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Cynthia Moss

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News from the Amboseli Elephants

NEW EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Greetings!

I am excited and pleased to announce that we are launching an e-newsletter today. Although I send out a long letter at the end of each year and we do have an interactive website, I still feel out of touch with some friends and supporters of the project for the rest of the year. With an e-newsletter I will be able to send news and updates at least once a month directly to your e-mail address so that you won't miss any important developments.. There is certainly no lack of news about the Amboseli elephants. Watching elephants is often like a soap opera. ATE activities and research results are also newsworthy. I think a newsletter is an excellent way to get this information to all of you.

This first newsletter is an experiment so forgive it's clumsiness. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated. If you have friends whom you think would enjoy receiving news from Amboseli please add them to our mailing list.

Cynthia Moss
Director
Amboseli Trust for Elephants

The Drought of 2009



Dry Amboseli

Last year Amboseli -- elephants and other wildlife, people and livestock -- underwent the worst drought in living memory, the culmination of three years of poor rainfall. By the start of the dry season of the third year, September 2009, animals began to die in large numbers. Soon there were carcasses everywhere strewn over the dry, barren ground. It was truly a horrific sight, hard on everyone who had to witness it.

In December rains finally came to areas outside the Park and then in the Park in January. Good rains continued to fall for the next few months. Vegetation was soon growing and the landscape was transformed.

In early March the Kenya Wildlife Service together with the Tanzanian wildlife authorities and NGOs including the Amboseli Trust for Elephants, conducted a total aerial count of the greater Amboseli ecosystem. The results revealed that 83% of the wildebeests, 71% of the zebras, and 61% of the buffaloes perished. Over the whole ecosystem 60% of the cattle died and in the areas around Amboseli the loss was as high as 80%.

The elephants were not spared. We are still collecting data on the mortalities as the families and bulls are sighted in the Park and can be censused. So far we know that close to 300 elephants (almost 20% of the population) died. Most tragically this number included at least 60 adult females, many of them matriarchs, a devastating loss because they were the leaders and repositories of knowledge for their families.

These old females were individuals we had known since the early 70s and losing them felt like losing old friends. As painful as it has been we need to continue the research. We must watch carefully to see how each family reacts to its losses. Who will become the new matriarch? Will the others follow her lead or will sub-groups splinter off? Will some families with few remaining members join up with other families? Will orphans find a place within their family or move on their own? How quickly will females recover and start breeding again? The data we will collect over the next year is vital for our understanding of the social dynamics and reproduction

recovery among elephants. For these reasons it is important that the families and independent bulls be monitored more intensively than ever.

We need funds for monitoring and are asking for your help for the following:

- One vehicle dedicated exclusively to monitoring at least six days a week
 - One year = \$9,000
 - One month = \$750
 - One day = \$30
- One highly experienced researcher out at least six days a week carrying out special censuses and recording grouping patterns and social and sexual behavior
 - One year = \$12,000
 - One month = \$1,000
 - One day = \$40

Let's hope this is a once-in-100-years' opportunity to witness this kind of social disruption in an elephant population. We don't want the elephants ever to undergo a drought like this one again, but at the same time we must learn as much from it as we can. We need your help to do this.

The Upsurge in Poaching and Illegal Ivory Trade

On top of the drought, poaching of elephants for their ivory started up again after nearly 20 years of peace for Kenya's elephants. After the ban in international ivory trade was implemented in January 1990, poaching all but stopped in Kenya and elephant numbers slowly began to rise.



Amboseli's Magnificent Bulls are in Danger

Then in 2008 a few months after China was allowed to buy ivory stockpiles from some of the southern African countries that had had their bans lifted, we began to get disturbing reports of people requesting to purchase ivory. We believe that the stockpile sales started a demand in China. With many Chinese companies working in Kenya we heard that ivory was being bought by the Chinese workers. At the same time the interceptions of shipments of tons of illegal ivory were reported in Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. At the international airport in Nairobi several shipments of ivory were stopped with the aid of sniffer dogs. Most of this ivory appeared to come from outside the country.

In 2008 we recorded nine definite cases of tusks being removed from elephants who may have been poached or died of other causes. This was the first time ivory had been stolen from carcasses in Amboseli for many years. In the first months of 2009 there began to be definite cases of poaching in the Amboseli ecosystem and in nearby Tsavo. Additional reports of poaching were coming in from other parts of Kenya. The official poaching figures for Kenya from the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) revealed that 47 elephants were poached in 2007; 145 in 2008; and 204 in 2009. This increase was very disturbing for all of us concerned with elephant conservation. No one wanted a repeat of the horrific time in the 1970s and 1980s when Kenya lost 85% of her elephants.

