

KENYAN CHILDREN DON'T SEE ELEPHANTS

Would you believe that most children in Kenya, including most adults, have never even seen a living elephant.

One of the most surprising things I learned when I went to Kenya for the first time is how few people have ever actually seen an elephant. It all started when I went to a school in a rural part of the country and asked how many of them had ever seen an elephant.

At first, all these little hands raised in the air but I soon realized my mistake when one of the people on my team asked the question in a different way ... "How many of you have ever seen a *living* elephant?" And just like that, all the hands went down, except for one.

So I asked the young man where it was that he saw the elephant and he replied, "In the Nairobi Museum." He was referring to Ahmed of Marsabit, otherwise known as the King.

Ahmed had HUGE tusks and was so valuable to Kenya that the President gave him two armed guards and 24-hour protection, making him the only elephant in history to be considered a "living monument."

After his death in 1974, he was stuffed and placed in the Nairobi Museum. Out of the 400 kids, I spoke to that day, that boy was the only one who had ever seen an elephant and that elephant wasn't even living.

Hi everyone, I'm Debbie Ethell, executive director of The KOTA Foundation for Elephants as well as a conservation research scientist.

Later on that same trip, I met up with my Swahili professor from Portland State University. We were both visiting Kenya at the same time and he was thrilled to show me his country. When I asked him if he would like to come with me to see an elephant his eyes opened wider than I had ever seen them. I didn't know that he had never had the opportunity to see a living elephant either. And yet I, an American from about as far away as you could get from the land of elephants was the first person to ever introduce him to one.

DEBBIE: What did you think when you first met the elephants?

MWALIMU: I fell in love with them. Whenever I visit Kenya I make sure to take my family for an elephant trip.

The problem is that elephants are kept inside national parks, fenced in. Even though some national parks are as big as some of our states, you still have to pay to get in.

And the cost to enter is equal to about the average of three months' salary for a Kenyan. And that is just for ONE PERSON. Can you imagine if it cost thousands of dollars just to visit the zoo?

Yet when I ask that exact same question to students in the United States: "How many of you have ever seen a living elephant?" Nearly every hand in every classroom is raised.

If we're going to make any headway saving wild elephants we have to work with the people of Kenya and engage them. That's why we, at KOTA, continue to teach everyone, whether its people here in the US or the young students in Kenya. And we support organizations that allow students to see elephants for free like Wildlife Direct and each time I go into a national park in Kenya I always try to bring a young Kenyan with me, someone who has never seen a living elephant before so that one day when I ask that question to the students I speak to more than one hand will be raised.

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