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Cynthia asks...

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### Amboseli Book Summaries

Since 1972, the Amboseli Elephant Research Project (the 'research arm' of ATE) has been a wellspring of scientific knowledge on the African elephant, with more than 100 peer-reviewed papers, and recently a large scientific book, **The Amboseli Elephants: A Long-Term Perspective on a Long-Lived Mammal**.

We've come to realize that this major compendium of more than three decades of research, published last year by the University of Chicago Press, may not be the sort of book that graces every coffee table or shelf of Africana.

Yet we feel that we owe it to our supporters to share the information in a form more generally palatable than your average scientific publication, particularly one that is nearly 400 pages long with well over 1,000 references, hundreds of tables and graphs, and only five photographs (albeit gorgeous ones by [Martyn Colbeck](#)).

So, we've decided to serialize the book's contents and main conclusions over the following months. The brief précis will be highlighted here in our monthly Newsletter -- Chapter 1 this month -- and eventually a complete set archived on our website.

We hope the summaries will provide compelling information and perhaps a teaser for those who may wish to buy the tome to delve deeper into the substance of the life and times of the Amboseli elephants.

## News from the Amboseli Trust for Elephants

### January - February 2012

#### Greetings!

*It's a new year with new hopes and fears for elephants. The extraordinary baby boom in Amboseli gives us hope. Watching these tiny calves coming into the world and learning how to walk, how to use their trunks and finding out how much fun it is to play with other calves fills one with joy. None of us on the project ever tires of watching the newborns and delighting in their antics.*

*At the same time we fear for their future. Will they be able to live to 60+ years or will their lives be cut short by a poacher's bullet, a spear or a poisoned cabbage? In this issue we report on TRAFFIC's alarming figures for confiscations of illegal ivory. The demand for ivory is growing and is truly frightening.*

*Even if the ivory trade could be brought under control, there is the additional fear that elephant habitat will be gone in 10, 20, 30 years.*

*We at ATE think there is a future for elephants but we have to work extremely hard to secure it. We can't just give up and say we are up against immovable forces and there is nothing we can do about it. Public awareness about the magnificence of elephants and their crucial ecological role in savannahs and forests will help and it is one of our main goals to make sure people know what the Earth would lose if elephants were to go extinct.*

*Please help us to spread the word.*

*With thanks for your concern and support,*

Cynthia Moss

Director

Amboseli Trust for Elephants

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### Two Albino Calves

After nearly 40 years of documenting elephant births in Amboseli we recorded the first ever albino calf in December. That was amazing and rare enough but now we have a second albino calf. Both are males. The second one was first seen on 29 January. What's happening?

Albinism occurs when both parents contribute genetically recessive alleles (genes), although there are some extremely rare forms when only one parent is responsible. An albino offspring can be produced by two non-albinistic parents and obviously this is what has happened in Amboseli.

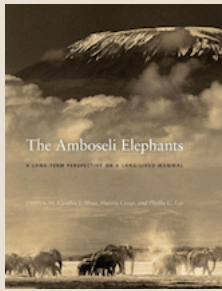
We suspect that one of Amboseli's bulls, who has only recently reached the age of being able to successfully mate with females, is carrying the genes for albinism. In the cases where he has impregnated a female who also has the genes there is the possibility of producing an albino calf.

If the male is very active we could expect even more pale calves, but we hope not. Although albino animals grow normally and are generally healthy, they are in danger of skin problems including cancer. Elephants protect their skin from sunburn by mudsplashing and dusting, creating a kind of sunblock. Let's hope that these calves learn to do that quickly. In the meantime, they are seeking shade under their mothers.

We know it is possible for albino elephants to survive in the wild, and these calves were both born to experienced mothers. It is very tempting to imagine what they will look like when they are fully grown. We hope that Amboseli may be home to two magnificent "white" bull elephants in the future.



*The first ever recorded albino calf in Amboseli with mother  
Jemima*



### Name a Baby Elephant



We can barely keep up with all the babies being born. As of yesterday we were up to 98 recorded in the last three months. Some days the researchers find as many as eight new babies.

It's going to be a monumental job trying to name all these calves. Usually we wait until they are four years old because by that age their chances of survival to adulthood are very high. This time we are going to have to ask for help in finding names.

ATE has a regular naming program which you can read about on our website by clicking [here](#). We usually charge \$2500 to name and follow the life of an elephant, but we had a special holiday offer of \$2000 that we will extend until the end of February.

Your donation will last a lifetime and does not have to be renewed. You will receive photos of your elephant and its mother, a history and current structure of the family, and periodic updates. This calf will have no other name and no other sponsor. It will be yours alone.

### ATE's Facebook Page

We are finding our ATE Facebook page to be an excellent way to keep everyone informed about the Amboseli elephants on almost a daily basis.

