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In the Dust of Kilimanjaro

David Western

*To my mother and father,
Shirley, Carissa, and Guy,
and the wildlife and Maasai of Amboseli*



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Drought

NOTHING IN FIVE YEARS of research had prepared me for the signs of drought I saw when I drove across the basin flats of Amboseli in August 1973 after an eighteen-month stint in Nairobi, writing up my thesis and lecturing at the university to make ends meet after my Ford Foundation grant ran out.

Bumping over the washboard road in a brand-new Toyota Land Cruiser donated by the New York Zoological Society, along with a new grant for my research and conservation work over the next three years, I had every reason to feel on top of the world. The time in Nairobi had had another useful outcome: the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife had asked me to prepare a detailed management plan and investment budget for Amboseli in collaboration with economist Philip Thresher. The plan, spelling out the principles of local participation and the need to involve the Maasai in benefits accruing from Amboseli, provided a blueprint for a \$35 million wildlife and tourism loan from the World Bank to the Kenya government. The conservation and development plan would be the largest ever contemplated for Africa.

Although the break and the company of friends in Nairobi had been enjoyable, I had missed the solitude and stark beauty of Amboseli; it was time for another long spell in the bush. But this was not the Amboseli I had known.

Gone was the sea of ruffled yellow grass hiding gazelle fawns from the searching eyes of cheetahs. Grazed-down tufts of grass barely broke through the miniature sand dunes blanketing the plains. Few animals were to be

seen, apart from the odd Thomson's gazelle patrolling its barren territory enveloped in a shroud of white dust.

The drought had been a long time coming. It had begun imperceptibly, due more at first to the swollen herds than to lack of rain. Then, from 1969 on, an inexorable decline set in, culminating in severe drought in 1973. Thousands of bones hidden by long grass in wet years now lay exposed and bleaching in the sun. Where were all the animals?

The answer lay behind my house. Tens of thousands of animals clustered back to back on the dwindling greenery of the swamps, ripping at the grass with monotonous intensity. Never had I seen such a spectacular concentration of animals. Elephants had pushed deep into the permanent swamps, their backs barely visible in the tall rushes. Buffalo, still in large herds, grazed the beaten-down margins of the marsh. Zebra and wildebeest nosed through the swamp-edge thickets previously shunned for lack of grass and fear of lions. Thomson's gazelle and warthog nibbled on the heavily grazed outer lawns around the thickets. The browsing animals—Grant's gazelle, rhino, giraffe, bush buck, and lesser kudu—occupied the scrub and thinning fever-tree patches.

How could so many animals survive in such a tiny area? Emaciated as they looked, few had died of starvation. I felt a tingle of excitement as a new and unexpected insight bubbled up. Of course: elephants had thinned out the thickets of Sodom apple and *Pluchea* shrub, allowing a dense sward of cynodon grass to penetrate, providing a new pasture for zebra and wildebeest. The elephants had also trampled and chewed down the ten-foot-tall rushes, enabling prostrate and palatable sedge species to colonize the wetland margins and proliferate. Small knots of zebra and wildebeest had discovered the new lush growth trailing the elephants' steady push into the swamp.

The swamp, acting like a giant sponge, kept replenishing the pastures as the elephants foraged harder in the thickets and swamp. Five years earlier, in a time of plenty, it had been hard to understand how so many species of herbivores could coexist in Amboseli. The drought made it abundantly clear.

The coexistence of so many species comes down to niche specialization, the ecological slot each species occupies. At the extremes, niche separation is easily discerned. A giraffe browsing fifteen feet in the trees cannot

pen rather than the spear. He was working the crowd now, his huge neck flared like that of a cobra about to strike as he flayed the air with his fly whisk and hurled out intoxicating phrases with the mesmerizing power of Lenin during his revolutionary days. "Who will send children to this school now?" he thundered again. Never did I think the day would come when I forgave the politician who nixed the plan for a Maasai park, but here I was, cheering him on along with the rest of the crowd.

