

CYNTHIA of the elephants

In 1967, a young theatre reporter took an extended trip to East Africa, and her life changed forever. The following year she had relocated to the continent and in 1972 established what would become the longest-running study on elephants in the world. The books and films she has written and produced have deepened our understanding of the planet's largest land mammal, and for many people in conservation circles Cynthia Moss has become synonymous with the elephants of Amboseli National Park. **Fransje van Riel** caught up with her recently.

TEXT BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL

There is something very special about having breakfast in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. Sipping a pre-dawn coffee on the deck of Tawi Lodge, I contemplate the looming snow-capped giant dominating the acacia-dotted woodlands of Amboseli National Park and its 1 500-strong population of elephants. It is mid-March. The first early showers have begun to sprinkle the sanctuary's parched soil and small patches of greenery are already starting to sprout.

I had had my first sight of a massive herd of elephants the previous evening at dusk as we were winding through the conservancy [NAME?] at the end of an afternoon game drive. Against a dramatic canvas of dark, brooding rain clouds, they were a magnificent sight. Little ones were stumbling over their feet to keep up with mothers and aunts as Ron Guijs, Tawi's general manager, braked and switched off the engine to allow us to observe them trample across the landscape.

It is these very elephants, as well as many others, that Cynthia Moss has been studying so closely for an incredible 40 years. Born in Ossining, New York, in 1940, Cynthia had been working as a journalist for *Newsweek* magazine when she happened to meet elephant researcher Iain Douglas-Hamilton during a visit to Lake

Manyara National Park in Tanzania in 1967. Inspired, she resigned her job a year later in order to join him – and has never looked back.

She founded the Amboseli Elephant Research Project in 1972, and over the course of four decades she and her colleagues have identified as many as 50 different family herds. In the process, Cynthia herself has become synonymous with the park's elephants which, as current director of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants (ATE), she continues to labour tirelessly to protect. I asked her some questions about her enthralling and important work.

Fransje van Riel Elephants are a subject of much controversy in Africa and around the world. According to some estimates, 35 000 elephants were killed last year alone. Of these, 360 deaths were reported in Kenya, with 150 elephants slaughtered in the Mara ecosystem. Reports from people on the ground suggest that this number is much higher – somewhere between 2 500 and 3 000. Which is true?

Cynthia Moss 360 is the official figure. It's not that anyone is trying to hide the actual figure, it is simply that the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) has to remain consistent in the way it collects mortality data. The carcass has to be present and it

has to be determined that the death was caused by man and that the goal was poaching. If an elephant is poached and the carcass is never found then it cannot be recorded. There are also other causes of death: natural mortality (accidents, illness, old age); elephants killed due to human–elephant conflict; and those killed by KWS as part of problem animal control. However, the toll from the death of an elephant is underestimated, especially if the animal is an adult female. Her calves will die too, but their carcasses are unlikely to be found. If she is a matriarch, the loss of her leadership may result in further deaths, especially of other calves in the family.

FvR: Is the poaching situation worse today than it was before or are we just talking about it more via global, social-media communications?

CM: The rate of killing is not nearly what it was in the 1970s and '80s. In 1973 estimates of elephant numbers in Kenya ranged from 153 000 to 167 000. By 1989 only 16 000 to 19 000 remained. After the CITES ban that same year, the population grew, reaching 37 000 at the onset of the present resurgence of poaching.

FvR: We have read about a recent baby boom, with 215 elephant calves born ▶



DENIS-HUGO/NPL/DIFFUSION



FRANSJE VAN RIEL

since 2011. Do you think it could be nature's way of compensating for the decline of elephant numbers due to encroachment and poaching?

CM: No, there's no such thing as nature's way. Each individual is trying to maximise his or her reproductive potential in their lifetime. What happened was that most of the females who had small calves lost them during the 2009 drought. The other

females stopped reproductive activity because they were in such poor condition. When the drought ended, most of the females in the population were available to conceive and once they had put on some weight, that is what happened. The result was 246 calves born in an 18-month period from October 2011 to March 2013.

FvR: How do you feel about lifting the ban on trade in ivory?

CM: It is a very bad idea, for many reasons – a good one is that there are not enough elephants left in the world to supply the demand for ivory. One factory owner in China privately acknowledged that the 330 pounds [136 kilograms] of legal ivory he acquires annually lasts just one month. The rest, he said, is bought on the black market. His is just one factory out of dozens. I don't believe that a legal ivory market can be controlled. There are those who argue that a regulated ivory trade would stop the illegal trade, but when you look at the numbers they simply don't add up.

FvR: Are the Amboseli elephants safer than other populations because of the presence of the ATE and the importance of your scientific work here?

CM: They are safer here because we [have our] eyes and ears on the ground constantly. In the 15-year period between 1974 and

1989, when Kenya lost 85 to 90 per cent of its elephants, the Amboseli population grew by 25 per cent. We did not carry guns, we did not have any anti-poaching teams; we were simply there, watching.

FvR: Many of us know that elephants are particularly sensitive and are capable of deep emotions and long memories. Have you seen evidence of elephants reacting to encroaching human presence, poaching activities and other human intrusions?

CM: Of course, elephants react to all of these things. They adjust their behaviour and movements accordingly. If people move into their range, they find a way around the settlement; if poachers are operating in an area, they avoid it. In the 1980s the elephants concentrated in the park where they were safe. In the early '90s, after the ban, they gradually began moving back into their former range.

