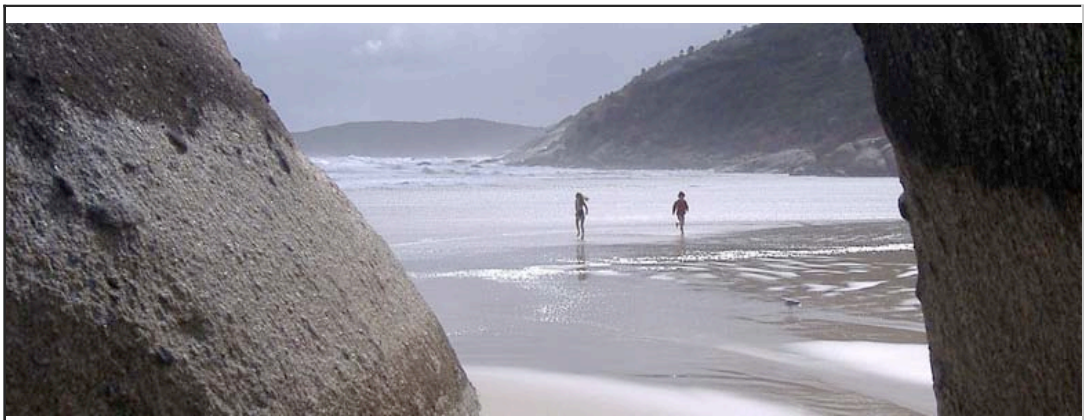

FEATURE ARTICLE

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Keepers of the Trust: Caring for Kenya's Elephant Orphans

Dedicated Humans Work to Save a Dwindling Pachyderm Population

By Mark Sissons

Each morning at eleven, a boisterous group of orphaned elephants at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Nairobi National Park romps out, trunks linked like a preschool class on a field trip, to enjoy their daily mud bath. Frolicking in the murky water, they happily splash each another as their human minders watch, occasionally wagging an admonishing finger when the play gets too rough.

These pachyderm babies are among a dwindling number of elephants left in Africa: a recent study jointly funded by the U.S. government and various non governmental organizations estimated that of the half million remaining African elephants, more than 23,000 were slaughtered last year alone by poachers, despite international ivory bans in place since the late 1980s.

Baby Pachyderms romp in the mud at the David Sheldrick Reserve outside of Nairobi. (Photo by Mark Sissons)

Founded in 1977 by Daphne Sheldrick to honour the memory of her late husband David, the founding warden of Tsavo East National Park (Kenya's largest game reserve), the Trust has successfully reared nearly 70 infant elephants. Some arrive at the orphanage with gunshot wounds inflicted by ivory poachers who have also slaughtered their mothers, and often, their entire families. Others fell down wells or into quarries, or were separated from their herds as humans were driving them off.

Despite the staff's best efforts to save them, some will perish of illness or grief soon after arriving at the orphanage. The ones who survive normally spend about two years at the orphanage before being transferred to Tsavo East, where they are gradually reintroduced into the wild elephant community; a transition that is made at their own pace and in their own time.

For the two dozen visitors gathered this morning behind the wire fence, this may be as close as many will ever get to baby elephants not confined within a zoo enclosure. For the next hour, resident spokeswoman Tal Manor, a Dutch volunteer studying Environmental Management, explains how it works at this remarkable animal haven.

"Until the elephant orphans are released back into the wild we try to recreate their natural conditions as closely as possible," she explains. "This includes doing exactly what their mothers would do, like giving the toddlers a midday mud bath, which acts as a natural sunscreen, protecting their surprisingly delicate skin from the scorching equatorial sun."

In charge of recreating those natural conditions is a small, dedicated group of Kenyan men called "Keepers" who act as surrogate mothers, replacing the orphans' lost natural ones. Keepers typically spend 24 hours a day handling the infant elephants – just as their mothers would in the wild. They even sleep on straw mats alongside them in their stalls each night. And like all responsible parents; try to provide a little discipline.

