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Elephants

Anna Merz – Lewa Downs – Kenya

Few animals cause emotions to become quite as heated as does the greatest of the planets land mammals, the African elephant. For much of the Western world it is the "gentle giant". Largest and wisest of beasts, beautiful and much persecuted, symbol of the natural world and the vast, wild spaces of Africa. Just to see it in the wild is top priority for many visitors to East and Southern Africa and it was certainly at the top of my list when I went to live in Ghana nearly half a century ago. As a child I had seen then in zoos and circuses and was fascinated, but even then sensible enough to deplore the spectacle of such might reduced to performing tricks, begging for buns, and giving rides to children, even though I joined the queue. Books revealed more than did the captive animal itself, swaying its great body to and fro in boredom and looking majestic, frustrated and wholly out of context. A marvel, but an unhappy one whose vast strength may be used only on command and in a sterile environment because in a zoo there is no build up or anticipation to the idea of an elephant, probably because there is no idea, just the fact of the creature, alive, but a slave and a prisoner.

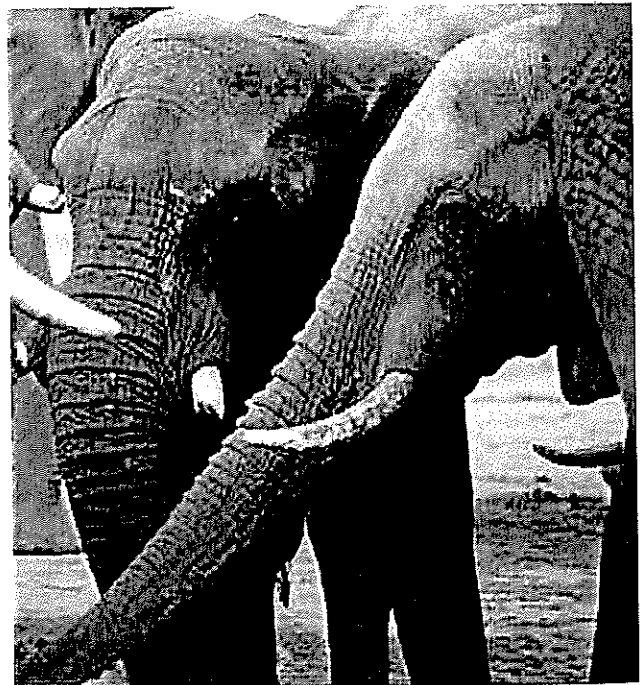
To see wild elephants is a wholly different matter. They are not lined up to be inspected behind bars but are free in the world of the bush which is their world and into which they can disappear silently and swiftly, but which is an alien worlds to most Europeans, a world of dust, heat, terrible roads and thorns. First you see in the dust their tracks like vast soup plates, the branches torn down or trees uprooted where they have fed; their size and strength are apparent in their passing. Then the huge piles of dung, each big enough to fill a wheelbarrow and as much as half a dozen horses could produce, the idea of an elephant is in your mind before you see the great creature itself. Suddenly they are there, a small group of the animals, and then they are gone, how could anything so large move so silently through thick dry bush you wonder? Only the scent remains, strong and unmistakable, once registered you will never forget it but you cannot describe it because our

vocabulary is sight orientated and lacks words to deal with a sense we use, at least consciously, so little. Why did they depart so swiftly as if, deep in the heart of a great National Park, they were still afraid of man? The West African elephant is not new to man. For many centuries his tusks were traded across the Sahara for salt and other precious goods before Europeans and their ships arrived on the coast. The Ivory Coast was well named and it is also said that the elephant does not forget.

Years pass after that initial encounter in the Perjari in what was then the north of Dahomey. I had become an Hon. Game Warden for the Government of Ghana and was in the Bia South Forest Reserve in the south west of the country, looking for monkeys and the possibility of chimps with the idea the area should receive legal protection. It was barely light and a misty rain was falling and the forest was cool and very wet with low slung clouds virtually adorning the treetops. I walked down the boundary line between the Forest Reserve and a timber concession where already farmers had followed the timber tracks and planted bananas and plantains, I heard what I thought was an elephant in the distance and suspected he would return to the safety of the reserve before the day was much advanced and his night time feast on bananas was discovered. The rain became heavier and together with my dog, I huddled for shelter within the vast buttressed roots of an old silk cotton tree. Of a sudden the hairs on the dog's hackles were raised and I felt those at the back of my neck do likewise. Slowly I turned my head. The elephant stood silent just outside my root shelter. I had not heard his

approach, nor did I hear his departure. One moment he was there and the next gone. Only the vast depressions in the mud proved we were not hallucinating.

