

The Joys of Fostering an Elephant in Kenya.....

Julie Titcombe writes.....

Since a small girl, I have had a love of all animals whether domestic or wild. However, I have always been drawn to elephants, lions, and rhino. They each have their own characteristics, majesty, beauty and qualities. The world's fauna and flora are at great risk, some to the edge of extinction, which will, and is, having a devastating effect on our planet resulting from poaching for ivory, rhino horn and trophy hunting by humans. Without these magnificent animals much of our planet would not exist as it is. The balance of nature is paramount to our survival. We are all part of the circle of life where living together should be key. Unfortunately, this is not true as some humans choose to destroy natural wonders instead of treasuring and learning from it.

Fortunately, there are many people around the world speaking out for our wildlife, both in the UK and worldwide. I am part of that voice, and carry out as much campaigning as I can to draw awareness of the plight of elephants and other species. It is hard to imagine the greed of consumerism and material items, resulting in the detrimental trafficking of animal parts.

I took myself off to Kenya 15 years ago, a childhood dream, and have returned most years. Flying into Nairobi I had read of an elephant orphanage on the outskirts of Nairobi National Park, run by a lady, Dr Dame Daphne Shelbrick, whom some of you may be familiar with from the BBC series "Elephant Diaries". So off I went to one of the daily public viewings between 11 am and 12 noon to witness for myself the work being carried out by the David Shelbrick Wildlife Trust, (DSWT) set up decades ago in memory of Daphne's late husband. David had been the first game warden in one of Kenya's largest national parks and reserves, called Tsavo East National Park. I have since returned to the Nairobi elephant nursery 60 times, plus visits to the reintegration units in the wild at Ithumba and Voi, where the orphans continue their journey to be fully fledged and free elephants, as nature intended. The whole process of rehabilitation can take 10-15 years. To date the DSWT have succeeded in returning 180 elephant orphans back into the wild.

What I witnessed at the Nairobi orphanage, and also at Ithumba in September 2017, was both sad and joyful. Sad that the baby elephants in the orphanage had suffered various traumas of losing their mother and elephant families, due to poaching, human conflict, and falling down man-made wells for human water collection. Once deep down in the wells the calves can not get out and perish. Elephant calves, who witness their mothers and families being killed by poachers, either by rifle shot or spears, are not only traumatised by events, but are then left alone in the bush to fend for themselves, from which they cannot survive without their mother's milk and their elephant family. Elephants live in family groups and rely on the adults to teach many attributes including migratory routes for survival. A calf is milk dependant for at least 2 years therefore the loss of their mother means they too suffer a cruel death sentence. The poachers are not interested in calves with no tusks, which are in fact incisor teeth, and used, as we all know, for ornaments and carvings. During my visits I then saw hope where the orphans had been rescued and were in the dedicated care of the DSWT in Nairobi until they are old enough to start their next journey of being released to live freely in the wild with their own species.

Elephants are not instinctive killers, but will protect their family. They have the same emotional responses as we humans, i.e. grief, joy, love, fun, separation, despair, empathy, caring, and trust. Elephants have been known to actually shed tears when distressed and when happy.

Did you know that 96 elephants are killed every day throughout Africa for their ivory. That is one every 15 minutes, totalling 35,000 elephants per year. Due to the gestation period of 22 months, the rate of births cannot overtake the rate of slaughter, therefore numbers cannot be sustained, only depleted. At this present rate, elephants will be extinct in the wild by 2025, less than 10 years away if urgent legislation is not in place and taken seriously.

However, at last some countries are beginning to listen to the Non-Government Organisations, (NGO's), and have started to take steps in banning ivory sales and trafficking. Unfortunately, it is a very slow process getting legislation in place, and the illegal trade continues. Prison sentences are handed out to those who are proven guilty of poaching and trading. Identifying the criminals gets harder as the corruption surrounding the ivory trade goes underground

It must be said that all campaigners welcome and congratulate those countries who have started to sit up and listen and are now introducing stronger laws and penalties for those involved in any ivory trade activity. Carving factories are slowly being closed down in Asia, and it is illegal to sell ivory in shopping outlets. Many Ivory stockpiles have been destroyed to give out a strong message that the ivory trade is not acceptable. What a waste I hear you say. Well the fact is that by having ivory stocks, poachers keep doing what they are doing to keep stocks up. The lesson is to educate people, around the world that poaching is destroying Africa's unique wildlife and culture, which people treasure. There is no other country on earth like Africa. Ivory is more valuable on a live elephant than on a dead elephant. Wildlife survival keeps the tourist industry alive in Africa, from which thousands of people are employed. If there is no market for ivory and the like, life will be made more difficult for those who choose to destroy Africa's heritage and future.

By teaching farmers to live alongside wildlife they can themselves benefit. For example, elephants roam looking for food and sometimes go too near to farms where plantations, and people livelihoods, are ruined. Some time ago it was noticed that elephants do not like the sound of bees. As a result, bee hives and transmitted bee sounds have been attached to perimeter fences, and once the elephants hear this they do not go near. This saves the farm land, and also provide honey for farmers to sell as an extra income. It is working, but is not yet utilised everywhere to prevent human conflict.

NGO's , such as DSWT, Born Free, IFAW, Save the Elephant, are all working hard to educate and teach communities to live side by side with their wildlife so that future generations can continue to experience the wonders of Africa.

