodies, all with their tusks hacked off. Cows, calves, and juveniles had been indiscriminately left to die by poachers supplying the illegal ivory trade. Two months later, Fay found the remains of 1,000 more dead elephants nearby. Poachers had killed entire families, including adolescents and calves. Taking action into his own hands, Fay chased poachers out of the forest by destroying their camps. He also met with the local village leaders to solicit their help in ending the killings. By the spring of 1997, Fay and his colleagues had stopped illegal hunting of elephants in the Nouabale-Ndoki region. He and Andrea Turkalo, another researcher for the Wildlife Conservation Society, continue to monitor this region. This is a tribute to the power of a few individuals working with local communities and concerned conservation groups.

Hunting elephants is no longer legal in many African countries, but poaching continues and enforcing non-poaching regulations is difficult and takes a lot of man power to protect the vast range that elephants need to survive. For many the high price of ivory is too tempting to resist. Local people and tribes often have few options to making a living, and subsistence farmers or herders can make more by selling the tusks of one elephant than they could make in a dozen years of farming or herding.

Today, the effects of poaching continue to cause the collapse of elephants' entire social structure, as well as decimating their numbers. Elephants don't recover quickly from the trauma of mass slaughter or great individual loss. The elephant psyche can be irreversibly injured by human cruelty. In addition, breeding females only breed every 5-10 years due to their gestation period of 24 months. It takes 3-5 years to wean and raise a calf. Elephant herds can be completely devastated by the loss of their members

never fully recovering. Regardless of all the knowledge, science and history behind this magnificent animal, the greatest threat to the survival of the African Elephant continues to be poaching.

LOCAL HUMAN CONFLICT

Elephants need a large amount of habitat because they eat so much. Humans have become their direct competitors for living space. According to Elephants Without Borders, human populations in Africa and Asia have quadrupled since the turn of the century, the fastest growth rate on the planet. Forest and savanna habitat has been converted to cropland, pastureland for livestock, and timber for housing and fuel. Elephant habitat and natural browse ranges are shrinking due to human population and severe drought conditions. In some areas African Elephants are literally starving to death.

According to AWF, even though it is illegal to kill an elephant in Africa, people continue to slaughter elephants -- if not for ivory, then for revenge. Whether forest or savannah dwellers, roaming elephant herds have begun butting up against sprawling human populations in most regions. While Masai herdsmen coexist with elephants by leaving their livestock unfenced and letting the animals walk through their land, farmers who try to barricade their crops from migrating wildlife create trouble for themselves. To a farmer, an elephant can be an irritating five-ton garden pest -- or an active danger to his life. If a hungry elephant destroys the season's crop, the culprit (or sometimes just the nearest elephant, guilty or not) may be hunted down and forced to pay the price of the damage with its life. Some countries have gone as far as enforcing culling programs: park officials or hunters kill a predetermined number of elephants to keep herds manageable and minimize human-elephant conflicts. For most conservationists and elephant scientists this is no answer and causes irreparable damage.

Scientists and conservationists are working on remedies to protect both people and elephants. Conservation organizations and local wildlife services are working on large fencing projects, designing new elephant corridors and educating local residents to protect their crops with appropriate fencing, protective dogs and the use of a pepper-spray bomb that wards off elephants by attacking their sensitive eyes with airborne pepper molecules. The elephant recovers soon after, having learned to stay clear of local fields and crops.

Dr. David Western, director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, believes the best way to alleviate human-wildlife conflicts is to give people a reason to keep the local wildlife alive and healthy. For instance, ecotourism in Amboseli National Park and its neighbor Nairobi National Park puts money directly back into the local Masai communities. Rather than a burden, the elephants become an important part of the local economy. Educating communities on the importance of elephants and sharing the economic benefits are proving a promising strategy for human/elephant conflict.

HUNTING AND CAPTURE FOR HUMAN ENTERTAINMENT



Nothing is more agonizing than the trade of live elephants shipped from Africa to foreign lands for exhibition in zoos and circuses. Throughout the 70's and 80's, and even continuing into the 21st century, the violent act of kidnapping calves from their mothers and their herd is one of the cruelest acts that man can unleash on African Elephants. The grief, loss and heartbreak caused to the mother, entire herd and the social structure of the African Elephant is unimaginable. An entire family can be thrown into grief and herd members have been known to die of heartbreak. If the calf survives the shock and trauma, it will do so by slipping into depression and despondency, often submitting to all and any abuse by its captors. Today, most zoos and circuses have captive breeding programs and don't engage in wild capture and hunting. Still, small clusters of this practice continue due to demands by countries, such as China, Japan and Thailand.