On the ATE page we post news items and photos and videos. Go to Facebook and find the Amboseli Trust for Elephants and then click on "Like". You will then receive our news items and photos on your home page.

We presently have 1600 "members" but we would like to have many more to spread the word about elephants.

### Public Awareness

View our videos on YouTube

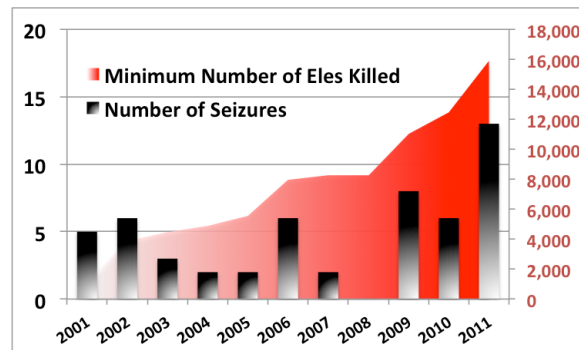
## 2011: A 'Horrible Year' for Elephants - Harvey Croze

Everyone by now has probably seen newclips summarizing the recent report from the IUCN TRAFFIC monitoring unit: *An 'Annus Horribilis' for African Elephants*, which for some odd reason, borrows a Latin epithet primarily from the Queen's 1992 Guildhall speech inspired by manifold family problems in the house of Windsor.

Back to elephants. TRAFFIC, drawing on the data gleaned by its ETIS (the Elephant Trade Information System), announced with refreshing candor for an intergovernmental organ, that '2011 has seen a record number of large ivory seizures globally, reflecting the sharp rise in illegal ivory trade underway since 2007.' The report (which can be read [here](#)) makes the point that the number of seizures of illegal ivory jumped from an average of around four a year since 2000 -- bad enough considering the volumes of ivory concerned -- to a record high of three times that last year.

The final 2011 tally of 13 seizures amounting to 26,676 kg (52,200 lb) represents the deaths of at the very least 3,400 elephants.

But the picture is much grimmer. As the graph shows, the cumulative number of elephants killed to fill out the TRAFFIC decadal table is not less than 15,000 elephants killed since 2000.



International ivory seizures 2001-11 (black) and estimate of minimum cumulative total of elephants killed for the ivory (red).  
Source: IUCN/TRAFFIC

And the real figure is probably several times that, since no one knows how many illegal shipments of ivory are NOT seized (a widely-held estimate: only 10% of illegal drug or endangered pet-trade shipments are intercepted, a factor that would suggest some 150,000 elephants could be killed over the decade).

Most illegal shipments, TRAFFIC acknowledged, end up either in Thailand or China, where the demand by the *nouveau-riche* is growing rapidly.

The premium price of illegal ivory is approaching the price of drugs, which, we have learned, are hugely difficult and expensive to control by police action alone.

The ONLY answer is to educate the billion-plus newly-moneyed consumers with the message that using ivory is supremely un-cool, and only elephants should wear ivory.

## The History of the MA Family

The MA family was first sighted and photographed on March 26, 1975. It appeared to be a small family, and therefore it should have been a simple group to work out, but it never was. There were six members present that first day including two adult females. It was not until six months later that I saw them again and got better photographs of them. Over the next six months and actually up until 1978 I struggled to figure out who belonged to the MA family.

The problem was that the MAs were closely bonded to the WAs led by the matriarch Wendy. These two families seemed to be constantly interchanging members. Eventually I decided that there were three adult females in the MA family and I named them Mariana, Mabel and Marcia. Mariana was definitely the matriarch, acting as the leader and defender of the group. I estimated that she was born in 1945. Mabel was the next oldest, but considerably younger than Mariana, and thought to be born around 1957; and Marcia was the youngest, just a teenager, born around 1960.

There have been several filmmakers in Amboseli in the last couple of month and more coming soon. They have all come to film the elephants.

ATE is encouraging and participating in these films whenever possible. We believe strongly that public awareness is crucial to the future of elephants. Way back in the late 1980s when aerial counts revealed that there was wholesale slaughter of Kenya's elephants, Joyce Poole and I, who were both concentrating on our scientific research until that revelation, made a vow to drop everything and focus on getting the message out of what was happening to elephants.

Joyce and I traveled to Washington DC and spoke to wildlife conservation organizations about the crisis. The only group that responded was the African Wildlife Foundation. With them we began a public awareness campaign with the slogan "Only Elephants Should Wear Ivory". It was an excellent and powerful program and it did make a difference.

