

# RETURN TO ELGON

## CAVE ELEPHANTS PROMPT BONFIRE THOUGHTS

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**Ian Redmond reports from his former study site on Mt Elgon, Kenya, then attended the Brazzaville ivory burn, and asks how the latter can help protect the former.**



**Ian Redmond, OBE** is a wildlife biologist and conservationist, known for his work with great

apes and elephants. For nearly 40 years he has been associated with mountain gorillas, and served as Ambassador for the UN Year of the Gorilla 2009 and subsequently for the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species since 2010. He co-founded the ELEFRIENDS campaign, which helped achieve the 1989 ban on international ivory trade, and in 1996 established the Ape Alliance [www.4apes.com](http://www.4apes.com) which he still chairs.

**Elephants feel their way across roof-fall in back of Kitum Cave, Mt Elgon National Park (NP), Kenya.**

**I**t's a paradox. Simply put, ivory is a consequence of there being elephants. And if an animal's front teeth can be carved into a nice ornament, why not collect them when they have died of natural causes? History shows, however, that when demand for ivory exceeds natural mortality, and there is money to be made in meeting that demand, elephants won't be left to die of old age, they will be killed. There's the paradox - the way things are going, poaching for the ivory trade will ensure there are no elephants left to grow ivory. If there is one thing the current crisis facing elephants and rhinos shows, it is that in a world awash with guns, crime and poverty, an animal with a fortune on its face cannot be

protected 24/7. Only a change in the fashion for ivory can do that, which is what the dramatic destruction of confiscated ivory stocks is designed to achieve, so far by 13 countries and rising. Can global campaigns change deep-rooted attitudes?

We've been here before, as anyone perusing back-issues of *Swara* will know. My studies of the amazing mining behaviour of Mt Elgon's cave-elephants in the early 1980s were interrupted by poaching. By 1986, the price of ivory rose to a level where even the scratched, pitted, worn-down stumps of Elgon's salt-mining elephants were worth killing for. In 1987, I stood beside the carcass of Charles, a young tusker I'd photographed mining minerals in Kitum Cave, his face sliced off with a chain saw for his tiny tusks. That gut-wrenching

experience launched the African EleFund\* (\*now part of the Born Free Foundation), and with several other NGOs led to the ELEFRIENDS campaign that helped bring about the CITES Appendix 1 listing for African elephants in 1989. Ivory prices fell, anti-poaching efforts increased and the fall in elephant numbers across Africa was slowed, for a while at least. But the trauma of poaching for Elgon's elephants was long lasting. Instead of the previous pattern of small groups of relaxed elephants feeding here and there, meeting up and separating at will, the surviving Elgon elephants appeared to move around the mountain in a single defensive herd, avoiding human contact. They were seldom seen and it was feared that

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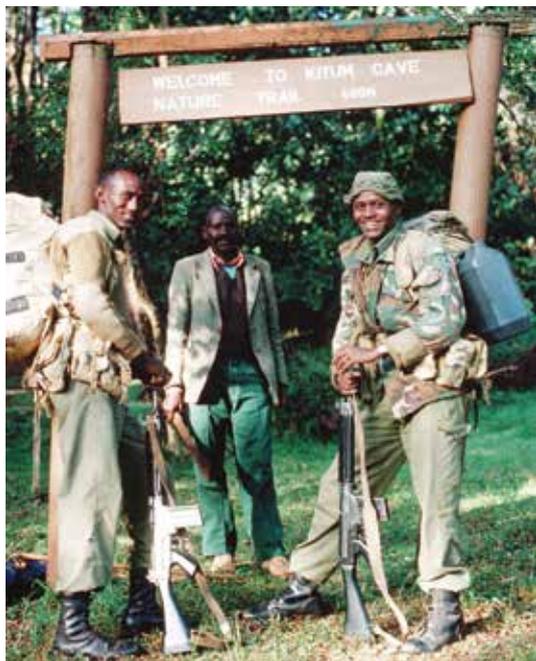
their numbers had fallen below 100 from an estimated 1,200 in the early 1970s.

When in 2000, Sir David Attenborough wanted to film the mining behaviour of Elgon elephants for the BBC *Life of Mammals* series, I advised that we would need to regain the trust of the elephants and learn more about their movements. Enter the MEEM Team, the Mount Elgon Elephant Monitoring team, comprised of selected KWS rangers working with trusted trackers from the local community and a hand-held GPS unit. On our first outing in 2001, we encountered the

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elephants in the bamboo zone and panic reigned among both elephants and humans – trumpeting, cracking bamboo stems and a rapid end to any observations.

I suggested adapting the method developed by Dian Fossey for habituating gorillas, and trained the men to use a low rumbling sound to announce their presence so as not to take the elephants by surprise. When I returned a few weeks later, I was delighted to be able to observe the elephants feeding in the forest even though they knew we were just a few paces away. For the first time, we began to learn about their ranging pattern and how they moved between the Mt Elgon National Park and the Sosio Forest Reserve to the south. The filming was so successful, the BBC then made a 50-minute documentary on the elephant caves (clips of which can be viewed on-line by searching for 'cave elephants' featuring the MEEM Team. Funded initially by the BBC and the African Ele-Fund, after the filming was over, the MEEM Team was supported by the Born Free Foundation and the Powles family, who used to farm on Elgon (and whose former home is now the Mt Elgon Lodge), with administrative support from local farmer Tony Mills. The boots on the ground brought benefits. Over the years, successive wardens told me



