

EARTH DAY 50: The Elephant and Me

by Bobby Myers

The dreams of my heart saw elephants painted into the portrait of Africa's watercolor sunset. As the elephants readied for sleep, they assumed a deeper shade of grey. Tiny trumpets and gentle rumbles emerged, as part of the Amboseli rhythm. The flickering stars played with their silhouettes as night fell and the rhythm danced into my soul.

The elephant has always held a special place in my mind and heart. As a child, I adored "Dumbo." I've never forgotten "Pink Elephants on Parade" or "Babar, the King of Celesteville." I used to plow through any tall grass like "Colonel Hathi" and my favorite short story is "The Elephant's Child" by Rudyard Kipling. I found laughter and joy with "Tantar" and "Horton" and felt the spook of *The Elephant Graveyard*.

In my own writings, I created "Piph," the elephant of white – and "Fluff," who's part of a fireside miracle. In my art, a signature style exists. In my mind's a dream to witness the vision of my heart in life. The elephant – one of Earth's most captivating and majestic creations is tragically one of our greatest crimes against nature. Beyond my most peaceful dream is a nightmare in waiting.

In 1977 there were 1.3 million elephants in Africa (PBS Nature, 1997). Today, elephant populations have plummeted seventy (70) percent to an estimated 415,000 (World Wild Fund for Nature, 2020). On average, an elephant is killed every 15-26 minutes.

On November 19, 2019, an article in *Newsweek* warned, "In fact, 20,000 elephants are killed every year...the African elephant will disappear within two decades if urgent action is not taken to save one of the world's most iconic species." (Georgiou, 2019)

Ivory lust and poaching, cruelty, human-animal conflict, and habitat destruction are inextricably woven with the tragedy of disappearing elephants. The ivory trade is driven by industrialized economic powers, namely China and the United States. In recent years, both countries have taken steps to conserve elephants through legislation that criminalized interstate ivory trade and imports (the United States lifted the ban on ivory imports from Zimbabwe and Zambia in 2017 under President Trump).

When an elephant is poached, they've either been shot with bullets or poison arrows, or they've been tangled in wire snares. The arrows' poison enters the bloodstream, disrupts the heart, and leaves behind a necrotic wound. A snare will fatally entangle and severely gash a leg, trunk, or neck. Often, before death, their faces are hacked off and tusks are stolen. Their families are decimated or at the very least, severely impacted. The young are orphaned, if they're not killed. Subsequently, they're likely to die.

This is the tragedy possible for all of Africa (and Asia's) elephants, without mentioning the capture of elephants for zoological parks or circuses at the turn of the 20th Century. In Asia, elephants are a component of tourism by being broken by their Mahouts and ridden for the pleasure of tourists. The accounts of elephant calves in isolation for obedience are plentiful (see: *Love & Bananas An Elephant Story* (2018) featuring Lek Chailert).

Population growth in Africa and Asia increase the likelihood of human-animal conflict on farms, for crops – elephants are rarely victorious or escape. The necessity of land for farming consumes water resources and directly impacts habitat destruction – and the extreme poverty found around these regions play vital roles in a lucrative ivory trade.

I can't imagine a world without elephants – a world where the dreams of hearts like mine would never have the opportunity to realize the vision of a herd at dusk. The importance and necessity of elephants extend far beyond my dreams, however.

Elephants are a keystone species, a concept introduced in 1969 by zoologist Robert T. Paine. Per his definition, these are species which have a disproportionately large impact on their habitats. Species like the honey bee, or apex predators like wolves. According to the research and conservation organization *Save the Elephants*, the vital role of elephants is as follows:

“During the dry season, elephants use their tusks to dig for water. This not only allows the elephant to survive in dry environments and when droughts strike, but also provides water for other animals that share harsh habitats.

When forest elephants eat, they create gaps in the vegetation. These gaps allow new plants to grow and create pathways for other smaller animals to use. They are also one of the major ways in which trees disperse their seeds; some species rely entirely upon elephants for seed dispersal.

On the savannahs, elephants feeding on tree sprouts and shrubs help to keep the plains open and able to support the plains game that inhabit these ecosystems.” (Save the Elephants, 2020)

The circle of life created by elephants is extremely important. Elephants have been observed transporting seeds for dispersal as far as 57 km (or 35 miles). Dung beetles, for example, feed on and store elephant dung as a food resource for their larvae – and honey badgers eat dung beetles (among other insects, small mammals, birds, and reptiles). Elephants, in essence and practicality, help shape habitats and encourage biodiversity. Lions, leopards, pythons, spotted hyenas, and Nile crocodiles have been known to feed on badgers and other species benefitting from the presence of elephants.

To this end, the great threat facing elephants in Africa is climate change. As recently as October-November 2019, elephants were being observed dying in masses as the result of extreme drought. The Weather Channel detailed this by writing, “Some 200 elephants have died in Zimbabwe because of the extreme drought enveloping large swaths of the African continent...the problem is compounded by the fact that elephants and other animals are straying from their usual territory in search of food.” (Childs, 2019)

The story of elephants dying from droughts and food shortages was covered far and wide, by *The Washington Post*, *BBC*, *NASA*, *CBS News*, and more. Per ABC News, Zimbabwe's Parks and Wildlife Management Authority issued permits to translocate more than 600 elephants from their game reserve to other national parks. But while this is a commendable action, drought and food shortages are part of the global crisis of climate change.

