

MINING ELEPHANTS

From Tragedy to Hope for Mount Elgon's Elephants

How a limping elephant and her calf are raising funds and awareness for coexistence on Africa's mountain of caves.



STORY BY
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BELOW

Chemukung showing her anguish at being caught in a snare. Elephants are particularly vulnerable to snaring due to their size and the fact that they often roam large areas.

Chemukung would never have survived if the local community on Mount Elgon had not reported her to the elephant scouts. The local herders had seen the elephant hanging around the cattle and appeared to be limping. When the elephant scouts reached her, they saw her state – her leg was caught in a three-metre-long log snare, and she was trying to catch up with the rest of her herd by lifting the log with her trunk and then dragging it with each step forward. With her every step, the nylon rope snare dug deeper into her flesh, taking her closer to death (see Swara, July-Sept 2020).

The elephant scouts, a team of locals employed by the Mount Elgon Elephant Project (MEEP) in partnership with the East African Wild Life Society (EAWLS) and funded by the Mount Elgon Foundation

(MEF) in the UK, reported the matter to the Kenya Wildlife Service rangers stationed on the mountain. Within the day, a veterinarian was flown from Maasai Mara. That was the easy part.

Once on the ground, time was of the essence to catch up with the snared elephant, which had now wandered higher up the misty, cold heights of the massif. Dusk was setting in when the team reached and darted her, which was no easy task.

They managed to cut the snare and treat the wound in torchlight. When she came around and stood up, the team watched her take a few steps, looking down to see herself free of the snare.

The local Sabaot community has named her Chemukung, the limping one.

A few months later, the scouts reported that Chemukung was now with a calf, which

PHOTO BY MOUNT ELGON FOUNDATION





PHOTO BY IAN REDMOND

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means that she was pregnant at the time of the incident. And so, on that night in February 2020, not one life but two were saved. The latest news (as of 2024) is that Chemukung has another calf.

It's inspired the unique bronze sculpture of Chemukung and her calf by Nairobi-based master bronze sculptor Denis Mathews of Matbronze. The sculpture and its wooden base are 40cm x 16cm x 24cm (length x width x height). It's a collector's item and is being raffled by the Mount Elgon Foundation amongst its "Friends of Mt Elgon" for a ticket price of €45 / KES 6,500 / \$50 / £40 to raise funds for the many projects the Foundation supports. This includes EAWLS-MEEP, which employs the elephant scouts and works closely

with the community around Mount Elgon National Park to reduce the human-wildlife conflict and incidents of snares laid out for the smaller mammals for the pot in which the elephants become the unintentional victims. The sculpture of Chemukung and her calf is on display at the Matbronze Gallery in Nairobi.

The draw for the winning raffle number will be held in late January 2025. To increase your chances of winning, you can buy more than one ticket by contacting the Mt Elgon Foundation via its website and becoming one of its Friends of Mt Elgon.

Elgon's Unique Elephants

Africa's eighth-highest mountain is home to the world's only known underground mining elephants. Using their tusks, they have tunneled into the depths of the extinct volcano in search of the one ingredient lacking in their diet—salt, which is deficient in the mountain's soils.

The local communities around the mountain had always known this, but the world only saw proof of this with the iconic photographs by the world-renowned wildlife conservationist Ian Redmond. In 1980 and '81, Redmond spent weeks on a shelf by the cave opening to get those epic shots of a herd entering the cave on a moonlit night. It was in the days of the analogue camera, and Redmond only saw the photograph weeks after the film was posted off for processing.

TOP

A family of elephants, feeling their way in total darkness over slabs of fallen rock in Kitum Cave, a unique culture passed down through the generations. Kitum Cave contains rich deposits of sodium, potassium, and calcium, which elephants are naturally drawn to. These minerals are vital for maintaining the health of the elephants' complex digestive systems, especially considering their herbivorous diets, which require a lot of energy and can deplete minerals over time.



PHOTO BY IAN REDMOND

In those days, Elgon's elephants faced few threats. But by 1987, the poachers had reached Elgon, and Redmond saw carcasses of Charles, a teenage male, and a young calf who had been attacked at the mouth of Kitum cave, where he had taken those epic photographs. Africa was now losing 100,000 elephants a year to poachers, reducing its population from 1.3 million in 1979 to an estimated 609,000 by 1989.

Today, Africa's elephant population stands between 450,000 and 500,000, a small victory that the population is not declining.

Although poaching is still a threat, albeit under control, there are other pressures facing Africa's elephants and other wildlife, such as the increase in human population encroaching on their space, which fuels the human-wildlife conflict. That's why Chemukung has become a symbol of hope for Elgon's elephants. Coexistence between humans and wildlife is fundamental to the survival of the last of the wild.

MEF was established in 2019 by Dr Emmanuel Ndiema, who grew up on Elgon and is Head of Earth Sciences at National Museums of Kenya, Chris Powles, whose grandfather built the farmhouse that morphed into Mount Elgon Lodge, and Aiden Doyle, who grew up on the mountain in the 1950s like many of the alumni of Kitale School, some of whom also helped form MEF. So far, MEF

has raised \$65,245 from similar raffles in previous years to support the Foundation's many projects on the mountain outside the national park. The latest is fitting satellite tracking collars on three elephants.

According to data collected by the MEEP scouts, an estimated 560 elephants are on the mountain today, although there has never been an official census. In recent months, with security on the ground, the elephants have been crossing into Uganda's side of Mount Elgon for the first time since the infamous reign of Uganda's strongman Idi Amin between 1971 and 1979, which saw the wholesale slaughter of elephants and the country's northern white rhinos.

MEF's vision is to see Elgon's iconic elephants safe, a land-use plan put in place so that there is no conflict of interest between human expansion and wildlife, the elephants able to move safely between boundaries into the Ugandan side, the elephant caves (some of which include rock art like Kakapel) secured against graffiti, and trails for people to follow safely. It's a win-win situation for the community, the elephants, and the other wildlife. ●

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TOP

Charles, a teenage tusker, tolerated Redmond approaching on foot to photograph him mining his dose of salts (mainly Sodium Sulphate) in a side chamber of Kitum Cave. His death launched the African Ele-Fund (*Swara* Vol 11 No.2, March/April 1988) which led to the Elefriends campaign to ban the ivory trade in 1989.