I looked out across acacia scrub, up the long shallow slope of Kilimanjaro to Parashino's farm. The scattered shambas had coalesced into a continuous belt with a few tassels running down the valleys toward the plains. In the foreground stood Maarba School, freshly painted red and white and marked off from the surrounding bush by a picket fence.

A loud satisfied growl from Oloitiptip and half-screamed ululations drew my attention back to the crowd. All hands were raised at last. Oloitiptip knew a winning cause when he saw one and had become a forceful ally for conserving Amboseli. Some change for the poacher who dared Sindiyo, I had to admit as I let out another whoop of approval.

"Amboseli National Park is the reason for this school," he concluded. "Guard wildlife well. Tourists will bring you money and progress."

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Changing Worlds

SEPTEMBER 1981. THE PLANE lifted cleanly off the airstrip into a gusting wind as a herd of wildebeest pounded off in a swirl of dust beneath the cowling. Leveling off, I banked toward Longinye Swamp in high spirals. Taking stock from the air was delightful and reassuring these days: after years of confrontation and drought, the Amboseli ecosystem was finally on the mend.

I throttled back over Longinye Swamp and scanned the remnant thickets expectantly. A rhino briefly raised its head at the sound of the aircraft before sinking back to its siesta. Another rhino ambled into the open up ahead, stopped briefly, ears erect, then moved on as a tiny calf huddled at its flank trotted to catch up. By 1977 only eight black rhinos had survived the spearing by Maasai protesting the government's attempted takeovers of Amboseli. Since then, numbers had risen to thirteen even as losses continued elsewhere throughout Kenya.

A herd of elephants came into view below the left wing. How delightful to watch two infants nonchalantly clambering over a recumbent adolescent as the herd idly foraged all around, flanked by an escort of white cattle egrets. Like rhinos, the elephants had flourished since 1977, climbing to over 600 from the 480 surviving when poachers had shot half the population. Making up for the last year of drought when a mere twelve calves were born, more than 100 tumbled to earth once the rains resumed. Fittingly, given that one in 100 births are twins, the last of this number were the Gemini Twins as Cynthia Moss proudly named them. Her research flowered with the soaring birth rate and drew international atten-

tion when the *New York Times* profiled her work in a front page article titled "Family Circles."

Here was proof, if any was needed, that Ole Mwenyendet had delivered on his promise of 2,000 extra pairs of eyes to guard wildlife. In the couple of rare spearing incidents since 1977, the elders had turned the culprits over to the warden for killing "our" animals, as they referred to them.

The recovery of elephants and rhinos dates precisely to the day in June 1977 when the government and the Maasai struck an agreement under the tortilis tree. Until then, Somali poachers had hit Amboseli's herds with impunity. The first test of Ole Mwenyendet's promise to stop poachers came three months later when a gang of five heavily armed Somalis walked into Amboseli in search of elephants.

The Maasai immediately picked up the telltale sandal tracks and made straight for the park headquarters. "Stop the *shifita* [bandits] shooting our elephants and scaring off our tourists," they told the rangers. The warden was in Nairobi, and the rangers called on me to help. Their ill-equipped .303 bolt-action rifles were no match for the *shifita* automatics, so I posted a ranger on Observation Hill to monitor their movements while I dispatched a vehicle to Loitokitok for reinforcements. Seventeen armed police arrived by Land Rover late in the afternoon. I circled overhead as they took up position, knowing the *shifita* would try to slink off the moment they realized the odds against them: they were unlikely to fire on the plane for fear of giving away their position. All the same, I felt like a solitary duck circling a hide of hunters as I scanned the thickets ready to peel away at the first puff of smoke or drum of bullets on the fuselage.

After half an hour of fruitless circling, I landed in a clearing and joined the police and rangers combing the area. There was no sign of the Somalis, except for a dagger dropped in a thicket. How they evaded the dragnet no one knew, but then they had a reputation for melting into the bush. Perhaps their escape was fortunate, anyway, for the gang apparently spread word of the Maasai's vigilance; after that there were no more poachers.

So much for the elephants and rhinos, but what about the rest of Amboseli?

