

## MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

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OUR INTREPID CONTRIBUTOR ROY WATTS TRACKS DOWN SHARON PINCOTT, AUTHOR OF *THE ELEPHANTS AND I* AND *BATTLE FOR THE PRESIDENT'S ELEPHANTS* SO WE CAN SHARE IN THE AMAZING JOURNEY HER LIFE HAS TAKEN AND

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# HOW IT HAS MADE SUCH A DIFFERENCE TO SO MANY HERDS OF GREYS

Why would a high-flying executive sell her home in Brisbane along with her fashionable sports car, and all the trappings of success in exchange for a life in the wilds of Zimbabwe? Probably for the same reasons that Lawrence Anthony (aka The Elephant Whisperer) went bouncing through the war zones at the height of the Iraq War in a hired Toyota, to save the Baghdad Zoo. Both are possessed by an all-consuming passion for animals that became their life force.



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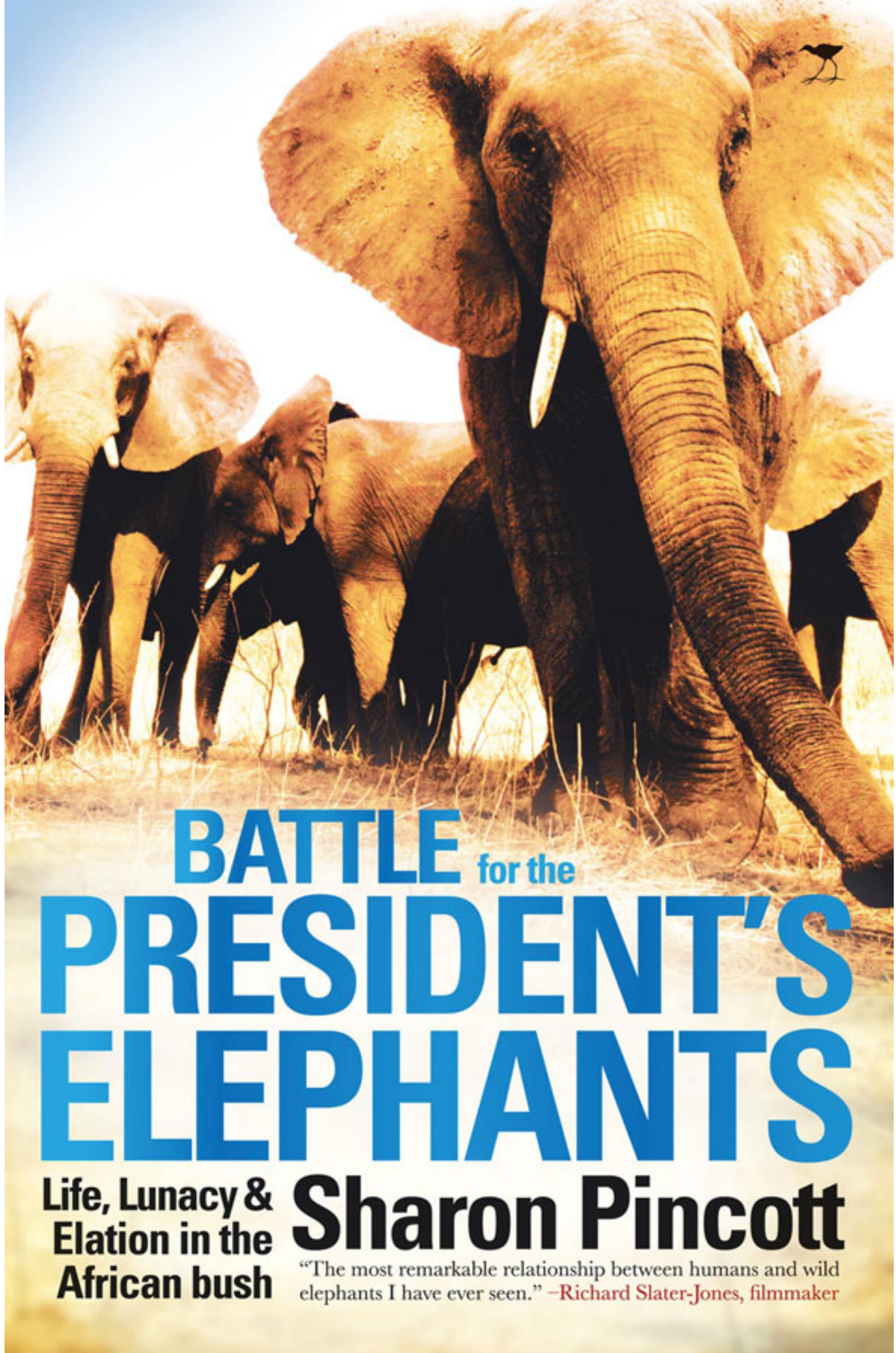
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# BATTLE for the PRESIDENT'S ELEPHANTS