So what does the DSWT do . Well as soon as they get a call from anywhere in Kenya notifying them of an elephant in need, they swing into action. Mobile veterinary units, teams of rangers, keepers, medicines, including IV infusions, helicopters and planes all start to work on the rescue. This could be treating and operating on a wounded adult elephant or to rescuing a calf who has been orphaned due to poaching. There is a little regional airport near to the Nairobi nursery called Wilsons Airport. Teams fly out to every corner of Kenya to retrieve these poor orphans.

Teams often find baby elephants standing by the side of their dead mothers and family. They are reluctant to leave but with the skill of the keepers and rangers, the baby is airlifted back to Nairobi. During the flight the baby elephants are already receiving infusions by the DSWT team, to hydrate their bodies .

On arrival at the nursery Daphne and her team set to work examining the orphan and settling it in to its new home. Other resident orphan babies trumpet and welcome the new arrival to the nursery. This often helps the baby calm down, but some are so traumatised by their elephant family loss, it can take much longer for them to settle and to trust the

human keepers trying to help them. The babies are covered in blankets to keep them warm, and during the day, blankets are also hung on clothes lines, where keepers stand behind the blanket with feeding bottles of milk formula. The babies interpret the blanket as the body of their mother and suckle the milk from below the blanket not taking any notice of the keeper behind the cloth. It is emotionally moving to watch

Through trial and error, it took Daphne 3 decades to perfect the milk formula that young elephants could tolerate and survive. She is known worldwide as the first person to ever achieve this. She has dedicated her life to the elephants, as does now her daughter Angela, and family. Daphne lives in a house at the nursery and is now in her 80's, yet still very active. All of the elephants love her, as do all of her supporters and followers. I have had the privilege of meeting this very kind, knowledgeable, and dedicated lady a number of times. A very proud moment for me to meet one of my heroines.

At night the orphans have their own separate "stable" and the keepers sleep by their side to comfort them every day, 24/7. The keepers have a bunk bed above the ground and can view the baby elephant all night in case they become distressed. The babies are bottle fed every few hours during the night, so it is nonstop care. Baby elephants are delicate beings, and are often prone to diarrhoea, and sometimes pneumonia which is another reason why they are never left alone. An elephant cannot sneeze, therefore no runny noses, until illness has set in and it is usually too late to save them. A few pass away after being rescued, but the survival rate is high, thanks to Daphne, Angela and all the teams. Keepers are employed knowing they will dedicate up to 10 years rehabilitating a baby elephant until it is old enough to be slowly integrated back into the wild at the age of nearly 2-3 years, depending on the elephant. This is carried out gradually over time at Ithunba, Tsavo East, to continue the rehabilitation and the keepers stationed there are always nearby keeping watch and supplying food and water as required. It is a huge operation and a very successful one.

The DSWT has two reintegration units where elephants are transported to, by road, for introduction to the wild and eventually meet with native elephant groups. However, the keepers are beside them all the way. The first reintegration unit was set up many years ago by David Sheldrick in Tsavo East National Park, with the nearest town, for miles, being Voi. I have visited this site twice to see the elephants and work of the Trust. The more recent reintegration unit to be built by the DSWT is in the northern region of Tsavo East National Park, at Ithumba from where I have just returned. Once the 2-3-year olds reach the units, they are still tended to by keepers. During the day, the elephants are free to roam, investigate their new surroundings, and be welcomed by ex-orphans whom they met, and knew, at the Nairobi nursery. There is usually a big welcome party for new arrivals and they recognise their "friends". New orphans arriving at the units, go into a locked area overnight to protect them from predators. The older ex orphan elephants now enjoy the freedom, day and night, but always return for their mud bath and drink at the water hole twice a day. They have been accepted into wild herds and a number of the orphans themselves have given birth in the wild which is wonderful to witness. My partner and I have 7 foster elephants whom we have sponsored for 14 years on an annual basis. Five are in the wild at Ithumba, one in the wild at Voi and one younger one, called Ndotto, still in the Nairobi nursery, but soon to be transferred to Ithumba . sometime in November/December 2017.

Of our five in the wild in Ithumba we saw three of our babies whom we last saw at the Nairobi nursery aged between 1 and 9 months, but now they are 13-14 years old. Wendi has given birth to little Wiva, named after the weaver birds of the area. She is so cute and all of the ex-orphans look happy and healthy in the company of around 60 elephants both

wild, and rescued ex orphans. Some of the ex-orphans I was able to get up close to, and give a hug, provided the keeper was beside me. It was the most magical, emotional and surreal experience.

So, thanks to the DSWT, these elephants have come through. They had a very traumatic and tragic start in life but now, with help, they are thriving.

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust also runs the following: -

9 Full time Anti-Poaching and Desharing Units,

4 Mobile Veterinary Units and Sky Vets,

5 Aerial Surveillance Planes and a Rapid Response Helicopter,

They also have teams providing Saving Habitats, Conservation Initiatives and Community Outreach.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the generous donations and sponsorship of individuals and companies. So, if you wish to foster an elephant and save a life, and hopefully the future of a species, please go to the website: -

www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org

There is a wealth of information and advice on how you can help.

Or if you wish to contact me, please do so via Princess Lodge Care Home Manager, Julie Heenan.

So, join the herd and be part of something astonishing. I have never looked back, it is in my blood and I will continue for work for elephant survival and other species whilst I'm still breathing !

For your enjoyment I have attached a selection of images to give you a flavour of the work carried out day in, day out, every day of the year to save these beautiful intelligent, gentle giants from extinction. Enjoy.