




Protector of the GIANTS

By Linda Ruck

A man in a green shirt and hat is walking through a herd of elephants in a savanna. The elephants are of various sizes, and the man is walking towards the camera. The background is a lush green savanna with trees and bushes.

As a budding conservationist growing up in Australia I was intoxicated with tales from Africa of Daphne Sheldrick and her incredible life, living amongst the elephants and rhinos of Kenya. Now twenty years later I found myself in Nairobi sharing tea with this icon of the conservation world.

Born in Kenya, Daphne Sheldrick grew up surrounded by wildlife. Married to David Sheldrick, the renowned warden of Tsavo National Park, the couple spent 25 years working together until David's untimely death

in 1977. With orphans still pouring in she was determined to continue their life's work and with the support of the Kenyan Government, Daphne established an animal orphanage in Nairobi National Park.

A protector of all creatures great and small, her home within the park receives some unusual daily visitors from squirrels and antelopes to tiny wobbly-footed baby elephants, and a placid long term resident rhino, Magnum. The latest orphan to join the group is 'Lualeni' a 3 month old baby elephant whose mother died as a result of poaching.

Daphne is recognized internationally as a world authority on the African Elephant and the Black Rhinoceros. She is the international best selling author of four books and has received

numerous prestigious awards including the BBC Lifetime Achievement Award.

You have devoted your life to the protection of elephants and rhinos yet they continue to be poached with the rhino on the verge of extinction. Do you ever get overwhelmed?

At times I get despondent particularly with the latest government which is totally uninformed about wildlife. At present they plan to send 300 wild caught animals to a zoo in Thailand in the belief it will promote tourism which of course it won't. They are also now considering starting up hunting again. My biggest battle has been fighting ignorance. In the 1980's the ivory trade caused the elephant population to fall from 1.3 million to 25,000. Everyone can live without ivory but not an animal that duplicates us in life span and intelligence.

With this in mind, Kenya has a population of 30 million and it is estimated that 10 million Kenyans live on less than a US dollar a day. Will poaching ever be controlled?

There is tremendous poverty in Kenya and no state welfare. To a starving man with a family the wildlife is a food source. It's about survival but at what expense to the country's wildlife? Frankly people shouldn't be starving. If it hadn't been for the corruption, this country would be wealthy. Corruption

“Humans need nature for the health of the soul and for peace of mind. We are part of nature. Within nature can be found many clues to happiness.”

is very difficult to control in the third world now with tribal ethics gone and people aspiring to own cars and houses.

What valuable lessons have you learnt during your lifetime living with the elephants?

A deep empathy and understanding of their minds and emotions. A baby elephant that has suffered the loss of its mother can lose the will to live. Elephants have human characteristics as well as many attributes that we don't have - they can communicate over distance and have the ability to walk over a hundred miles a day. They have all the emotions of humans; they are competitive, have a sense of humour, a sense of death, and a sense of family. You learn so much when you raise

them. Each individual is unique; some are outgoing and adventurous, others are clingy and shy. Some are even bullies.

The scientific world believes it is unethical to humanize animals. What are your thoughts on this?

This shows huge ignorance. Elephants, dolphins and whales have almost identical emotions to humans. Others are equally sophisticated but on a different branch of life. For instance the rhino that stepped out of the dinosaur age whose life is governed by chemistry and scent which we don't fully understand. Antelopes too, who communicate with telepathy and an unspoken language. Some people believe animals are put on earth for our benefit and enrichment. This is a selfish and ignorant point of view.

Many people search their whole life for their purpose. Do you think you naturally fell into your life's purpose by circumstance, it found you, or you developed it?

I was born into it. Growing up in Kenya in the highlands I had my first orphaned antelope when I was three. My brother was the first warden of the first national park and when I met my husband I married into the National Parks service. I feel extremely fortunate because there is nothing else I want to do. I have always loved animals both

Orphaned at 3 weeks, Magnum the rhino still returns to visit the keepers



domestic and wild. They are absolutely fascinating.

What is the greatest gift nature has given you?

Humans need nature for the health of the soul and for peace of mind. We are part of nature. Within nature can be found many clues to happiness. Simply listen, look and learn. By appreciating the miracle of life on earth and the beauty of all things natural we can discover a panacea to counter many human problems such as loneliness, emptiness, unhappiness.

As a naturalist I know the human population has overtaken itself and is not sustainable on the world's resources. The earth doesn't just belong to us. As we kill every tree, every animal, ultimately we are killing ourselves.

What drove you to continue David's work after he died?