**Life, Lunacy &  
Elation in the  
African bush**

**Sharon Pincott**

*"The most remarkable relationship between humans and wild elephants I have ever seen." —Richard Slater-Jones, filmmaker*

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My friendship with Anthony began when I wrote two articles about him in 2004. The first was about his extraordinary taming of a delinquent herd of angry elephants, and the second chronicled his exploits in Iraq. I was privileged to be with him on three separate occasions when he walked among his faithful



jumbos, and through him I came to realise how closely they match human beings in the sphere of basic emotions: anger, grief, jealousy, loyalty and, yes – love.

The best example of this occurred the last time he interacted with the herd. I noticed that Nana, his beloved matriarch – instantly recognisable for her missing tusk – was not there. When asked about this, he told me to wait while we moved 100 yards down the road where we found her waiting for him under a tree. Just like all other women, she didn't want to share him with the herd.

Elephant mothers have very few equals in the wild when it comes to nurturing and protecting their young. And anyone who has watched them cavorting in a river like kids in a water park, would have no doubt about their capacity for fun. Yet, there are many people who would happily put a bullet between their eyes, either legally or as poachers seeking financial gain in the form of trophies or the valuable ivory of their tusks.

In 1990, a measure of protection was introduced when Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe conferred the status of Presidential Elephants on the pachyderms of the Hwange Estate, in an effort to eliminate illegal hunting. It was a noble gesture, but lacked the teeth to provide the protection they deserved, and upholding the spirit of this decree was largely left to a heroic battle fought by Australian, Sharon Pincott.



From the year 2001, she embarked on a continual struggle against poachers, wire snares and a dubious government official who managed a land grab complete with hunting concessions. This was done under the 'Settler' tag – a polite euphemism for a 'connected' squatter. Much of her good work was undermined as hunters returned and spooked the formerly placid elephants, causing them to panic and flee the area.

Over the years, Pincott has been threatened, assaulted, abused and refused access to her favourite watering holes. She was also framed as a spy, and for a while appeared on Zimbabwe's most wanted list. Most recently, she was thrown out of her home of 10 years, with nowhere else to live.

Her African odyssey began in March 2001, when she received a letter granting her permission to work full-time on a voluntary basis with the Presidential Elephants of Zimbabwe. Her base was a single rondavel with plumbing on the Hwange Estate, which measured 140 square kilometres, and was separated from the 14 600km<sup>2</sup> of the greater Hwange National Park by the railway line linking Bulawayo to the Victoria Falls.

When she arrived, the area was already famous for the advanced degree of habituation present among the elephants there. This was largely due to the fact that they had not been hunted for the past 30 years.

With an obsession born of her driving passion, Pincott began to study, document and familiarise herself with the various herds through a process of rigorous patrolling and monitoring. She introduced a system whereby she gave each matriarch a name beginning with a successive letter of the alphabet. The rest of the herd were then given names starting with the same letter. Thus Mertle, the M group matriarch, had followers called Marmite, Marion, Magic, Mandy and Marianne etc.



NHU AFRICA PRESENTS

# ALL THE PRESIDENT'S ELEPHANTS

A CONTROVERSIAL PRESIDENT, AN OUTSPOKEN AUSTRALIAN & 450 ELEPHANTS

In an amazing feat, she got to know most of the estimated 450 elephants by name, along with their habits and personalities. After a short while, she was on stroking terms with many of the matriarchs through the window of her 4x4 vehicle.

