

# Elephant ambassador

**Kate Eckman sits down with Sharon Pincott, author of *The Elephants and I*, to hear her personal story of hope and heartbreak while trying to protect the Presidential Elephants of Zimbabwe.**



**Kate Eckman** is an American journalist who has interviewed hundreds of prominent newsmakers like Angelina Jolie and President Barack Obama. As a TV news anchor and reporter, she specialises in reporting on wildlife and the environment.

**S**haron Pincott may not have any biological children of her own, but she serves as a nurturing, loving and protective mother to more than 400 African elephants who are known as the 'Presidential Elephants of Zimbabwe'.

Although this large herd of wild elephants comprises more than 20 family groups, Pincott can recognise and name each individual.

"I allocated a letter of the alphabet to each elephant family, and then gave each elephant within that family a name beginning with that letter," she says.

"So there are, for example, the 'Ls' – and everyone in that family has a name beginning with 'L'. Just like people, elephants have their own individual

characteristics that make them who they are."

The nicks, rips and notches in the elephants' ears caused by ploughing through the bush, and the length and shape of their tusks make identification easy for Pincott. The magical part is that the elephants recognise and accept her too.

"The Presidential Elephants know my voice well," she remarks. "I'm always speaking and singing to them when they're close to my 4WD. When there were unethical sport-hunting problems here, I found that it was only my voice that was able to calm them."

But Pincott never allows herself to forget that these elephants are wild and could kill her with relative ease.

She adds: "Over the years, I've learned to read their moods, and I never push their level of tolerance. I also would never try to get out of my 4WD and walk amongst them. If a situation looks like it might become dangerous, I move off."

This elephant whisperer of sorts says she's developed a mutual trust with the elephants over many years of working together.

"Perhaps they now see me as just one of their own, an 'honorary elephant' so to speak."

Pincott's journey to Zimbabwe (and, in turn, to the elephants) began in 1993 during an impromptu visit to South Africa's Kruger National Park. That's when the then 31-year-old said she fell in love with her first elephant.

"It took my breath away," she recalls. "With that first encounter it was their sheer size, their majesty, their wise persona. But as I got to know more about their lives, it was their very human-like qualities – their intelligence, their close family bonds, the way they care for their young and for each other, their sense of humour and playfulness and their obvious love of life – that truly captured my affection."

Four years later, Pincott began spending much of her time in the African bush volunteering on various wildlife conservation projects. But it wasn't until the sudden death of a close friend (a warden in Hwange National Park who was killed while tracking rhino) at the turn of the new millennium that the Australian-born beauty decided to give up her cushy life as a high-flying information technology consultant and pursue the life of her dreams.

"I've realised that the high-powered job, the flashy house, the flashy car, the flashy holidays – all of which I once had – aren't what make me happy," she explains. "I've learned to fully understand and appreciate the calming effect that animals in wild places can have on your soul. And

I've grown to know that helping those who have no voice can be a very rewarding thing."

The Presidential Elephants are supposed to symbolise the country's

commitment to responsible wildlife management.

Robert Mugabe declared the clan protected in 1990, but according to Pincott, these elephants, who spend the majority of their time on the Hwange Estate – an unfenced area bordering Hwange National Park in the western part of the country – have been plagued by problems.

"Conservation land dedicated to photographic safari tourism all of a sudden became a playground for illegal sport-hunters and poachers. The fight for the end of this poor land management (and all of its associated repercussions) lasted for quite a few years," she remarks.

Now Pincott's focus is to encourage tourists from throughout the world to return to Zimbabwe. She said tourism dollars are crucial to the preservation of all Zimbabwe's wildlife, including the elephants.

She notes: "If tourists return to Zimbabwe and help illustrate how much more elephants are worth alive than dead, then the species has a fighting chance."

"Elephants need more people on their side," she says. "Many people dedicate their lives to helping other people, and that's quite obviously a very worthy thing. Far, far, fewer people dedicate their lives to helping wild animals – especially in countries like Zimbabwe, where day-to-day human life can be a struggle in itself. When you know in your heart that you're making just a tiny bit of difference to the lives of animals you've come to know (and love) so well, it becomes more and more difficult as the years pass to walk away. And, too, there's always hope to help sustain me; hope that everything around me will eventually come 100 per cent right." 🌿

★ Sharon's highly acclaimed book *The Elephants and I* is available from bookshops throughout South Africa, and online from [www.bookdepository.co.uk](http://www.bookdepository.co.uk), which offers free world-wide delivery.



**A helping hand**  
Royalties from the sale of Pincott's book *The Elephants and I* help fund her ongoing efforts to help save and protect the Presidential Elephants of Zimbabwe. Donations and/or sponsorships to support Pincott's voluntary work are always welcome. Visit [www.sharonpincott.com](http://www.sharonpincott.com) for more information.