I had reached Namelok Swamp a couple of miles short of Amboseli's eastern boundary. Below, a sprawl of Maasai huts and thatch-roofed houses bordered a green swatch of squared-off maize fields. The irrigation

channels watering the shambas had shrunk the swamp by half since 1975. Wildlife had dwindled to a solitary herd of buffalo skulking in the acacia thickets. Amboseli would have become another Kimana and Namelok too, had it not been for the protection of a park.

Swinging south, the stark block of the new park headquarters buildings rose at the southeastern boundary. A stone's throw away, on the other side of the boundary, stood a community hall and health clinic built for the Maasai as part of the 1977 agreement. Stretching out from the headquarters were newly graveled game-viewing circuits that had cut off-road driving to a tenth, giving the lions and cheetah respite from tourist harassment. With the Amboseli herds safe, tourism under control, and the Maasai benefiting financially from the park, there was no denying the improvement on all fronts.

To assure myself that Amboseli's turnaround resulted from Maasai protection rather than a general improvement in the status of wildlife in Kenya, I decided on a whim to fly over to the Tsavo West National Park, twenty minutes away.

No trace of elephants survived in the bush between the two parks, except for dozens of white skulls left over from days when the herds seasonally migrated out of Tsavo and got gunned down by poachers. Crossing into the park over the black cinder cones south of the Chyulu Hills, I picked out a half-dozen rhino skulls scattered in the bush, the remains of the 8,000 rhinos biologists counted in Tsavo in the late 1960s. Between 1970 and 1981, black rhino numbers slumped from 20,000 to 380 in Kenya, and from 70,000 to 14,000 for the continent at large. The species would be all but extinct in ten years if the killing continued.

Flying deeper into Tsavo I came across a huddle of freshly killed elephants, their faces hacked to pieces, their bodies spattered with white vulture droppings: Somali poachers.

The bad years for Kenya's pachyderms began with the latest scramble for the horn of Africa as first the Soviet Union, then the United States plowed so much military hardware into Somalia that the cash-strapped militia took to poaching and banditry in gangs fifty strong, armed with Kalishnikovs. The West called it the Cold War, a euphemism absolving it of any responsibility for the dozens of real wars spawned in its tussle with the USSR over political hegemony in the region. The poaching wars that

the time Daniel Sindiyo took over from John Mutinda, the Wildlife Department had acquired the moniker Wildlife Poaching Department.

Having neither the international clout nor the political access to do anything about the Wildlife Department, I sat by helpless and despondent as the situation in Amboseli and throughout Kenya worsened. Never had I felt so angry and frustrated, especially after the heartening turnaround in Amboseli. I felt sick at my own impotence, wondering whether all those years in Amboseli might have been better spent trying to place wildlife higher on the list of national priorities.

At that point, Lee Talbot appeared.

As director-general of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), Talbot ran the world's largest consortium of government and nongovernment conservation agencies. The union was charged with defining threats to wildlife and habitats around the world and strategies for saving them. The Species Survival Commission, one of its expert bodies, was concerned with threatened and endangered species. When it came to African elephants and rhinos, Talbot had a problem of his own he wanted to share.

"The African Elephant Specialist Group has come to a standstill over the status of the elephant," he confided. "I also want to get things moving on the rhino. It seems sensible to put both groups together because elephants and rhinos face the same problem—poaching. We need someone impartial with first-rate scientific credentials to do that and sort things out. You've done good scientific work on elephants and rhinos and have established a good reputation for the way you handled Amboseli. Would you be prepared to take on chairmanship of the joint African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group?"

"Sure, why not?" I found myself agreeing all too quickly, ready for something big and challenging to take my mind off Amboseli. I had been deeply interested in both species and worried about their fate for years, having seen them killed off by poachers in Amboseli. Together with Sindiyo I had published one of the earliest accounts drawing attention to the precarious state of rhinos, studied the ecological role of elephants, and got Cynthia's study of elephant behavior going. I felt up to the task, and the time had come to get involved in conservation programs outside Amboseli. Nothing could be more pressing and important for Africa than

the fate of its elephants and rhinos. After all the long wrangles in Amboseli, resolving the status of elephants and rhinos and coming up with plans for conserving them would be a pleasant change. No one at the time anticipated how bitter and drawn out the Ivory Wars would prove to be.