By the time my husband died he was very well known in the conservation field. He was the first person to ever successfully raise an elephant and rhino orphan over the age of two and the first person to understand the complicated nature of elephants and their behaviour. When he died many people donated money in his memory. An American organization, the African Wildlife Foundation, asked me to identify the projects David would have liked to continue. Both the money and the orphaned elephants continued to come in and nobody knew how to care for them. The Kenyan Government asked me to continue my work and gave me permission to be based in Nairobi National Park. Having the courage to fight for those that cannot fight for themselves gives you the satisfaction of being needed.

With so much political uncertainty in neighbouring countries, what keeps you grounded and do you feel like you belong?

As a white person you never really feel like you belong in black Africa. I know if times become really tough and unstable I might have to escape. I would never leave Africa though; this is where I belong with the animals. Africans tend to live for the day and we have adopted this philosophy.

You are the author of four successful books: *The Orphans of Tsavo, Tsavo*



Orphans will eventually be reintegrated into the wild

Story, *An Elephant called Eleanor and A Four Footed Family* and now you are writing your autobiography. You have had an amazing life. When will your memoirs be finished?

I've been trying to write my memoirs for the past 10 years as I refuse to have publishers and deadlines. I also have a lifetime of painful memories particularly of the first animals I loved and cared for. It's hard to relive these memories even in words. It is important though that I finish my memoirs for the Sheldrick Trust Archives. I hope it will be within the next two years.

There are so many worthwhile charities competing for the donation dollar. With Africa known for its corruption, there is apprehension about putting funds here. What are your thoughts on this?

I believe you reap what you sow. If people can see you doing a good job and like what you are doing, then they

are going to support you. If you are courageous enough to be outspoken about what is going wrong, people will respect that. Of all the countries in Africa, Kenya has the most chance because it has always remained stable and there is a big enough middle class

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Photograph © David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust / Joseph Sauri

Pioneering milk formula has saved countless orphans

who don't want to rock the boat. They have witnessed the events in Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe.

Animals have been an important part of your life. Out of all the animals you have cared for, what is your favourite?

I love all animals but if I had to choose it would be the antelopes because they are so gentle and sophisticated. In my lifetime I have raised most of the antelope species. I had one impala, 'Bunty', for twelve years. Even now when I think of her it makes me cry. It would be a disservice to the animals to detach your feelings.

I would never turn any animal away that needed me. Elephants and rhino's became such a big part of my life because so many kept being brought to me. To care for and love an animal you should think long term, about the quality of life you can provide and its future rehabilitation. We have never taken on a big cat as those would not mix with the orphans we have, and I haven't hand reared a giraffe, simply because I haven't been given one.

What are your hopes for the future for the animals of Africa?

For people to understand them more and to have compassion towards them. Animals are necessary for the well being of the earth and not here for our benefit. Africa has been blessed with some of the most fascinating and varied wildlife. I hope they realize the value of this priceless treasure, and save it before it becomes too late.

Do you believe you have made a difference and is there anything you would have done differently?

I know I have made a difference to the animals and we have been able to make a big difference to conservation in this country. I don't believe in regrets. I am a bit too outspoken at times and say exactly what I think. But what is the point of not standing up for your beliefs?

I am happy with the life I have had. The Trust's work is internationally recognized and will continue long after I am gone. I was the first person to successfully create a milk formula to



Photograph © David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust / Esther Wolf

Daphne and one of her grown up orphans

hand rear and save newborn elephants and rhinos. We have trained 55 elephant keepers who are able to raise orphans. We run 6 anti-poaching teams in Tsavo National Park and a mobile veterinary unit, and we receive orphan elephants and rhinos from throughout Africa. Our community outreach programs assist communities living on the boundaries of the National Parks, sponsoring field trips into the Parks, text books, sporting equipment. We have been able to assist the Kenya Wildlife Service substantially over the years, by providing security fuel for Tsavo National Park for years, building boreholes and windmills in waterless regions of the Park, rebuilding the engine of their surveillance aircraft, and erecting electric fences on sensitive boundaries to protect the communities and their crops from the elephants, and the elephants from falling prey to 'Problem Animal Control'. These are just a few areas we have managed to make a substantial difference over the years.

What advice would you give XL Magazine readers to live an extraordinary life?

This makes me laugh. I don't think I have had an extraordinary life although other people think so. I was born into this life and I don't know anything else. What I do find extraordinary is going to a big city; I am terrified and don't even know how to catch a bus. I am much happier roaming about the African bush amongst the wildlife.

My philosophy is simple: "Nature holds healing powers for troubled souls, and by being at peace with all life on earth one finds that one is at peace with oneself."

How would you like to be remembered?

Through my work and my love of the animals. That I made a difference. **XL**

The BBC is currently filming a documentary at the Park over 15 month period following the lives of the keepers Daphne has trained and their young charges. 'Elephant Diaries' will be aired later this year. For further information on the David Sheldrick Trust or how you can sponsor an orphan elephant or rhino please check out website www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org