Pincott's epic struggle to preserve her pachyderm friends has been well documented in her two absorbing books. Backing this is a DVD titled, *All the President's Elephants*, a riveting documentary



that features extraordinary footage of the trials, tribulations and some of the joys of her controversial existence in the Zimbabwe Wilderness. So as a dedicated jumbonista, I was given the signal honour of interviewing her en route to satisfying my own curiosity about her remarkable story.

*Roy Watts: Who granted the consent for your initial entry, and were there any terms of reference regarding your permission to work with the Presidential Elephants? Was there any hint of executive approval and, in particular, anyone at ministerial level who could be called upon for some sort of assistance in troublesome situations?*

Sharon Pincott: In 2001, I had no ministerial contacts, although I knew of the high-level Zanu-PF minister (now minister of state in the President's Office), who was key in obtaining the initial presidential decree in 1990. He kindly assisted me when things got tough, and helps me still.

Things were quite different (and, indeed, much easier) when I first arrived in Zimbabwe 12 years ago, since land reform hadn't yet hit the Hwange Estate area. At this time, a photographic safari company called Touch the Wild controlled the majority of the Presidential Elephants' land and it was this group who granted me my first approvals and assisted in obtaining my first government-issued work permits (which were required regardless of my doing voluntary work). Today, Touch the Wild no longer exists – at least not on the Hwange Estate.



*Much of your energy went into getting President Mugabe to sign a reaffirmation of the original decree that was made 21 years ago. This he did in 2011. Was this accompanied by any extra measures that would help you in your efforts to preserve the safety of the elephants?*

Regrettably, nothing has been forthcoming to assist with anti-poaching, monitoring or patrols. Verbal affirmations were made at this time, however, and awareness was certainly raised. The public was sent a clear message that shooting a Presidential Elephant was as bad as shooting the president, and that if you killed one, you could expect to be killed. The message was loud and clear; penalties for compromising the Presidential Herd would be severe.

Thankfully, I no longer encounter as many snared animals as I did during my early years in Zimbabwe. Donor-funded anti-poaching teams now patrol, destroying snares and ambushing poachers. Penalties for snaring are less lenient than they were 10 years ago, which has deterred some would-be poachers. But as you see in the documentary, two snared elephants were encountered during the two months of filming – and that's still two too many.

*Taking on, and eventually defeating, the land-grabbing high-level government official involved great courage and considerable risk. The fact that you managed to get him evicted does suggest that you must have had some friends at the coal face of government? What was the background to his departure?*

There are still some people in high places who do have the welfare of these elephants at heart. Without these supportive government ministers, our problems would be far graver. In fact, without the high-level support of these few, I would long ago have been expelled – or worse – and Zimbabwe's flagship herd would no longer exist in any meaningful form.

Once the issues were highlighted, these supportive ministers recognised how disastrous it was for key Presidential Elephant land to be negatively interfered with. It didn't happen overnight, and it certainly wasn't easy – in fact, it was the most frightening and trying time for me in Hwange to date, but eventually things were put right by those in high places.

*Most of your favourites were matriarchs, and I was particularly moved by your relationship with Lady – and your elation at finding her after a long absence. Do you believe that winning their confidence meant quicker acceptance by the rest of their herds?*