More years passed and we were living retired in Kenya. In the previous decade tens of thousands of elephants had died in blood and agony to satisfy mans insatiable demand for their teeth. Ivory is beautiful and great works of art have been created from it. But can the beauty of even great art compare with the beauty of the living beast itself? Added to which little ivory becomes great art. Most become normal trade items sold in tourist shops throughout Africa and the Far East. Even a hundred years ago Africa was still a continent of vast wilderness areas surrounding small human settlements. The elephant, by nature a wanderer, could roam where he wanted, tied to no particular habitat. His appetite was vast but the range of vegetable matter he could digest was equally vast and he could inhabit swamps or mountains, rain forests and even near deserts, virtually all he encountered was as grist to his huge appetite and many of his trails would become the roads of Africa. In the period following the 2nd World War the Africa the elephant had known throughout its life on earth started to



disappear with ever accelerating speed. African populations exploded and they needed meat and grain to feed them. Where there were not >>

fences and crops there were men with guns, not bows and arrows, but AK47's. Where antelopes once roamed there were now cows, sheep and goats.



If you view a sedate herd of elephants within a National Park from the security of a 4 x 4 vehicle you may both think and say "surely elephants and people can live in peace together?" But if you try you will learn there is more truth in what the African thinks, and that is that the elephant is a difficult creature to share with. Difficult if you are a pastoralist, but impossible if you practise agriculture. If you grow crops on a commercial scale elephants will break your fences, eat your crops and trample and destroy what he cannot consume. Their activities can make the difference between profit and loss. But what is the difference between profit and loss for the large-scale farmer can mean total disaster for the peasant farmer who has but 5 acres on which to provide a living for his entire family. One elephant in one night may destroy that living for a whole year. In the worst case this may mean starvation or destitution. If relatives can help it may just mean no school for the children and no health care for the family. It can of course, also mean an unpleasant death caused by the elephant with whom you are disputing property rights. If you are a man with a gun you may come out of the encounter on top. If you are a woman or child you may well be killed. If the

elephant is wounded but not fatally there is yet another hate filled animal for the neighbours to contend with. Do elephants remember? Do they know their enemies? I cannot prove it

but I am certain the answer is yes. What do they think? No one knows but their brains are huge and serve their purposes as ours (sometimes) serve ours. Why do they tramp, rage, kill and destroy, behaving in such a similar way to homo sapiens so frequently? In my own mind I have come to believe that they want to trundle along the trails of their forbears they want to move from mountain to plain according to

the seasons and to their urges, I believe that like us they have an inbuilt urge to travel and explore. I think the rhino can stay in one area without suffering from frustration, but not the elephant. When their natural urges are frustrated by humans, either intentionally or otherwise, they become not just frustrated, but furiously so, especially the more impatient males. Is the elephant by nature destructive of its habitat? Reading some of the old books, the answer seems to be yes, but with the whole of Africa at their disposal, trees cast down would be replaced, seedlings consumed would give way to others, the landscape would change but would not be fatally damaged, and life would flow on.

Now it seems that the future of elephants in Africa, if they are to have a future, will have to lie within protected areas. But of all the creatures of Africa they are the most difficult to protect by reason of their size and their vast capacity to destroy their own habitat and the other creatures within it. They out compete all other browsers and destroy the trees on which they depend. They also prevent re-growth or re-seeding. They may help grazers initially by destroying bush and leaving more room for grass but even they

eventually suffer from lack of shade trees and destruction of riverine growth and springs. One morning on Lewa I followed a solitary bull elephant from 7.00a.m. till 1.00p.m. During that period of time he pushed down 42 mature acacia tortilis trees, some of these lovely trees may have been over a hundred years of age. During this period he took no mouthful of food from any one of them. He was not trying to impress any cows by his strength (one possible explanation for this behaviour that has been given) because none were in sight. He gave every impression of being in a fearful, cold, rage. Why? A bullet lodged non-fatally in his huge guts? A wound to his body or to his mind? He was but one of the many elephants who had flooded into Lewa as a direct result of the American intervention in Somalia. As the Marines moved in, so did the Somalis move out. Armed to the back teeth and hell bent on getting ivory to buy more AK47's and create more mayhem. Sadly I remember a helicopter flight back from the Mathews range when we flew low over herd after herd of massacred elephants, including tiny, pathetic calves. To say the survivors of this massacre were traumatised would be putting it mildly. And we on Lewa had to endure them. One day I stood on my veranda and across the valley watched one bull I know well and feared greatly, and with good reason. Peacefully he stood beneath one of the few remaining trees and watched a herd of impala pass in front of him. Then he charged. All but one of the unsuspecting antelope fled. She was brandished aloft in that most marvellous hand like appendage, the trunk, then she was smashed to a bloody death on the ground. Why? It seems that we humans are not alone in killing for sport and in wanton cruelty and in killing for revenge those smaller and weaker than ourselves. Once before, in the Kruger Park in South Africa, I had seen a elephant charge a herd of impala, but he was so drunk on the over ripe fruit of the Marula tree that he at least had that excuse, also he missed the impala and nearly brained himself when he hit a tree too big to be knocked over, so he sat down shaking his head in a most bewildered fashion. We were most mystified until we were told of the inebriating effects of the Marula as this tree does not exist in Kenya.



