

Arthur Jones "Save the Elephants" on 20/20

YouTube video on Steven Koeppen

Segment taken from *20/20* called *Save the Elephants* with Roger Karras

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Hugh Downs

If you've ever felt a passion for a cause, it's probably stirred you to action. It could be as simple as baking pies for the church supper, canvassing for a political candidate, or working long hours in your local neighborhood hospital. And the reward is the knowledge that you've somehow made a difference. Well, tonight, Roger Karras has the story of someone with many passions. One of them resulted in an extraordinary mission.

Roger Karras (00:00:45)

Victoria Falls. A symbol of African fertility, but at times, a beautifully deceiving one. Although billions of gallons of water spill over these falls into the Zambezi river every day, much of it is wasted. For the most part, the water flows through Zimbabwe and Mozambique, emptying into the Indian Ocean, doing little good along the way. And that's more than just a pretty geography lesson, because the other rivers in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, along with just about all the rest of East Africa, now look like this. As the land periodically dries up and a burgeoning population demands more and more of the fertile land, African wildlife is pushed into ever smaller pockets. All this competition for room and food, most of it coming from man, leads to this.

(00:01:52) It's called culling, as shown on British television several years ago. It means to thin out the herd, and it's done with terrifying efficiency, especially with elephants. They are pretty hard to miss. It's done, say officials, to keep the elephants from overgrazing, in effect eating themselves out of their own home. The value of their ivory could have something to do with it. The magnificent African elephant, the largest land animal on Earth, is being squeezed every year into smaller patches of land. Some conservationists fear it is being squeezed into extinction.

(00:02:35) Here in the Wankie National Preserve in Zimbabwe, where we went recently, 20,000 elephants have been pushed into an area that should support only 5,000. These giants can weigh up to 8 tons and eat 300 to 400 pounds of vegetation a day.

That's a lot of foliage. In the best of times, during a drought, it's a disaster. Unless they can migrate to find food and water, they can't.

So they're killing. Killed off is the quickest and easiest way to deal with the problem. The inevitable quick fix. The males, the females, and the babies. That's where this man enters the picture. Arthur Jones, a multimillionaire from Ocala, Florida, along with his wife Terry, simply decided to jump into one of their three private 707s, fly to Zimbabwe and rescue the baby elephants, or at least some of them, from an upcoming culling operation. Their plan was to bring the elephants back to their farm and build an American herd of African elephants.

Arthur Jones (00:03:38)

It's my opinion that the African elephant will be extinct on the African continent before the end of this century. We're picking up elephants which would otherwise be shot and we're going to give them an opportunity to survive.

Roger Karras

Arthur, with all the governments involved, there are 51 countries south of the Sahara in Africa alone. Why does it take Arthur Jones from Florida to save African elephants?

Arthur Jones

Don't hold your breath till any government helps anything. Governments, by the very nature of governments, are good at wasting money, at destroying resources, at creating problems, at building up problems.

Roger Karras (00:04:18)

There are people who say that the money you are spending on these elephants could be put to better use.

Arthur Jones

That's their opinion. And I'm sure that that would be true of practically anybody you ask. It's my money, Roger. I made it and I'll spend it any way I choose.

Roger Karras

It's his money, all right. And it took a bundle of it to get his 707 onto the isolated airstrip at the Wanke Game Reserve in Zimbabwe. The whole elephant operation cost an estimated \$1 million. And he was there to supervise every penny of it.

Arthur Jones

10

Crew member

Negative 4

Arthur Jones

10, that's 10 all right.

Crew member

19

Arthur Jones

Correct. Okay. And then you get 3 times 21. And 3 times 7 is 21.

Crew member

Yeah.Okay.

Arthur Jones

Which makes 63, right?

Crew member

63

Arthur Jones

Yeah, okay.

Roger Karras (00:05:09)

No one had ever tried to stuff 63 elephants into a 707 before. And to the local people it was the best show to hit towns. And stocked at Livingston passed this way thumping his Bible. A century ago, if stuffing elephants into an aircraft was a new experience for the people concerned, it was downright mind boggling for the elephants. They seemed to have their own idea of where they wanted to go and wherever that was.

It wasn't on a jet plane. Since no elephant lift of this scope had ever been contemplated, much less attempted, no one was sure at the time if any of them would make it to Florida alive.

Crew Leader (to a baby elephant)

You get back.

Roger Karras (as several baby elephant trumpet in the background) 00:05:54

So begins one of the more unusual animal odysseys of history. These baby elephants are frightened. For wild animals, this is a hardship and their future is full of unknowns. But at least the passengers of this airborne ark are alive. That's more than can be said for their families. To give the elephants the best chance of surviving their trip, their time inside the plane had to be kept to a minimum. So a precise timetable had to be met.