The origins of the Ivory Wars, as the fracas over the elephant was known, lay in Douglas-Hamilton's Pan African Survey and Ian Parker's response. The survey, done under the auspices of IUCN's African Elephant Specialist Group, chaired by Douglas-Hamilton, relied on questionnaires circulated to wardens, conservationists, and scientists throughout Africa. The responses included counts, estimates, and guesses of population trends and the threats posed to the elephant.

On the basis of the survey results, Douglas-Hamilton provisionally put the African elephant at around 1.3 million when he compiled his report in 1979. That sounded a safe enough number, were it not for the trend lines. Respondent after respondent reported a sharp drop in elephant numbers, and sometimes wholesale population crashes as in Tsavo National Park. Thoroughly alarmed, Douglas-Hamilton saw a poaching crisis in the making, triggered by a tenfold jump in ivory prices around 1970. Something must be done and done fast, he concluded.

Switching from scientist to advocate, Douglas-Hamilton slapped together a report of his findings and a proposed a million-dollar Elephant Action Plan to save the species. In disregard of accepted scientific norms, neither the report nor the action plan was peer reviewed. Douglas-Hamilton and his mediagenic wife, Oria, then launched a highly publicized campaign to save the elephant. Stardom came easily to the Douglas-Hamiltons after the runaway success of their best-selling book, *Among the Elephants*. Whether the scientific evidence merited the crisis or merely gave the Douglas-Hamiltons an excuse to promote themselves was a question on the minds of conservation experts.

Whatever the answer, the Douglas-Hamiltons carefully orchestrated campaign made Ian Mr. Elephant in the western media. He had just the right combination of charisma, dash, and dedication to capture the limelight. A series of high-profile films and magazine articles turned his save-the-elephant campaign into a cause célèbre in Britain and the United States.

To bolster his case, Douglas-Hamilton commissioned Ian Parker to

investigate the ivory trade, fully expecting confirmation of his Pan African Survey. Parker, the undisputed maven of the ivory trade, did nothing of the kind. He was determined to unmask Douglas-Hamilton and scuttle his save-the-elephant campaign. In a statistics-laden two-volume report, Parker insisted that global ivory sales fell well within sustainable limits of Africa's million-plus elephants.

Ian Parker is a small, wiry man with disarmingly boyish looks. The ex-game warden and don of wildlife utilization had made a career of game cropping, elephant culling, and ivory trading. He is a man of singular intelligence and proprietary feelings about Africa and the way its wildlife should be managed. At the time he was indisputably the most respected practitioner in his field of wildlife utilization. I have heard him boast of having shot more elephants than any other man alive—probably more than any poacher alive. That claim alone was enough to enrage the Douglas-Hamiltons.

The two adversaries, one for, the other against the ivory trade, were mirror opposites in style and substance. About all they had in common was a flair for publicity and an unbudgeable insistence on being right. The proverbial phrase “like oil and water” could have been invented for Douglas-Hamilton and Parker. Parker thought of himself as the undisputed and indisputable elephant expert and took exception to Douglas-Hamilton's incursion onto his turf. Parker also despised expatriate conservationists like Douglas-Hamilton, although he was one himself. In short, Douglas-Hamilton was a lightning rod for Parker's pet dislikes.

In his own book, *Ivory Crisis*, published in 1983, Parker bitingly debunked the elephant crisis as a publicity stunt and accused conservationists—read Douglas-Hamilton—of sleight of hand with elephant statistics. He concluded by excoriating IUCN for technical incompetence and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for fraudulently relieving the public of one million dollars to save the elephant.

Despite his claim to scientific objectivity, Parker's language was no less histrionic than Douglas-Hamilton's. In a thinly veiled chapter titled “Films and Pharisees” he wrote: “Conservationists are aware of public predilections. Assuming a St. George's mantle they tell the world that they are about to slay the dragon which if it doesn't exist it can always be created.