"The Keepers try to teach the babies some manners so they won't get into the habit of bullying each other, especially the young males, who are always demonstrating their strength by doing things like pulling down trees," explains Manor.

She says they do this to try to prove their strength, as only the strongest among them will have the opportunity to breed with the females, who are very selective.

A crucial part of hand-rearing orphaned elephants is bottle-feeding them several times daily. It took the Sheldricks nearly 30 years of trial and error to finally create an artificial substitute for elephant mother's milk that could sustain the infants, who are extremely fragile and wholly milk dependent for their first two years.

A Keeper feeding one of the baby elephants at the Sheldrick Reserve in Kenya. (Photo by Mark Sissons)

So what does it take to become a Keeper? According to Manor, love for the orphans is paramount, and cannot be faked just to secure a job in a country where unemployment is chronic. When Keepers are recruited, she says that no matter how much they profess to love animals, the elephants (who are emotionally very similar to humans) can always tell whether they are being genuine.

"Poaching orphans, especially, must overcome a deep hatred of humans, having watched their mothers being murdered," she says. "They are also incredibly intuitive and always know whether or not you are a good person. You can lie to a human, but you can't lie to an elephant."

Head Keeper, Edwin Lusicki, who has worked at the Trust for seven years, says it took about three months for the orphans to finally accept him. A soft-spoken man with a gentle disposition, Lusicki had never even seen an elephant up close until he came to work here. He had originally wanted to be a priest, but now finds commensurate satisfaction in his role as surrogate "elephant mom."

"It's like taking care of your own child," he says. "When they lie down you cover them with a blanket, and when they wake up in the night, you feed them milk from a bottle. Just like what you would do with your baby at home."

Among Lusicki's current nursery charges are Kamboyo; found abandoned by a de-snaring team on their way to arrest two poachers; Buchuma, who fell into a pipeline manhole, and Kora; discovered wandering along a road, his mother a suspected poaching victim.

"It's hard not to have favourites," he admits. "But I try to discourage myself from doing so because once you favour one, all the others get jealous. So I spend time with all of them and sleep with a different one every night."

But eventually, like any parent, Lusicki must face the day when he must let go of his babies and set them free.

"Of course I'm sad to see them go," he says - referring to Sheldrick's policy of releasing the orphans back into the wild after an average of two years. "But to get to share your life with and take care of these wonderful creatures, and then see them eventually survive in their natural habitat feels really great."

And then there are the reunions. "Even in the wild, long after their release, if two former Sheldrick orphans meet, they get very excited about reuniting," says Lusicki. His favourite memory, though, is of the day not long ago when a majestic, mature elephant approached him in Tsavo East.

"You don't expect a wild elephant to behave this way – and yet she came right up to me and touched me. She remembered me."

Elephants, as they say, never forget. Nor will anyone who visits the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust ever forget watching these baby orphans at play; their oversized delicate ears flapping comically as they take great joy in their daily mud bath. Babies who once were lost, and now are found.

The Trouble With Tusks

- The African elephant population decreased from 1.3 million in 1979 to 600,000 in 1989, when an international convention banned the trade of ivory. The population is now about 500,000.
- Countries worst affected by poaching include Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.
- Last year about 15 tonnes of ivory were seized — 10 to 15 per cent of the total traded.
- 60 to 70 per cent of ivory goes to the Far East, where it is used to make name seals, tourist trinkets and carvings
- The black market price of good quality ivory was about USD $750 last year, up from $100 in 1989.
- An elephant's tusk contains about seven kilograms of ivory.

Source: Born Free Foundation

ACCESS

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust is open to visitors from 11 a.m. every day of the year, except Christmas. It's located in Nairobi National Park, on the outskirts of the Kenyan capital.

For more information about the David Sheldrick Trust visit **www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org**.

Mark Sissons is a freelance writer/photographer based in Vancouver, British Columbia. His work has appeared in the Globe & Mail, Winnipeg Free Press and Vancouver Sun among others.