

The Discovery of Elephant Infrasound: How Do Elephants Communicate?

Debbie Ethell: How it was determined that elephants were as social as humans is one of the greatest accidental discoveries ever made.

Famed elephant researcher Katy Payne was one of the leading scientists that discovered whales communicated with each other over long distances by placing a recording device underwater. Then when they played back the device back at a slower speed they could hear the sounds. *That's* how they knew whales were communicating using infrasound.

Infrasound are long, low, sound waves, that fall out of the range of what the human ear can hear. Once Katy and her team determined whales were communicating using infrasound they then discovered whales were in fact communicating with each other over entire oceans. What was once considered to be a “lone” species was suddenly viewed as a cheerleader gossiping with all of her friends.

But then a stunning coincidence happened when Katy Payne visited the elephants at the Oregon Zoo and that visit literally changed the science of elephants as we know it.

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

In 1984, nearly 20 years after Katy discovered whales communicated using infrasound, she felt a similar sensation while watching the elephants at the Oregon Zoo. It was the same feeling she had underwater with the whales. On a hunch, she grabbed a recording device. When she played it back she heard nothing. But when she slowed down the speed of the recording ... there it was ... *infrasound*.

The largest land mammals (elephants) communicated in the same way as the largest marine mammals (whales). This discovery was absolutely groundbreaking because it shed light on how incredibly social (how much like us) elephants actually are.

Katy Payne not only wrote about her experiences in her best-selling book “Silent Thunder” but she also founded the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University where she works with teams of researchers to uncover the secret language of elephants. She might have started her

career as one of the pioneering scientists in whale research but she went on to become one of the greatest elephant scientists in the world due to her most remarkable discovery.