The plane had to be off from Wanke just before sundown and arrive in Florida just after sunrise the next day. That was not an arbitrary schedule. The plane had to take off before darkness since the wacky strip is deep in the bush and has no lights. Smashing into an unseen animal at takeoff speed would have made a big batch of elephant. Stewart, that wasn't the only problem.

Arthur Jones

We got about 15 minutes. Hey, Chuck, we only got about 15 minutes. We better get. You want to get an engine going?

Roger Karras (00:06:56)

Since there is no power at the strip capable of kicking a jet engine into action, Jones and his crew had to bring along their own starter. If it didn't catch, the elephants would have to be unloaded and the whole operation jeopardized.

Arthur Jones

Crank up this engine. Stay away from it.

Roger Karras

Meanwhile, the sun kept going down and Jones, now with his elephants aboard, had to round up his people.

Arthur Jones

Buck, take that damn vehicle and run over there and tell those people to get here now.

Terry Jones

I'll go with it.

Roger Karras (plane engines starting in the background) 00:07:23

Finally, the starter took hold and got the engines running. Very little light left now. In a few moments there would be none. And for the first time, Arthur Jones looked worried. Finally, everything was over. Aboard full load of fuel brought by trucks from hundreds of miles away.

20 people, including the 20/20 crew and the 63 confused and unhappy baby elephants. There was still a little light left, enough to see the length of the Runway, and everything was ready to go. Well, almost. The last hatch to close suddenly got stubborn and wouldn't. One little detail in a complex operation for a moment threatened to torpedo everything. But just as the last splash of sunset washed over the Wankie preserve, the crew forced the door closed and the 707 started its run down the airstrip. With 40,000 pounds of elephants aboard, it was a long run.

After eating up 65 seconds worth of runway at an eventual ground speed of 250 miles an hour, the big jet finally dragged itself out over the trees and the 22 hour trip to the west was underway. All night long, in the spooky half-light of the cargo bay, the ghostly figures of the handlers moved around the pens, feeding, petting, trying to reassure the frightened elephants, none of whom had volunteered and who couldn't comprehend what it meant to be 39,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean, (elephant screams in the background) traveling in the same direction as the sun, but at only half its speed.

(00:09:15) We were caught by the next day's dawn, a couple of hundred miles off the Florida coast, right on schedule, the handlers made a daylight inspection of their charges and were relieved to find, so far at least, that all the babies were still alive. And if their robust voices were any indication, they intended to hold their grudge over the indignities they had suffered. As we made our initial approach to Jones's private airstrip in Ocala, the first phase of Operation Elephant Lift was over.

Arthur Jones

You gotta do first things first. First you got to rescue the animals which would otherwise have been killed. And we've done that (elephant screams in the background). What happens next, we'll take it step by step.

Roger Karras 00:09:56

And after a 16,000 mile round trip, we were home. The largest herd of African elephants in captivity then had to be unloaded. A much easier operation than getting them into the plane. They became the newest residents of what amounts to the Arthur Jones private wildlife preserve. The baby elephants didn't seem to care about residency, though. After being penned inside the plane for 22 hours, all they wanted was water and lots of it. Then it was time to roam around and get acquainted with their new home.

(00:10:53) Some of them even got a little playful. When a 1200-pound elephant gets playful, it can ruin a cameraman's whole day (elephant roars angrily). It doesn't do a whole lot for the camera either. As they became accustomed to their new home, they also seemed to be getting used to having people around.

Roger Karras 00:11:15

Why'd you do it?

Arthur Jones

Because I like elephants and because nobody else is doing it. And it's very unlikely that anybody else will do it. And I simply could not live with myself if I idly stood by and watched the African elephant become extinct.

Roger Karras

The extinction of the African elephant, that's a matter of debate. At least its timing is. Many authorities say the species is not in danger yet. You can really have it on authority either way. So if Arthur Jones is wrong, it really doesn't matter. There'll simply be a few extra elephants roaming around somewhere in Florida. But if he is right, Florida could be one of the few places on earth where your grandchildren will be able to see a herd of live African elephants.

Barbara Walters 00:12:06

Roger, I am as fascinated by Arthur Jones, this crusty eccentric, as I am by those sweet baby elephants. Who is Arthur Jones? Where did the money come from?

Roger Karras

He has been rich and poor many times. He was a TV producer. He made a couple of features. And then, Barbara, he invented the Nautilus gymnasium equipment system. And now he's very, very rich.

Barbara Walters

I see. Does he have other animals or does...

Roger Karras

He has about a thousand alligators and crocodiles.

Barbara Walters

Alligators and crocodiles, I see-

Roger Karras

Two white rhinoceros, a gorilla, and lots and lots and lots of very large rattlesnakes and a huge serpentarium.

Barbara Walters

I think I'll go back to the elephants. Hugh

Hugh Downs

Thank you, Roger. Thank you, Barbara. We'll be right back.

00:12:46