FvR: How has Amboseli, its infrastructure and the elephants changed – if at all – since the first time you were here?

CM: When I first starting working in Amboseli in 1972 it was a game reserve. It was gazetted as a park in 1974, which brought about many changes in the running of the protected area. There were 600 to 700 elephants in 1972. There are close to 1500 today.

FvR: What do you most admire about elephants?

CM: I most admire how they are with each other – cooperative rather than competitive. Of course, there is competition, but the overwhelming traits one sees in a family of elephants are affiliation and caring for one another.

FvR: Why are the elephants in Amboseli so special to you?

CM: I'm sure that any elephant population would be special as soon as you got to know the animals individually. That really changes everything. Your knowledge about them becomes multi-dimensional. Watching elephants is wonderful (in the true sense of that word) for anyone, but when you know the individuals and have followed their lives for many years, it's very different. On any day out with a family, you remember shared from experiences in the past, things that have happened to them – births, deaths, a particular bit of fascinating behaviour – and then the whole experience is amazingly rich.



AMBOSELI TRUST FOR ELEPHANTS

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FvR: Echo was particularly important to you – how do you relate to her after all these years?

CM: Echo died of natural causes during the drought of 2009. I still miss her but her family, the EBs, are doing well and I spend time with them. I feel very close to this family because I have spent 20-plus years helping to make films and writing books about them.

FvR: Do the Amboseli elephants have a special relationship with you that they don't share with anyone else?

CM: The elephants appear to recognise our research vehicles and are very relaxed around them. They also recognise our voices and our smell. Some-times when we take strangers out in the field the elephants react by raising their trunks and smelling, and sometimes moving away.

FvR: Have you ever wanted to study elephants in a different area?

CM: I have shared so much history with the Amboseli elephants that I can't imagine moving on to another population. ▶



BERNARD CASTEILEIN/NPL/DIFFUSION

FvR: As director of the ATE, what are your most urgent needs and highest priorities? Have these changed over the years?

CM: The most urgent need for the Amboseli elephants and thus the trust is to secure land. The park is safeguarded, but it covers less than 10 per cent of the total ecosystem over which the elephants roam. We have a good chance of securing the majority of this ecosystem through conservancies and the leasing of land for corridors.

This focus is very different from the one we had during first 20 or so years of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, when we concentrated on the ecology and behaviour of elephants. Although we continue to carry out studies in elephant behavioural ecology, we are also committed to working with the local people on the conservation of the whole Amboseli ecosystem. We also spend a great deal of time on the issue of illegal ivory trade.

FvR: How would you propose Kenya goes forward to protect its elephants?

CM: Kenya can go forward on several fronts: 1) increase all anti-poaching activities throughout the country; 2) change the penalties for poaching and illegal trade so that they are true deterrents; 3) assure that the ports and airports are not transshipping ivory; 4) and try diplomatically to encourage China to close down its ivory markets.

FvR: Conservancies are popping up all over the place, adding sizeable and important land to protected areas and providing corridors for movement. Are there any specific areas you would like to see join existing

conservancies, and do you think there is any hope for the sustainable co-existence between Kenya's elephants and people?

CM: We have a good network of conservancies in the Amboseli ecosystem, but I would like to see more, including some across the border in Tanzania. I do feel there is still hope for elephants to live in Kenya, particularly in a place like Amboseli where they share their range with the Maasai people.

FvR: Do you feel that people really get what you are trying to achieve and do they understand your passion for elephants?

CM: I think people understand my passion, but I also think that some have a romanticised view of what I do. They think I'm out communing with the elephants when really so much of my time involves sitting at my computer writing proposals and reports, networking with other conservationists, advocating for elephant welfare and conservation, and simply answering e-mails. Of course, I would rather be out with the elephants, but as director of an organisation that's often not possible.

FvR: What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

CM: I believe the greatest achievement of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project is our scientific results that reveal the intelligence and social complexity of elephants. People view them in a different way because of our publications and films.

When I first started, no-one considered the ethics of how we treat elephants and other wildlife. Knowing what we do now, it is very hard for most people to think of elephants as just walking meat or ivory,

simply to be used for human benefit. Elephants are sentient beings with emotions. Few would deny that now.

FvR: If there were one thing you could teach the world about elephants, what would it be?

CM: The world would be a much poorer place, both spiritually and ecologically, without elephants. Spiritually, they bring us joy and wonder. Ecologically, their removal would be a disaster for both the savannas and the forests. Elephants are the architects of the savanna and the gardeners of the forest. The former would turn to unproductive bush; the latter would become totally impoverished without elephants to eat the seeds of the big tree species, transport those seeds and provide the dung piles in which seedlings can grow.

FvR: It has been more than 40 years since you began your studies. How do you view things after all this time?

CM: One could become cynical and depressed and give up hope with all that has happened over the years, but I haven't. I have simply become more committed to the Amboseli elephants, to making sure they have a future. I won't stop fighting for and working towards that for the rest of my life.

Fransje van Riel flew courtesy of Air Kenya (www.airkenya.com) and was hosted by Tawi Lodge. For more information visit www.tawilodge.com or e-mail info@tawilodge.com. Find out more about the Amboseli Trust for Elephants and Cynthia Moss at www.elephanttrust.org