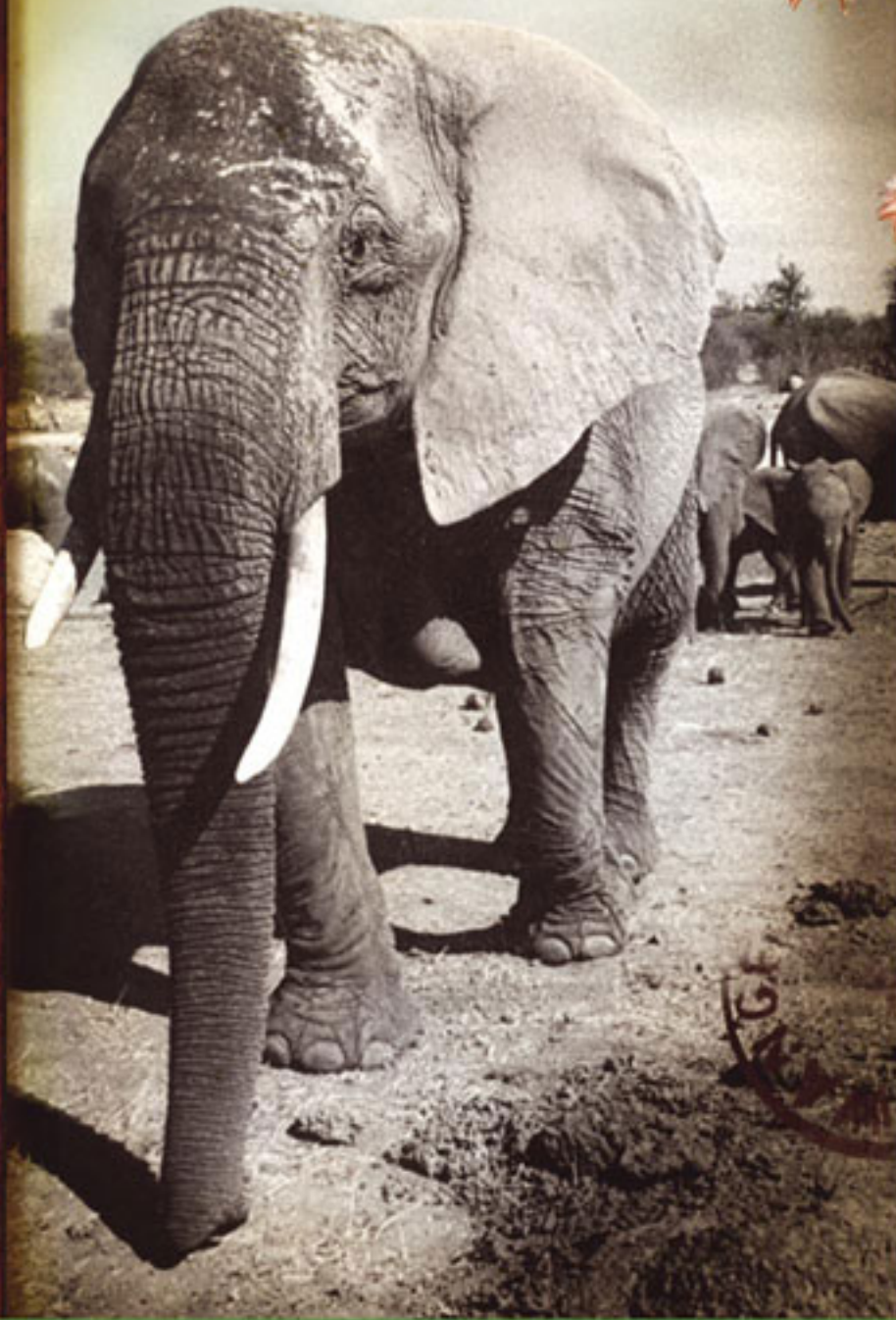
Young elephants certainly follow the lead of their elders. Family members learn quickly in whom their mothers and matriarchs put their trust, and tend to display this same level of trust. The reverse is true, too, with less friendly matriarchs leading more reserved families. These shrewd elephants know who their friends are, and are far less responsive around humans they don't know well.

*Your books are wonderful accounts of your titanic struggle on the Hwange Estate – and being readily available in bookstores, the public has easy access to your story. The beautifully produced DVD is also a very graphic and powerful account of your life with the Presidential Elephants. Are there any moves afoot to increase its availability?*

Natural History Unit Africa's DVD distributor recently listed it for sale on *Kalahari.com*. Hopefully they'll manage to get it into some South African shops as well. There's also a distributor working on worldwide television rights, with Poland (of all places!) having taken it on just recently. It would be fantastic for increased awareness – and thereby increased safety – of these deserving elephants if television interest could be secured in South Africa as well.