... It is with your money St. George will triumph: he must have your money. ... Be dramatic. Cause or create a sensation. Elect a champion with whom the public can identify and choose an opponent who is easy to vilify: bring in blood and violence (or sex) in Technicolor.”

Parker reserved his most scathing comments for Douglas-Hamilton's multimillion-dollar Elephant Action Plan, claiming that over 90 percent of the populations were either safe or of unknown status. To Parker, the entire crisis was a fraud trumped up by charlatans and cynically exploited by conservation organizations bent on garnering publicity and giving jobs to their cronies.

The climax in the clash of personalities came at Wankie National Park in 1981 at the first All-Africa meeting of the Elephant Specialist Group. Douglas-Hamilton's figures were rejected as sheer guesses; Parker's views carried the day. Confusion reigned in the conservation world. Was the elephant in trouble or not? To hear it from the experts at Wankie, the evidence gave no cause for alarm.

Douglas-Hamilton lost his chairmanship and limped off in disgust. Anyone with eyes to see could tell there was a crisis, he fumed, data or no data. IUCN and WWF blinked in confusion. What next?

With Douglas-Hamilton's departure, Talbot put me in the hot seat between the two archrivals. The new and expanded group I assembled insisted on putting the black and northern white rhinos at the top of the pachyderm agenda. That didn't please everyone. Our first meeting in 1982 looked as though it would be a second-round slugfest between the two elephant adversaries. Douglas-Hamilton was still fuming over the rejection of his Elephant Action Plan and insisted that the new group endorse his report. “We're wasting time talking,” he told me after the meeting. “You're making this a technical group when we should be lobbying to save the elephant.” He was too bitter and angry to see the danger of leaving himself scientifically wide open a second time, or the risk to the technical group's credibility if it engaged in media lobbying instead of advising IUCN, as it was supposed to do.

“This is a technical group,” I told him firmly. “We're not advocates. If you want to advocate, you're free to do so, but don't use the specialist group's name. If you want reliable figures to make your case, then you are

going to have to work with the group. And you're going to have to trust me to do an impartial job."

Douglas-Hamilton clearly took my impartiality to be collusion with the devil himself. Even though I invited him to conduct new and expanded elephant surveys, concentrating on areas with repeat counts to give irrefutable evidence of population trends, he was not mollified. He had taken a bad drubbing at Wankie and desperately wanted scientific endorsement to bolster his flagging confidence. He did finally accept my offer, but he never lost an opportunity to tell me that he was right, Parker was wrong, and I was responsible for the elephants dying every day because I was in with his enemy.

Ian Parker didn't exactly help either. Still gloating over his victory at Wankie, he never passed up a chance to attack Douglas-Hamilton and attempt to vindicate the ivory trade. Parker, a merciless debater with a sardonic wit, had no trouble scoring points against his angry and less facile opponent.

"Most of Douglas-Hamilton's figures are sheer guesses," Parker repeatedly asserted. "We can only tell what's happening to the elephant from trade statistics. And the figures are irrefutable. The volume of ivory is steady at around 600 tons a year, well within sustainable limits. The elephant is not threatened by the ivory trade. If anything, the species is threatened by population growth and habitat loss."

I was sick of the infighting by the end of the first meeting, but if there was one thing Amboseli had taught me, it was the rewards of persistence and sticking to the issues. Despite my quiet demeanor, the two adversaries found that they couldn't bludgeon or sweet-talk me into their position and eventually got down to the job ahead. I was intent on getting some definitive answers and forging a consensus on the status of Africa's elephants.

Cynthia Moss, whom I had brought in to give more attention to the social aspects of elephants, voiced her own refrain. "Why all this talk about ivory?" she burst out angrily to everyone's astonishment. "All I've heard is the ivory trade. What about the elephants? I haven't heard a single word about elephants in two days." She was right. But as much as Cynthia and the western world loved elephants, caring alone wouldn't persuade the politicians to stop the killing when they were behind the ivory racket and

when African farmers were screaming about the death and damage caused by elephants.

