

## THE CAVE ELEPHANTS OF MOUNT ELGON

Brandon Brooksbank

In 1936 my father bought 500 acres of African bush on the slopes of Mt. Elgon, about 5km up the mountain from Endebess. He slowly cleared the bush and developed it into a farm. He told me that one night a leopard killed his whole flock of sheep, about 40 of them. So he hunted down and shot the leopard and the skin adorned the back of our lounge room sofa for many years. He also told me that a black rhino was shot near our farm and I remember that, in my lifetime, the last lion was shot on Mt. Elgon in the late 1940s. There are no longer any lion or rhino left on Mt. Elgon and, like it or not, these animals that had existed up there for thousands of years were all killed by white men, either for 'sport' or in order to allow for safe farming of the land. It is a common story of the early days of European occupation of Kenya and those of us who were born there all benefitted from it.

The good news is that there are still a few of the large iconic African animals left on Mt. Elgon. Numbers are difficult to verify but it is believed that between 200 to 300 elephants and a larger number of buffalo remain. Leopards still exist in the forest. It is estimated that the elephant population was once 5 to 10 times larger across both sides of the mountain in Kenya and Uganda but the entire population of elephants on the Ugandan side of the mountain was wiped out in the period of Idi Amin's rule. In the 1980's, the Kenyan elephant population came under heavy poaching pressure but this, fortunately, abated and no elephants are known to have been killed on the Kenyan side until 2013 when, it is believed, up to 7 died. Since then the elephant deaths have continued due to more poaching and also because of human encroachment arising from recent changes in national Kenya Government policies that on Elgon are unfortunately driving human – elephant conflict.

The Mt. Elgon elephants are unique in that they are the only 'mining' elephants in the world. In order to compensate for the lack of salt in their natural diet they have learned to penetrate deep into the mountain caves and dig salt out of the cave walls and floors with their tusks. They usually go in at night and can penetrate up to 150m from the entrance. How they navigate their way in and out in total darkness is still a mystery. This activity has now recently been recorded in many caves, all unknown to western science, in a large remote area of Forest Reserve to the west of Mt. Elgon National Park.

It is now realised that a full scientific study is needed into an elephant culture that is more complex than previously realised and that has been only partially described. This may be of great importance, not just for the conservation of Elgon's elephants, but also for efforts to conserve the species across its range.

A team has been formed to scientifically investigate Elgon's elephants and to establish a conservation programme to ensure their survival. The Programme Director is Dr Zeke Davidson who is a senior wildlife conservationist with a doctorate from The University of Oxford. He supervises a team on the ground and is supported by three key friends of Mt. Elgon: (a) Dr Emmanuel Ndiema, Senior Research Scientist and Head of Archaeology at the National Museums of Kenya who grew up on Mt. Elgon and whose ancestors lived in the caves; (b) Charles Kerfoot, who is ex Kitale School, lived for many years near the key elephant range area and knows it and its people intimately; and (c) Christopher Powles who began documenting the caves in the Forest Reserve in January 2017, is the grandson of Buster Powles (the founder of Mt. Elgon National Park), and whose uncle, Peter Powles, sponsors archaeological work being undertaken in Elgon caves.

The immediate problem is the escalating rate of killing of the few remaining elephants by poachers and local farmers. The elephants are not confined to Mt. Elgon National Park and wander into the adjoining Forest Reserve where poachers from Uganda and local areas target them. They also clash with (illegal) 'slash and burn' farmers and others now allowed to graze cattle in the forest or plant crops in felled areas of commercial plantation (under the "Shamba" or "PELIS" system). Charles

Kerfoot and Christopher Powles have been financing Zeke Davidson and three scouts since May 2017 to start to build up detailed knowledge of the key area, to devise a long term conservation plan and to begin to gather scientific results. This has included placing camera traps in caves in the Forest Reserve which are starting to give an insight into the extent and frequency of the elephants' cave mining behaviour.

A conservation plan has now been prepared and the 'Mountain Elgon Elephant Project' (MEEP) has been formed. Zeke, Emmanuel, Charles and Chris have gained support for MEEP of an impressive group of institutions: (a) **Kenya Wildlife Service** (with responsibility for elephant protection), (b) **Kenya Forest Service** (the land owner), (c) **National Museums of Kenya** (the lead for a wider Elgon initiative, including the archaeological research), (d) **East African Wild Life Society** (the project co-manager with responsibility for funds and wider value add), and (e) **The Elephant Crisis Fund** (a lead donor which is an initiative launched by Save the Elephants and the Wildlife Conservation Network, in partnership with the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation).

To date, the Elephant Crisis Fund has donated \$37,000 and the Powles family \$20,000. Another \$30,000 is needed for year 1 to give the team time to raise more money from other institutions. So this is a plea to those who care about the legacy we leave our children to help in this last ditch effort to save the remaining elephants in the area where we grew up and love. The team has set up an account for a 'crowd funding' initiative and I would encourage all of us to give what we can to help. None of the money will be spent on 'expenses', 'administration', travel etc. It will all go to activity on the mountain and Charles has undertaken to report annually on progress, how much has been collected and where every dollar has been spent.

If you wish to get more information, Charles has a detailed Powerpoint presentation which he will be happy to send to you. You can communicate with Charles directly on email: [charleskerfoot47@gmail.com](mailto:charleskerfoot47@gmail.com) or by phone on +(61)(0)428 228849

The Bank Account details are below. This is a separate account, solely set up for donations to MEEP, and it will be administered by the East African Wildlife Society.

Account Name:	EAST AFRICAN WILD LIFE SOCIETY	
Bank:	NIC BANK KENYA LTD.	
Branch:	JUNCTION	
Account Numbers:	US Dollar:	1000022318
	Kenya Shilling:	1000020733
SWIFT CODE:	NINCKENA	
Bank/Branch Code:	41106	
Bank Address:	The Junction Mall, Ngong Road, Nairobi P.O. Box 44599 Nairobi, Kenya	
	Postal Code: 00100	