KWS is working hard at both the ground level and through regional and international forums to try to stem the poaching. In Amboseli we are doing what we can, but we desperately need more support to stop the local trade in ivory before it gets deep into the economy. Amboseli National Park is only 150 square miles; the ecosystem over which the elephants roam is 5000 square miles. On any given day, of the 1200 elephants making up the population only about 300 might be in the Park itself. Therefore, it is necessary to secure the whole Amboseli ecosystem, not just the Park. For the moment the Maasai are on our side, but if there are people out there asking for tusks and paying huge amounts for them, then we could lose the battle.

There is no doubt that it is the attitude of the local people that really makes all the difference. What exists now on the community level is a force of about 90 Maasai anti-poaching scouts in the areas surrounding Amboseli. They form the Amboseli-Tsavo Game Scouts Association (ATGSA), but they are miserably under-funded. Two months ago two strategic scouts' camps had to be closed down for lack of money for salaries and rations. These two camps are south of Amboseli National Park on the border with Tanzania. With this international border so close it is easy for poachers to come across, kill one of the Amboseli elephants, and go back into Tanzania where there are networks of buyers and smugglers

We can prevent poaching in the Amboseli area. It happened during the intensive poaching years in 1970s and 1980s. The only place in all of Kenya where the elephant population grew was Amboseli. It was partly because we researchers were there on the ground and partly because the Maasai were not killing elephants themselves and did not allow poaching on their land. Good relations with the Maasai are key and our community outreach program--providing jobs, incentives and education--is essential.

There are two ways in which you can help protect the elephants:

1) We need to support the ATGSA anti-poaching scouts. In particular we want to get the two camps on the border set up and running again. The cost of running two camps:

- One year = \$29,280
- One month = \$2,440
- One day = \$80



2) The Amboseli Trust for Elephants has 15 scouts of its own that function both as researchers and sources of information on poaching and other problems relating to elephants. They are the ambassadors for elephants out in the Maasai group ranches and are very important for engendering positive attitudes towards elephants and the research project. It has and continues to be a very successful part of our project. To supervise and support 15 research scouts costs:

- One year = \$18,120
- One month = \$1510
- One day = \$60

A donation in any amount will definitely help to keep our wonderful bulls and big females safe.

Recovery

In this first newsletter and subsequent ones, we promise we won't just send news of crises and disasters. There are good stories coming out of Amboseli as well. We are happy to report that the ecosystem got enough rain to turn everything green and productive once again. The elephants are definitely recovering physically, even if we don't yet know the long-term social and psychological effects of losing so many leaders.

Some females miraculously carried calves through the drought and gave birth in 2010. So far we have recorded 24 births. One of the females was Erica of the EB family. She is the orphaned daughter of Erin, who died as a result of spearing in 2003, leaving several calves. Erica, who is also Echo's granddaughter, was only five years old at the time, but the EB family is a very nurturing one, and she survived along with her younger brother E-Mail. In fact, Erica did well enough to reach sexual maturity and come into estrus when she was just 10 years old, which is young (the average is 12) and shows she got the nutrition and care she needed.



Erica at 4 years old with her mother Erin

Much to our surprise, given the dreadful conditions of 2009, Erica gave birth in March 2010, which meant she conceived in May 2008 and maintained the 22-month pregnancy right through the drought. The calf, a female, was small at birth but healthy and is now five months old. It is hard enough raising a first calf for a young mother, but much, much harder when that female's mother has died. Well done, Erica, you have done your mother and grandmother proud.

The good outcomes, such as Erica's success, are the stories that keep us going. I hope they are also the ones that interest you in elephants and the Amboseli project.

The elephants of Amboseli are a unique and valuable natural heritage for Kenya and the world. We are in a fight to keep them safe and we need your help. Please donate whatever you can and please forward this e-mail to friends (see link below to Forward email) so that they can sign up to receive future newsletters.

Cynthia Moss
Amboseli Trust for Elephants

The Amboseli Trust for Elephants aims to ensure the long-term conservation and welfare of Africa's elephants in the context of human needs and pressures through scientific research, training, community outreach, public awareness and advocacy.

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