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SPECIAL REPORT

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The Woman who Loves Giants

Born in Kenya in 1934, Daphne Sheldrick developed an empathy with wildlife from an early age. For over 25 years, until 1976, she worked alongside her late husband, David, the famous founder warden of Kenya's Tsavo National Park. During that time she raised numerous orphaned animals and rehabilitated them back into the wild. Following David's death in 1977 she created an animal orphanage in Nairobi National Park, where she has since hand-reared over 32 newborn elephants and over a dozen black rhino calves. Her 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." **Juliet Coombe** caught up with Daphne in Nairobi.

What is your earliest memory of bush life?

My earliest bush life memory would be the natural world of our farm, which incorporated many wild places. I remember the call of the leopard at night, which posed a threat to our animals and struck fear into us children.

How did you learn about raising baby elephants?

For my first few years of rescuing baby elephants it was largely trial and error, for example, finding the right milk formula and observing the wild community in order to get the husbandry correct. No one other than myself has ever hand-reared the newborn elephants at the orphanage. Through this first-hand experience I have learnt many things. Blowing into an elephant's trunk, for example, is like saying "hello" or shaking hands.

What is a normal working day for you?

From 6am to 9pm, with a 20-minute doze in my chair after lunch. I spend as much time with the elephants as possible; however it is the keepers who are with the infant elephants in the nursery 24 hours a day, working in shifts. A different keeper sleeps with a different elephant each night. The elephants have to view the keepers as 'family' and must not be allowed to latch onto just one person. Small elephants drink up to 35 pints a day. You have to feed the young ones under blankets to recreate, as closely as possible, the underbelly of a mother elephant. In

the middle of the morning and the end of the afternoon I take the youngsters for a mud bath (mud acts as a sunscreen protecting the youngsters from sunburn). Much of my day also includes public awareness-raising, media visits and fund-raising to develop the orphanage and maintain the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

Why do you ask for donations of ladies tights and blankets?

The baby elephants like to play in the dirt and if it's a particularly cold morning they need to be rugged up in blankets to keep warm. Elephant babies are very fragile. One has to keep their temperatures stable when they are deprived of the body heat of a loving elephant family, which would shield them from the wind, the sun and



Brian Quiring

the rain. Tights make ideal elephant belts, because they can be pulled to fit any size of elephant and we use them to keep their blankets in place during early morning walks. Sometimes if it rains the keepers attach umbrellas to them as well.

What is the most important lesson you have learnt from living with wildlife?

Within nature can be found many clues to happiness. One simply has to listen, look and learn, and by appreciating the miracle of life on earth, and the beauty of all things natural, one will discover a panacea to counter many human problems – loneliness, self-pity, boredom and resentment, to name just a few. By immersing oneself in the far greater problems that beset the animal kingdom, and having the courage to fight the good



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Blowing into an elephant's trunk is like saying "hello" or shaking hands.

fight for those that cannot do it themselves, one learns resilience and the satisfaction of being needed.

Have you ever been in personal danger?

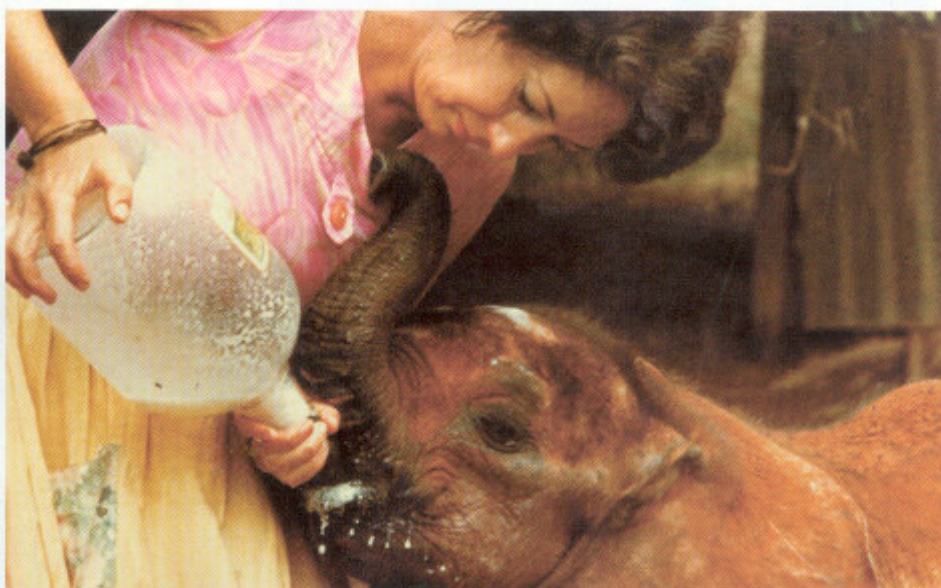
Only once, but it was my own fault. I was in Tsavo National Park and was calling out to Eleanor, one of my many orphans. An elephant about her size came out of the herd and greeted me with her trunk. When I looked into her eyes, however, they looked distinctly different in colouring. Catherine, as this wild elephant became known, was a friend of Eleanor's. When I touched her behind the ear she reprimanded me with a swipe of her trunk. I was thrown in the air and suffered a broken femur and knee. When Catherine came over to me I thought I was about to be finished off, but instead she seemed deeply concerned and confused, using her foot to touch me as if trying to work out what had happened.

Do you think elephant rides are a good idea for raising awareness?

I do not agree with elephant rides. I believe that, like everything, an elephant needs freedom and space in its own terms, which does not mean being tied up at night and only brought out for an occasional short walk. To frustrate natural instincts is a recipe for disaster. Events prove this – riding elephants in Botswana and Thailand have killed people.

What would you never travel without before venturing out in the African bush?

Water and food. And take a mirror that can be used to signal a passing aircraft.



Winning formula. Daphne Sheldrick pioneered the hand-rearing of young orphan elephants, such as Aisha (above).

What do you think of The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species' (CITES) 1999 experimental controlled trade of Ivory between Botswana, Namibia and South Africa?

I think CITES is a waste of time, and the money would be better spent on protecting the elephants. CITES has only contributed towards the problems elephants have by endorsing the trade. As long as there is trade, there will be people to kill the elephants, even for a dime, and CITES is, after all, about trade and not the elephants.

How can people around the world make a difference?

Public opinion is a powerful tool. People around the world need to speak out for the animals, keep their politicians in line and maintain an international ban. On a personal level, they can become foster parents of our elephants. The most important thing people can do to save the elephants from extinction is never buy ivory; shun it entirely, because then there would be no need for a trade that, during the 1980s, caused African elephant numbers to fall by 50%. Prior to this there were 1.3 million elephants. Now there are 25,000 left in the wild. An all-out ban on ivory trading is essential. Everyone can live without ivory, but not an animal that duplicates us in life span and intelligence.

■ Elephants by Daphne Sheldrick can be purchased online from Care for the Wild, www.careforthewild.com

■ Daphne Sheldrick's orphanage in Nairobi National Park currently has six elephant orphans and can be visited daily between 11am and noon. For more information, visit www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org, where you can also find out about making a donation or fostering an elephant, as well as reading the keepers' diary, a daily chronicle on the progress of the orphans.



Milestones

- 1977: Established the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.
- 1989: Received an MBE.
- 1992: Elevated to UNEP's Global 500 Roll of Honour.
- 2000: Awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery by Glasgow University.
- 2001: Received the Moran of the Burning Spear from the Kenya Government.