Recently, with the exposure of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey elephant abuse cases, captivity and training elephants for the purpose of human entertainment has come under scrutiny. Dr.

Dame Daphne Sheldrick states, "There is no doubt that training elephants for the purpose of human entertainment involves domination, abuse and immense ongoing cruelty that is completely unacceptable due to our growing understanding of the elephant psyche."

View the following articles for an indepth look at this issue:

Circus Elephants' Rights

Circus Elephant Abuse

Ringling Brothers Employees Speak Out

Anne the Elephant

Anne the Elephant Update

Circus Elephant Debate

Zoos have recently began contemplating the closure of their elephant exhibitions due to the elephants inability to cope with captivity. Many elephants are dying younger and younger due to depression and stress. Elephants and captivity simple don't go together. Elephants often choose to simply die in captivity. The good news is that relocation and rehabilitation for these displaced elephants is more than possible. There are many sanctuaries dedicated to the healing of captive, stressed and abused elephants. These sanctuaries often include great amounts of land and browse dedicated to the elephant. Elephants are often consciously and compassionately cared for and matched with other compatible elephants to encourage social bonds and loving interaction.

Take a look at The Elephant Sanctuary

Performing Animal Welfare Society

View the Following Articles for an indepth look at this issue:

Bronx Zoo Ends Elephant Exhibition

Story of Lucy

WHAT YOU AND I CAN DO TO HELP AFRICAN ELEPHANTS

1. Donate to and support groups that are working for the conservation and preservation of the African Elephant in the wild. Make sure the group is interested in protecting their wild habitat, educating local African communities and conserving the wild elephant population. Avoid groups that are supporting captive breeding programs, zoos and the entertainment industry (including the promotion of films with elephants in them). I have done my best to research and contact the following African Elephant conservation organizations and find them to be honorable and dedicated to the preservation of the elephants in their wild habitat.

David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust
Amboseli Trust For Elephants
Elephant Voices Organization
Save the Elephants
African Wildlife Foundation

2. Don't buy, sell, or wear ivory. This includes checking jewelry and gift items for ivory. Also, if you are a musician make sure any instruments you own or purchase are free of ivory. Piano keys are usually made of ivory, as are some decorative inlays on guitars.

3. Participate in eco-tourism. If you choose to travel to Africa do so by researching ecologically sound safari and tour groups. Indicate your desire to see wild elephants without infringing on their herds and do not participate in eco-tours that use elephants for travel. These elephants are traditionally taken from the wild and trained for tourism. Participating in sound eco-tourism helps boost Africa's economy and helps placate local residents who view elephants as pests.

4. Finally, help support and provide captive elephants with the best possible life. Boycott circuses, whose unethical treatment includes chaining elephants up by their feet and trunks, as well as beating them into submission. Do not attend zoos unless they have created large environments in warm areas where elephants can roam and browse outside year round. They should have other elephants to socialize and bond with. Zoos should not be engaged in a captive breeding program! Captive breeding is unusually stressful and inhumane. You can confirm these facts and take a stand for captive elephants by emailing the zoo you plan to visit and asking questions about their elephant exhibit. Express your concerns and shed light on zoo elephant exhibits!

Animal Defenders International is an organization dedicated to exposing the abuse of elephants in the entertainment industry. They also work with Bob Barker in rescuing captive circus animals in inhumane conditions. See some of Bob Barker's compassionate work below:

Bob Barker Helps Lucy the Elephant

Bob Barker Helps Zoo Elephants

Bob Barker Encourages Circus Ban



Every piece of ivory is a haunting memory of a once proud and majestic animal that should have lived three score years and ten; who has loved and been loved, and was once a member of a close knit and loving family akin to our own, but who has suffered and died to yield a tusk for a trinket.

Dr. Dame Daphne Sheldrick

I do not think I called the elephants to me. I think they are coming to us, calling us. I think they are consciously transmitting cries of anguish and grief, and some of us are hearing them and are responding. When we come forth in that way we are re-united with them in a single wave of consciousness.

Deena Metzger

Animals are indeed more ancient, more complex, and in many ways more sophisticated than man. In terms of Nature they are truly more perfect because they remain within the ordered scheme of Nature and live as Nature intended. They are different to us, honed by natural selection over millennia so they should not be patronized, but rather respected and revered. And of all the animals, perhaps the most respected and revered should be the Elephant, for not only is it the largest land mammal on earth, but also the most emotionally human.

Dr. Dame Daphne Sheldrick

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