Back in Kenya we agreed to see, talk to, and be filmed by every film crew and journalist who showed an interest. We worked with US, British, German, French, Japanese and many other journalists and filmmakers. It was exhausting but it paid off. In 1989 we attended the CITES conference and we along with many other NGOs lobbied for and succeeded in obtaining a ban on international trade in ivory.

Unfortunately, we are back to a point where we have to fight for elephants once again. Thus we are working with as many journalists and filmmakers as we can.

Soila has just been filmed by a company that hopes to make a series on poaching and the ivory trade. Next week she'll be working with a Japanese film crew. On February 21 Martyn Colbeck will be returning to film the mothers and calves for the BBC "Survival" series.



Mariana leading her family and the WA

In 1975 there was only one young calf in the family and this was a male belonging to Mariana. Just the tiny tips of his tusks were showing in November 1975, which indicated that he was about two years old and thus born in 1973.

There was also a juvenile male, 10-12 years old, who was thought to be Mariana's older son. He was given the number M118. Another slightly older male was sometimes with the family and sometimes not. It was difficult to say if he was definitely a member of the family. He was called M88.

To complicate matters further there were sometimes one or two other juveniles with the MAs. To this day I do not know if one of the young juvenile females was a true member who died before I knew her properly or a member of another family. One young female turned out to be Winnie of the WAs. Some of the other youngsters who associated with the MA family belonged to three other families that formed a bond group with the MAs.

I eventually discovered that the MAs were members of the largest bond group in the Amboseli population. Bond groups consist of families that appear to have a special relationship with one another. They spend more time with each other than with any other families in the population, and when they meet they greet with a particular ceremony, and when they are together they move together in a coordinated way. In total there were five families in this bond group: the MAs, WAs, VAs, LAs and CAs. The various members of these families were the source of my confusion over sorting out what originally seemed a small, neat family of six.

To read the whole history of the MA family go to the [the ATE Website](#).

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## Amboseli Book Chapter Summary: 1. The Amboseli Elephants, Introduction

Chapter 1, *The Amboseli Elephants: Introduction* (C. Moss, H. Croze & P. Lee), sets the scene historically and in substance. When Cynthia and Harvey each moved from their elephant work in Tanzania - with Iain Douglas-Hamilton in Lake Manyara National Park, and with the Serengeti Research Institute, respectively - they joined forces in 1972 to start a systematic study of the Amboseli population called the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, AERP.

There were fewer than 800 elephants back then. Thanks to the intolerance of Maasai inhabitants of the ecosystem to interlopers, the elephants had been relatively untouched by the poaching scourge of the 1970s. It appeared to be a perfect population for baseline studies on elephant social and reproductive behavior, and population dynamics. The chapter lays out the three main elephantine threads of the book: *longevity*, *size* and *intelligence*, with a fourth dimension - the *future* of the population in its ecosystem - looming in the background.

The threads define the special fabric of both AERP and the elephants themselves. Only a long-term project (which even so has only been working for just over half an elephant's potential lifespan), working with a population of known individuals, could capture the physical, developmental and social ebbs and flows of a large-brained, big-bodied, highly intelligent and communicative social animal. Imagine trying to capture the story of *The Sopranos* in just one episode. Impossible.

Thus the editors and chapter authors decided to present a three-decade slice - from 1972 to 2002 - of the life and times of the Amboseli elephants, the longest studied and best known population in the world. Much of the information presented in the book is new, or newly analyzed, to augment and build upon the 100-plus peer-reviewed papers that form the AERP canon of scientific literature.

The first chapter features a house-keeping box with definitions of terms used throughout the book. We eschew the bovine term 'herd', and refer instead to 'groups': *Cow-calf group*, *bull group*, *mixed group* and so on. Everyone must know by now that the smallest elephant group is a *family unit*, led by a *matriarch*. Adult females come into *estrus*, nutrition allowing, and males have more or less annual periods of *musth*, during which high testosterone levels move them to compete for female attention.

The book is laid out in five parts. **One** establishes the ecological, temporal and human context of the population in an ecosystem that is larger by twenty times than the protected central confines of Amboseli National Park. **Two** details how the elephants make a living in the Amboseli habitat and the impacts on their population dynamics and distribution. **Three** comprises an exploration of elephant behavior and communications, rounded out with intriguing perspectives on cognition. **Four** examines the complex nature of elephant society and the consequences for female and

male reproductive success. And **Five** looks at the trials and tribulations of elephants in Amboseli's fast-changing human context, finishing with a look to the future of the elephants and the ecosystem.

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*As I put the finishing touches on this issue of the newsletter word has come from Katito of two more new calves, bringing the number to 100 calves born since mid-October. We've never had anything like this happen before. In the previous baby boom it took more than a year to hit 100. And we're expecting even more calves!*

*More than anything we want to assure that there is a future for these new lives. We need your support.*

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.