"We have to have a watertight scientific case," I concluded at the end of the meeting. "And even that's no assurance. The rhino horn trade has been banned since 1977, and poaching has increased sharply every year since, despite the best efforts of wardens like David Sheldrick in Tsavo."

The fractious group did finally agree on the need to collaborate on resolving the elephant controversy, but only after two days of incessant wrangling. Anyone who believes that science is dispassionate and objective has never worked with scientists.

Shortly after the first meeting, Tom Pilgram, a young bearded Berkeley graduate with a bent for computers and an interest in conservation, dropped in looking for a job. I lost no time getting him started on a computer model to test how various levels and patterns of hunting—a euphemism for poaching—affected elephant populations. His sincerity, impartiality, and skills were exactly the combination to ensure that the warring factions contributed their ideas and data.

Pilgram's models quickly dispelled the fallacy of Ian Parker's position on the ivory trade. When we tested the impact of poaching on elephant populations, the herds kept crashing to extinction. Even light poaching sent the herds into a nosedive. The reasons for the alarming results, we soon realized, lay in the oddity of tusk growth and in ivory preferences among carvers.

Elephants, especially the males, put on progressively more ivory with each year of life. By their late forties and early fifties, big males add on more ivory than ever as they rise up the dominance hierarchy. Ivory carvers in Japan and Hong Kong prefer big tusks and pay up to twice as much per kilo as they pay for small tusks.

Thus, unlike meat yields from animals killed for market—cattle and pigs, for example—the greatest yield of ivory comes late in an elephant's life. In fact, our computer model showed that poachers would get most ivory by collecting tusks from elephants dying of natural causes. But in reality no poacher, least of all the rural peasants and armed militia doing the killing, was going to wait for an elephant to die of old age. Any elephant with tusks is fair game, and every poacher has reason to kill it before

the next poacher does. It paid poachers to hunt big bulls. But once the big bulls were killed off, poachers shot an increasing number of small bulls—and eventually females and calves. The outcome, as predicted by our computer model, was the slaughter of ever smaller elephants until the population collapsed, a result Iain Douglas-Hamilton was beginning to verify with data collected from his repeat aerial counts across Africa.

A check of Parker's trade statistics matched our predictions: although the total weight shipped remained the same, the average weight of individual tusks bought in the Far East had fallen by half in less than a decade—a point Parker had overlooked, or conveniently ignored. These figures meant that twice as many elephants were being killed as ten years before, ever more of them females and young. Parker's own statistics had proved him utterly wrong about the sustainability of the ivory trade. Instead of conceding that the ivory trade was a threat to the elephant, he fell back on a second and less assailable line of defense, resting not on trade statistics but on his claim that most tusks entering the trade carried the distinctive thin, straight, yellowish ivory of the forest elephant preferred by carvers. The high volume and large size of forest elephant tusks entering the world market attested to a huge population, Parker claimed, so large in fact that the species as a whole was safe despite the decline in savanna elephants. Privately, Parker put the forest elephant population at 2 to 3 million, but having vilified Douglas-Hamilton for making such wild guesses, he wouldn't say so publicly.

The models Tom and I put together verified Parker's scenario—up to a point. If the total African population stood at well over 1 million, the African elephant could sustain the existing ivory trade, despite the localized overhunting in East Africa. If, however, the overall population fell much below 1 million, the ivory trade was indisputably driving the elephant to extinction, as Douglas-Hamilton claimed. The swing factor was the little-known forest elephant, hidden beneath the vast canopy of the central African forest.

Counting the forest elephant posed enormous, perhaps insurmountable challenges. The central African forest covers an area the size of Alaska and Texas combined—a million square miles of some of the most inaccessible country on Earth. Few roads penetrated the region, and counting elephants beneath dense canopy was almost as hopeless as looking for fish in

a muddy river. Futile or not, a count had to be done. The next meeting of our group was a little over a year away. If we could only come up with scientifically credible numbers by then, we could influence the all-important 1987 meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

I decided to ask British biologist Richard Barnes to take on the forest elephant census. Barnes was a quiet, bush-skilled elephant researcher with impeccable scientific credentials and a reputation for tenacity. He would need both to deliver the count on time and to convince the skeptics. The New York Zoological Society agreed to fund his work.