SHARON PINCOTT



A moving account of Africa's power to attract, inspire, and change the course of one's life, giving it a new meaning. Sharon's story is of courage, adventure, love and commitment to the elephant of Zimbabwe.

—KUKI GALLMANN,  
Author of the international  
bestseller, *I Dreamed of Africa*



# THE ELEPHANTS AND I



{ Pursuing a dream in  
troubled Zimbabwe }



HWA



Lawrence Anthony was convinced that elephants have a very highly developed ESP capability. Proof of this to him was the fact that they were all waiting at the gate when he returned from hospital after his first heart attack. Further evidence of this was well documented on the day he died, when all the Thula



*Thula elephants congregated outside his house in the reserve. Do you have any opinions on this?*

When a friend asked me about this not long after Lawrence's death, my immediate response was that I would expect nothing less from his elephants. It didn't surprise me in the least. There are times when I've been at my lowest, during yet another preposterous or alarming Hwange Estate incident, and I've driven into the field to find solace. Almost without fail, I'd end up with some of my favourite Presidential Elephants right beside the door of my 4x4, remaining there for an extended period of time, rumbling their alluring contact calls. Obviously I can't know that they're talking to me – as opposed to their family members – but it always feels as if they are; as if I'm one of their family after all, and they've come to offer comfort.

*What has been the level of support from all branches of the media (newspapers, television and magazines)?*

Overall support from the South African media has usually been quite encouraging. It's disappointing, though, that the media in other countries (including my own homeland, Australia) tends to take little or no interest. A good-news story – generally positive at least – isn't what international media seems to want to know about, when it comes to the troubled nation of Zimbabwe! I think that's a real shame. You just have to look at what Zimbabwe has been through during the past 12 years, and here we are with some of the friendliest wild, free-roaming elephants on Earth. Remember that there are no fences here; these elephants aren't restrained in any way. That they allow me so intimately into their vast world, despite all they've endured, is an incredible thing.

Social media now plays an important role in spreading awareness, too, with the Presidential Elephant's Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/PresidentialElephantsZim](http://www.facebook.com/PresidentialElephantsZim)) having attracted excellent interest in the few months since its inception.

*One of the more encouraging aspects of the DVD was the visit to Ganda Lodge by Francis Nhema, the Zimbabwean minister of Environment and Natural Resources, to celebrate the President Mugabe's reaffirmation of the original decree. He seemed to be genuinely impressed and really interested in all that he saw. Has any of this translated into wider government acknowledgement – and does the future look more promising since?*

I'm confident that Minister Nhema spoke from the heart, prior to reaffirming the decree on behalf of President Mugabe. I actually introduced him (something that you don't see on film), asking that he first share with the audience his experiences among the elephants from the day before, when he came out with me in my 4x4. He wasn't expecting this, and didn't have a pre-prepared speech from which to read. I do think the elephants touched him in a way that he didn't expect.

This doesn't necessarily translate into things that you hope it may, however. I suppose the wider government acknowledgement came just prior to this reaffirmation, since President Mugabe would not have been persuaded to re-pledge his support of these elephants without the appropriate backing from those closest to him.

I do feel that both the elephants and I have enjoyed renewed support from an elite few since then – but the battles are far from over.

*Can you recall the funniest (or happiest) incident during your time in Hwange to date?*

There are so many of these (a fantastic thing, of course, since why else would one continue to endure the seemingly unendurable?) that it's difficult to choose just one incident. There's no more entertaining species on Earth than a wild elephant! In the documentary, you see one of the W family elephants steal my yellow jacket from the backseat of my 4x4, followed by a great commotion – all of these wild



elephants clearly celebrating their own cheekiness!

That in itself is a great moment, but what you don't see – since the cameraman didn't manage to get his camera on us in time – is my jacket seesawing through my back window, my pulling on one arm and the playful elephant pulling on the other. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth my jacket went, through the open window, until I started to fear it would be split in two, and you see me on film releasing my grip. That was Elephants – 1; Humans – Nil!

Elephants giggle in infrasound; of this I have no doubt! They were definitely snorting their own happiness at this victory, and it's at times like these that you can't help but laugh out loud with them.

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