In so many ways does the elephant resemble us. It may not have speech but it has the most complicated methods of communicating, and over incredible distances by means of ultra sound. I am not the only person who believes that it can hand on its memories to succeeding generations. Nor am I alone in both fearing it greatly and yet holding it in awe and regarding it with a vast curiosity which I prefer to satisfy from a safe distance

and not on foot. If the elephant is to be given the space to enable it to survive with its memories of freedom and without frustration; then people who love it and those that fear and loathe it, have to do a lot of compromising, for wilderness no longer exists, where there are no fences still there are men with guns. If the pastoral peoples of Africa with their natural tolerance towards wildlife can not only be compensated for

damage done, but win valuable tourist dollars by allowing wild herds to share the land with their domestic flocks and herds then there is hope for the future. But the men with guns must also be dealt within the law. The antelope or giraffe shot and wounded dies in its own torture and misery, but the elephant can have its revenge, but seldom on the hunter.

On Losing a Friend...

by Ian Redmond, Wildlife Ape Consultant - Head of GRASP -
- Rhino Consultant & Co-ordinator African Ele fund

Someone, somewhere, wants a gorilla or two and is prepared to pay serious money. As a result, gorillas in Africa will die. Again.

In January it was four gorilla infants, allegedly from Nigeria but probably captured in Cameroon, shipped to a Malaysian zoo (see BBC Wildlife, June 2002). In May it was a mountain gorilla kidnapping with two fatalities. In the latter case though, for me, the feeling is not just that another endangered species is dying out. It is personal. Since working with the late Dr Dian Fossey in the late 1970s I have spent some part of almost every year in the Virunga region, doing conservation work, guiding special interest tours or advising on documentaries. As a result, I can honestly say that some of my best friends are gorillas. But there is a price to pay for such friendships when poaching rears its ugly head. After the death of Digit in 1977, Dian wrote, "Here at camp we wake up each day wondering who will be next?" When Jillian Miller of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund in London rang me in May to break the shocking news that mountain gorilla poaching had resumed, the same thought flashed through my mind. Who was it this time?

Sympathetic people often say 'it must be like losing a friend' to which I respond, it is not LIKE losing a friend, it IS losing a friend. This time, the deceased were Muraha and Impanga, and young Bibisi was missing. I first saw Muraha two days after her birth in 1977; I knew her mother Pansy

and her grandmother Marchessa well, and watched Muraha's childhood, so maybe it is more like being a Godparent; I saw her most recently last year, just before she gave birth to Ubuzima, and she came and sat so close to me that Kwakane, the young silverback, felt obliged to stomp over and object - but he didn't know we were old friends.

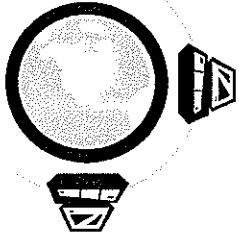
Impanga's death was even more tragic - despite her youth and inexperience, she was coping so well with being a disabled Mum - I only hope that Bibisi is found before it is too late and reintroduced to his group so that he can play a part in the mountain gorilla's future.

Poaching for the live animal trade has not been seen in Rwanda for nearly two decades, and no reputable zoo would accept a wild-caught ape because it is well known that the capture of an infant gorilla (or other ape) invariably involves the death of the mother and any family member who attempts to defend her. Gorillas are listed on Appendix 1 of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), which means that all commercial trade in them is banned. Moreover, captured mountain gorillas have never survived long enough to breed in captivity and so an infant could never be traded as 'captive bred'.

Mountain gorillas are in one sense fortunate in that their human neighbours do not eat ape-meat, so they are seldom hunted unless a foreign buyer waves a wad of money

at a poacher. And what can stop a determined criminal? As with the continual setting of snares in the park for antelope bushmeat, you can form a police force but you can't stop crime. The big question is 'who ordered the capture of a mountain gorilla baby?' Clearly, we need to approach the trade from both ends. And to do that, we need to know who puts out the order that tempts poachers to kill mothers and capture their infants. Where is the journalist or investigator prepared to probe the apparently burgeoning trade in baby apes?

It is not that mountain gorillas are more important than any other ape, but they ARE the best protected and they do have the most human friends. If even *they* are not safe from this kind of attack, who is?



Web links

www.gorillas.org
www.4apes.com
www.unep.org/grasp