

Founder of Kenya's iconic 'elephant orphanage' dies aged 83

April 13 2018, by Fran Blandy



Sheldrick was born in Kenya and spent nearly 30 years working with her husband David who founded the country's biggest national park

Dame Daphne Sheldrick, a conservationist famous for her work rearing baby elephants in Kenya and fighting for the protection of the species,

has died aged 83, her family said Friday.

"Daphne passed away the evening of the 12th April after a long battle with breast cancer, a battle she finally lost," her daughter Angela wrote in a statement.

"Her legacy is immeasurable and her passing will reverberate far and wide because the difference she has made for conservation in Kenya is unparalleled."

Sheldrick was born in Kenya in 1934, and spent nearly 30 years working with her husband David who founded Kenya's biggest National Park, Tsavo East.

After his death, she founded The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (DSWT), famous both for its contribution to conservation and to tourists who flock to the Nairobi centre daily to witness orphaned baby [elephants](#) being bottle-fed and frolicking in the mud.

"Daphne was the first person to successfully hand raise a milk dependent new born elephant and rhino, knowledge that has seen more than 230 orphaned elephants saved in Kenya, and countless other infant elephants in countries across Africa and into India," read a statement on the trust's website.

With their mothers shot by poachers for ivory, or dying due to frequent droughts, or human-wildlife conflict, scores of baby elephants found their way into Sheldrick's care.

However, it took her 28 years to discover the magic milk formula that would keep alive the baby elephants, who cannot survive without it under the age of two.

But milk is often not enough. Dedicated keepers spend 24 hours a day with the elephants, highly social and emotional creatures who are often severely traumatised when they arrive at the orphanage.



An orphaned baby elephants feeds on milk at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Nairobi

"The infant is very fragile. One must think in human terms for an elephant," Sheldrick told AFP in a 2004 interview.

When they are about two years old, the elephants leave the orphanage for Tsavo park where they try to join a new herd in what can be a long and difficult process.

However they continue to return to greet new elephants and their keepers for years to come.

'She lived alongside elephants'

Sheldrick's work has featured on countless television programmes and documentaries, while she also wrote several books.

In 2006 Queen Elizabeth II appointed Sheldrick Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, the first Knighthood to be awarded in Kenya since the country received independence in 1963, according to the trust.

The Kenyan government in 2001 presented her with a Moran of the Burning Spear (MBS) decoration—one of the country's top honours.

According to the Great Elephant Census project, African Savanna elephant populations fell by 30 percent between 2007 and 2014.

"Daphne lived alongside elephants and learned to read their hearts, much as they read ours - she understood their fragility, their intelligence, their capacity to love, to grieve, to heal, to support one another and she took those lessons to the global stage," read the tribute to her on the trust's website.

"In doing so, Daphne became a leading voice for elephants, never through a desire for the limelight, only ever driven by her belief that elephants, and other wild species, have a right to live a free and protected life - just like us."

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