I would pick Barnes up in the Central African Republic to get a feel for the size of the forest elephant population and consider the best way for him to conduct the first reliable count of the Congo Basin.

With the resolution to the debate within reach, I handed over the chairmanship of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialists Group to David Cummings, a highly respected Zimbabwean conservationist, and stepped back to the vice chairmanship. After three years of scientific wrangling I was ready for a break and couldn't think of anything more adventurous and timely than a trip to central Africa to get the forest elephant survey under way and look for the elusive pygmy elephant.

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THE FIRST DAY'S adventure had not been quite what I had in mind; nor was it over. Soon after I had dropped off to sleep on the hard earth floor, we were dragged out for a succession of interrogations by a newly arrived apparatchik. These episodes continued until 1:30 A.M., when the rusty galvanized door creaked open a final time. A skinny gendarme, reeking of local beer and drunker yet with authority, threatened us with a fan-belt and grabbed me by the arm. I flung him off in disgust.

Outside, an interrogation committee flanked by soldiers toting carbines and snub-nosed automatics grilled me in Swahili. After an hour we were marched off under armed escort through total darkness. Peter missed his footing and stumbled into a ditch, wrenching his ankle. A column of safari ants chose that moment to attack and send us slapping and cursing toward a waiting vehicle. Finally, shortly before dawn, we were thrown into a United Nations resthouse in Aru, the district center.

the deluge of data at Nyeri restored his credibility. The plummeting populations graphed from aerial counts across Africa, the population crashes predicted by Pilgram's computer models, the halving of tusk weights, the exponential increase in ivory prices, the paucity of elephants, the spent cartridges, the grown-over trails in central Africa's rainforest—the evidence was all there.

“So can we agree that the evidence points to a rapid decline in elephant numbers due to an excessive offtake of ivory?” David Cummings asked at the end of the session. A tall angular man with a quiet, firm demeanor, Cummings brought the right touch of science, common sense, and compassion to the Nyeri meeting and steered the factious groups toward a resolution. Only Parker seemed to disagree with the outcome, if less vociferously than before.

The sixth conference of parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), held in Ottawa in August 1987, did adopt the specialist group's findings on the status of the elephant, thus conceding the ivory trade as the primary threat to its survival a full decade after Douglas-Hamilton launched his Pan African Survey. The conservation community could breathe a sigh of relief and finally turn its full attention to curbing the ivory trade. Over half a million animals had died since the Wankie standoff, a high price to pay for scientific exactitude. The battle was not yet over, though, not by a long shot.

Despite adopting the conclusions of the specialist group, CITES did nothing about the ivory trade.

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Ivory Wars

MUCH HAD BEEN MADE of the stunning success of the worldwide ivory ban imposed by CITES in 1989. Science, the media, and animal-rights lobbyists have all been cited as decisive factors. Without the slightest hint of humility, individual conservation groups credit themselves with bringing about the ban by raising public antipathy to ivory through their publicity campaigns.

In reality the ivory ban came about only through the combined effort of many individuals and organizations. It was the culmination of twelve years of scientific investigation, public awareness, publicity, and lobbying, starting with Iain Douglas-Hamilton's Pan African Survey in 1977. Painstaking research and a scientific consensus in May 1987 proved him correct. From then on, no one seriously doubted the threat ivory trading posed to the African elephant. The only question remained what to do about it. The answer was not as obvious as it may seem in retrospect: CITES bans in the 1970s had saved the leopard and cheetah but done nothing for rhinos. Parker got nods all round whenever he warned that once it was banned, the ivory trade would go underground just like the trade in rhino horn. He also pointed out that African governments wouldn't go along with a ban, and at that time he was right. The nations of Africa had been the decisive voices resisting restrictions on the ivory trade at the 1987 CITES meeting.