As Earth Day celebrates its 50th Anniversary, it's now more important than ever to see the state of our world – and threats being faced by the cohabitants of our planet. I've shared with you the importance of elephants to their ecosystems. I've touched on the gruesome nightmare of poaching – and other human-driven threats (climate change, poverty, habitat destruction) facing elephants in the wild. I've shared what elephants mean to me – and many others.

Elephants live in our hearts and minds – in our stories and art. Many of our most beloved characters have endured and overcome the tragedy of cruelty. In *Dumbo* (1941), “Mrs. Jumbo” is beaten and locked away for defending her baby. The “Baby Mine” song and scene is heartfelt and tragic. “Babar, the King of Elephants” only becomes king in Celesteville after escaping a poaching incident that claimed his mother as a child. The novel and film *Water for Elephants* details the cruelty of mankind – the slavery of the circus – but also the compassion of people who love them.

Compassion takes many forms and has been detailed in the works of people like Dame Daphne Sheldrick (1934-2018), who co-founded the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya alongside her husband David Sheldrick (1919-1977). The Trust has raised and reintroduced more than 200 orphans into the wild – and they've attended to nearly 7,000 veterinary cases (ex. Treating poison dart/arrow wounds on elephants).

“They, who have suffered so much at the hands of humans, never lose the ability to forgive, even though being elephants, they will never be able to forget.” – Dame Daphne Sheldrick (Sheldrick, 2012)

People like Lek Chailert are on the frontlines of movements to retire elephants from confinement and solitude – from the slavery of tourism and elephant riding. Chailert co-founded the Elephant Nature Park, a sanctuary rescue center for elephants in Thailand. The Elephant Nature Park inspired four offshoot parks and has worked with the Save the Elephant foundation for coordination.

Those of us who dream of Elephants owe a great deal to the thousands of park rangers and people who've risked their lives to protect elephants – people like Wayne Lotter (1965-2017). Lotter co-founded the Practical Area Management System (PAMS) Foundation in 2009 with the mission to “empower those who protect wildlife in wild places.” The PAMS Foundation has protected 42,000 elephants and 7,000 giraffes. The effort has educated 4,200 children and confiscated 1,153 firearms. Their work was instrumental in the arrest of major ivory trafficker Yang Feng Glan (“The Ivory Queen”) and many other notorious poachers.

Lotter, like many others on the frontlines of the war against the ivory trade and animal conservation, faced death threats. Lotter was assassinated at the age of 51 on August 16, 2017 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The work that remains to safeguard elephants against their predicted extinction by 2040 is monumental. We must do our part now – and we must act often. We may make simple, essential contributions like raising awareness or educating our youths on the importance of elephants. May we inspire their minds with incredible facts and exposure to stories that capture their hearts and imaginations. We must support the efforts of organizations like the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust or Elephant Nature Park. The work of the PAMS Foundation and likeminded organizations is critical. They need our help. We must also do

what we can, when we can to combat and solve the climate crisis responsible for droughts and extreme poverty, that in part drives the ivory trade.

Our commitment to elephants must be diverse and far-reaching. The photos of poached elephants are horrifying – and in our age may be labeled “sensitive content.” It’s imperative that *you see* and *react* to life as it is presently. Share the atrocity – put more eyes on cruelty and inspire the voices of compassion that will rise to meet the challenge and create solutions.

If we fail together, elephants will be distant memories we share only in stories – in art – in movies – in books – in photographs and articles of what once was. If we fail together, a piece of hope dies – and the dreams that “saw elephants painted into the portrait of Africa’s watercolor sunset” will be forever but a dream.

Select Narrative Filmography

Dumbo (1941)
Water for Elephants (2011)
Babar: The Movie (1989)
Babar (1989-2002)
Babar: King of the Elephants (1999)
Dumbo (2019)

Select Documentary Filmography

Elephant (2020)
In the Footsteps of Elephant (2020)
The Elephant Queen (2019)
Love & Bananas: An Elephant Story (2018)
The Ivory Game (2016)
Battle for the Elephants (2013)
Born to be Wild (2011)

Select Reading

Love, Life, and Elephants: An African Love Story
by Dame Daphne Shledrick, © 2012

“Blood Ivory”
by Bryan Christy for *National Geographic*, October 2012

“The Elephant’s Child”
by Rudyard Kipling, © 1900

The Story of Babar: The Little Elephant
by Jean de Brunhoff, © 1931

Water for Elephants
by Sara Gruen, © 2006

Horton Hears a Who
by Dr. Seuss, © 1954

Works Cited

- Childs, J. W. (2019, November 12). *More Than 200 Elephants Die in African Drought*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from The Weather Channel: www.weather.com/science/nature/news/2019-11-12-elephants-die-in-african-drought
- Georgiou, A. (2019, November 19). *Tech & Science*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from Newsweek: www.newsweek.com/wwf-african-elephants-extinct-2040-1472697
- Knapman, J. (n.d.). *Dust and Sun in Madikwe*. Africa Geographic, Madikwe, South Africa. - WATERMARK
- PBS Nature. (1997, November 16). *Elephants of Africa | The Poaching Problem*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from Public Broadcasting Service (PBS): www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/elephants-africa-poaching-problem/11367/
- Save the Elephants. (2020). *Why are Elephants Important?* Retrieved April 22, 2020, from Save the Elephants: www.savetheelephants.org/about-elephants-2-3-2/importance-of-elephants/
- Sheldrick, D. D. (2012). *Love, Life, and Elephants: An African Love Story*. New York: Picador.
- World Wild Fund for Nature. (2020, April 22). *African Elephant*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from World Wildlife: www.worldwildlife.org/species/african-elephant