**TOP: Elephants file into Kitum Cave, Mt Elgon, Kenya, maternal trunk keeps baby safe in dark.**

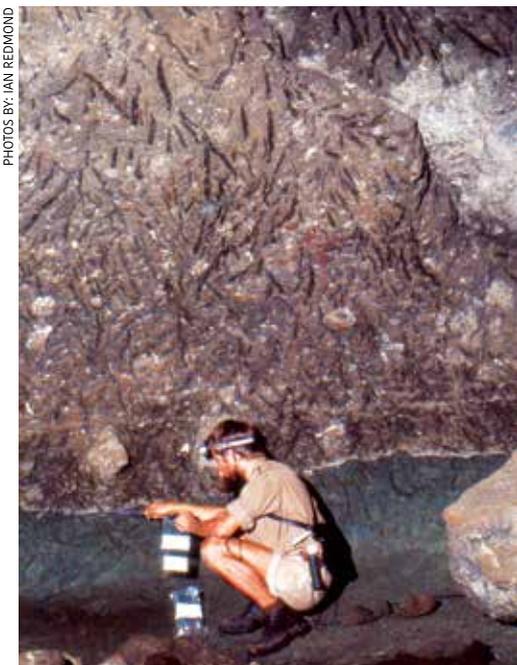
**BELOW: The MEEM Team, Mt Elgon NP, Kenya.**



that the MEEM Team had greatly improved community relations, had removed hundreds of snares and helped the park management understand how the elephants moved around the slopes of the mountain on the Kenya side (it seems they have not been over to the Uganda side for many decades).

Fast forward to 2013, and as reports of ivory poaching came in from across Africa, the world realised a new ivory crisis was upon us. In the Congo Basin, forest elephants declined by 65 per cent in a decade. The scale and extent of the trade is shocking, especially given that there are far fewer elephants than in the 1970s. Poaching is on the rise because people with no money are tempted by traders offering wads of banknotes. An outbreak of poaching was even reported on Mount Elgon last year, triggered by rising demand for ivory in China and Southeast Asia. The MEEM Team had been credited with keeping the elephants safe until then, but we were disturbed to hear that a new MEEM Team recruit may have provided information on the location of the elephants to poachers. In February this year, I returned to Mt Elgon with a couple of colleagues to find out more. The Warden explained that there was no hard evidence for the allegation, but that the MEEM Team had been suspended while security checks were run against all members. All but the new recruit had been cleared, and although there was no evidence to support a prosecution, the suspect was said to have gone missing. Otherwise the news was encouraging. Despite the small number of poaching incidents, elephant numbers were rising and the single defensive herd was now breaking up into smaller groups, suggesting that the elephants were becoming more confident. Plans were made to recruit more trackers (with strict background checks) so the different groups of elephants could be monitored simultaneously.

While on Elgon, I took the opportunity to take a series of spherical panoramic photographs for a virtual tour of Kitum Cave on [www.vEcotourism.org](http://www.vEcotourism.org) We hope to gain more international support for this unique tribe



PHOTOS BY: IAN REDMOND

**TOP LEFT: Forest elephant at saline bai, Dzanga-Sangha NP, Central African Republic.**

**TOP RIGHT: Charles, a young tusker, mining mineral-rich rock in Kitum Cave, Mt Elgon NP, Kenya**

**BELOW: Ian Redmond collects rock samples for analysis, Kitum Cave, Mt Elgon NP, Kenya.**



and retired for lunch while a gaggle of conservationists gave each other high-fives and took photos. Congo burned 4.7 tonnes that day in April, Ethiopia burned 6.1 tonnes in March, Kenya started the trend in 1989 by burning 12 tonnes, and this year torched another 15 tonnes. But why celebrate the destruction of millions of dollars' worth of ivory in a continent where so many live in poverty? What does burning ivory achieve?

Some people can't get it out of their heads that ivory is worth a lot of money. It's only worth a lot of money if people want to buy it. But that can change if, by burning or crushing ivory in a blaze of publicity, you can get across the message that ivory is no longer a status symbol, it's a symbol of support for organised crime and murder. Rangers are killed defending elephants, customs officers are killed trying to arrest criminals

and the organised crime gangs and terrorists who ship container loads of ivory around the world are making a fortune out of those deaths. Even people who don't care about elephants should care about that; and if purchases of ivory are essentially paying for organised crime, do they want to be a part of that? 'Look at my new ivory carving – I support organised crime and murder'. No. So the cave elephants of Mt Elgon, along with all the other elephant clans, clinging on in fragments of their former range, each with their unique culture, face a better future if this message goes global. Ivory is most valuable when it is attached to living elephants – gardeners of the forest and savannah. ●

of spelunking elephants by enabling anyone with internet access to immerse themselves in the sights and sounds of this amazing phenomenon. I left Elgon feeling more optimistic, greatly impressed by the Warden and his senior management team, but worried about the vulnerability of

elephants so close to an international border with ivory prices rising. It is the same for elephants everywhere, their front teeth are their downfall, and poachers, like migrating animals, know no borders.

A few weeks later, I found myself crouching a few paces from an inferno of petrol-soaked tusks stacked over illegally logged timber in Brazzaville, Congo. I had been invited, in my capacity as an Ambassador for the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species, to attend a four day meeting where delegates from across the continent hammered out a pan-African strategy to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. I recorded the crackling sound and rotated my camera to take a 360 panorama that would enable the on-line community to share the experience virtually (minus the heat). The presidents of Congo and Tchad who had lit the bonfire, accompanied by Somali super-model Yasmin Warsame, put down their flaming torches

## BUT WHY CELEBRATE THE DESTRUCTION OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS' WORTH OF IVORY IN A CONTINENT WHERE SO MANY LIVE IN POVERTY? WHAT DOES BURNING IVORY ACHIEVE?

**LEFT: Ivory carving reduced to ashes in Brazzaville, Congo.**

**RIGHT: Many tree species have their seeds dispersed by elephants – this one on Mt Elgon.**