Three complex and interlacing threads—science, the media, and African opinion—ran through the elephant campaign leading up to the next meeting of CITES in October of 1989. The success of the ivory ban cannot be understood without grasping the role of all three and some of

better off after years of effort to find the right solution. Like other rhino sanctuaries in Kenya, Nairobi National Park has succeeded where trade sanctions failed. Poaching has tailed off to a handful a year as a result of close protection, and numbers are on the way back up after hitting a perilously low 350. And with Richard Leakey getting strong backing from the president and donors for the Kenya Wildlife Service, the future looks bright. The time has come for me to step down as director of Wildlife Conservation International and chairman of the elephant and rhino specialist group to resume my research and conservation in the field. Finally, I am free to enjoy the wild animals, the bush, and my family. For me, this is what conservation is all about.

Our children, five-year-old Carissa and three-year-old Guy, love the regular trips to Amboseli and to Chololo on the northern Laikipia Plateau, where Shirley still studies the baboons. Shirley and I have a lot of catching up to do, exploring our special worlds with Carissa and Guy, seeing them afresh through their eyes.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton was shocked when I told him of my plans after Lausanne. "You can't drop out, Jonah," he said in disbelief. "There's still so much to be done for elephants."

He is right. The ban has bought some time, but very little, given the threat of more people, continuing poverty, and diminishing wildlands in Africa. Douglas-Hamilton's ambivalence over the ban and his outburst after the final vote at Lausanne, when he castigated conservationists for ignoring the splendid job the southern Africans had done conserving elephants, spoke for most of us involved. Despite all the back-room promises at CITES, only a fraction of the support for Africa has materialized. Donors and conservation groups alike walked away on a cloud of euphoria, blind or indifferent to the fragility of the ban and the outcome for Africa.

The ban has salved the conscience of the West and feel-good conservationists, but it will exacerbate the anger, poverty, and despair at the root of the wildlife crisis once elephants lose their fear of people and begin raiding shambas. It will be Mikumi all over again—unless the roots of the conflict are tackled with the same care and zeal devoted to the ivory ban.

Of all the personalities involved, Douglas-Hamilton did most for the African elephant. All the same, his comment to me about dropping out

shows a common misperception about where the ultimate fate of wildlife lies. In the course of all the moral grandstanding and rhetoric over the elephant, a conservation consensus has begun to emerge in Africa: the future of wildlife lies not in ivory bans and antipoaching, however vital as safeguards. The ultimate solution rests on local custodianship—on people like the Maasai, who saved Amboseli's elephants and in whose hands the fate of an entire ecosystem resides.

In a heartening development, the concept of integrated conservation and development is catching on in Africa and spreading around the world. Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia have adopted local participation as a general policy and are making greater headway than Kenya. Other examples are springing up in Tanzania, the Central African Republic, and Zaire. In the process, conservation has shifted from protectionism to sustainable use. It might not be box-office stuff compared to saving the elephant, rhino, and whale, but local participation will save countless species and conserve entire ecosystems even if comparatively few programs work. Without such success, there is no hope beyond national parks, and no escape from impoverishment within them.

Far from dropping out, a return to Amboseli is a return to the root of the problem—wildlife, people, space. I step off the plane raring to start all over again.

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THE TREES around my house in Amboseli have grown over thirty feet tall in the nine years since the elephant ditch went in. But this is not what grips my attention on getting back. Outside the ditch, where elephants regularly plucked every acacia seedling as if it were the first gray hair, thickets missing for fifteen years have miraculously reappeared. *Solanum*, *Pluchea*, *Withania*, *Abutilon*, *Achyranthes*, and even *Sesbania*—a bush so common that it merited a distinctive habitat on my 1967 vegetation map—have recolonized the cynodon swards behind my house. In defiance of elephants, patches of regenerating acacia five feet tall are making headway. And, to my delight, a scuffed dung pile in the middle of a thicket shows that an old friend visited last night.

For a moment I feel giddy with déjà vu, catching a fleeting image of a fading yellow tent tucked away amid a grove of fever trees, imagining a