

OBITUARIES

Dr Dame Daphne Sheldrick DBE – conservation icon saluted

Born: 4 June 1934
Died: 12 April 2018

Tribute by Angela Sheldrick

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To millions around the world Daphne was the mother of elephants. To my sister Jill and I, she was our most beloved mum. Daphne passed away on the evening of 12 April 2018, after a battle with breast cancer, at the age of 83.

Born Daphne Jenkins on 4 June 1934, to Bryan and Marjorie (nee Webb), she grew up on the family farm in Gilgil, north west of Nairobi. From the very beginning, animals and nature captivated Daphne, when aged just three her first wild friend was a young bushbuck and, while latterly world-renowned for her pioneering work with elephants, Daphne's deep love of antelopes continued throughout her life. The closest of whom was *Bunty*, an orphaned impala who Daphne raised during her years in Tsavo National Park (NP). *Bunty* had nine calves, choosing to give birth each time in the bush just below the garden with Daphne by her side.

Daphne was schooled in Nakuru and the Kenya Girls High School in Nairobi, and turned down a scholarship to study medicine. Instead she wished to remain in Kenya and became engaged to Bill Woodley. In 1953, at the age of 19, Daphne newly married, joined Bill in Tsavo NP, where he was posted as the assistant to David Sheldrick, the founder warden of Tsavo East NP

and my father. Bill and Daphne's (first) daughter, Jill, like myself, grew up immersed in a world of wild animals. Over the next few years they supported David's shaping of Tsavo, as he created a renowned National Park. In the process, Bill and Daphne became more like brother and sister, and separated amicably, remaining incredibly close throughout their lives. In 1960, Daphne and David were married.

Over the next 17 years, Daphne was at David's side as he and his team tackled the many challenges thrown their way throughout his tenure as warden of a wilderness area 11,747km², not least the poisoned arrow ivory and rhino horn poachers, laying the foundations for what is today one of the greatest wildlife havens in all of Africa. During this time, David would bring orphaned animals back to their home in Voi, which Daphne would care for. From dik-diks to zebra, impala to elephants, these animals needed help and Daphne was there to provide it.

Daphne had always had a love of animals, and while based in Tsavo NP her affinity with animals of all species grew stronger. She saw them as no different to people, with unique personalities, observing their individual characters and behaviour day in and day out. Compassion guided Daphne's every decision, while her strength and perseverance stood her in good stead, as there was much heartbreak. Orphaned animal infants would arrive fragile, sick and injured; many would not make it, while others would require round-the-clock care and Daphne was always there for both her human and animal family.

In 1976, Daphne and David left Tsavo when David was called to Nairobi to head the newly formed Planning Unit for Kenya's Parks. Six months later David died of a heart attack. It was an impossible time for Daphne and years later she would share that it was from elephants that she found a means to cope with her loss, learning from them the need to mourn yet garner the strength to move on in order to survive. Daphne did more than that; in 1977 she founded The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in David's memory, taking the lessons she'd learned in Tsavo and from his conservation vision and directing it into the protection

of Kenya's wildlife and wild places.

With permission from the Government, Daphne built a small home in Nairobi National Park, which she would live in for the rest of her life and around which has grown the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust elephant and rhino orphanage, the first of its kind in Africa. While David and Daphne had raised many elephants together in Tsavo it was the neonate babies that had proved extremely challenging. It was in Nairobi that Daphne ultimately refined the milk formula and meticulous husbandry needed to successfully hand-raise vulnerable infant elephants, knowledge that has gone on to save the lives of quite literally hundreds of elephants, not only in Kenya, but across Africa and into India, Myanmar and beyond. The same is true of her work in the rescue and hand rearing of orphaned black and white rhinos.

Daphne was twice recognised by Queen Elizabeth II for her conservation achievements, first with an MBE in 1989, and later appointed a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 2006, the first knighthood for Kenya since the country's independence in 1963. Daphne received many other accolades over the years; she was recognised in UNEP's elite Global 500 Roll of Honor in 1992 and in 2000 was awarded an honorary doctorate in veterinary medicine and surgery from Glasgow University. In 1993, in her beloved Kenya, President Moi celebrated her achievements by awarding Daphne a *Moran of the Burning Spear*.

Daphne's family, friends and supporters were perhaps more proud of these awards than Daphne herself, and that is testament to the character of my mother. Daphne was incredibly humbled by such accolades, she did what she did because how could she not, it was that simple. Daphne was fierce in the protection of elephants when she needed to be, playing an important role in driving through the 1989 ivory ban and advocating for greater protection for the species until her last breath.

Daphne stayed true to herself throughout her lifetime, and in her own words "...what a life I have led; to have found love, been immersed in nature, had a family of all shapes and sizes, and witnessed my daughters find their own happiness and be able to enjoy my four grandchildren".

Family was everything to Daphne and as the founder of the SWT; the importance of family has been woven into the very fabric of the charity. It is demonstrated through Daphne's success in raising the elephants, with more than 30 calves having been born to orphaned elephants rescued and raised by Daphne and her team, now living back in the wild.

Through her books, numerous television programs and documentaries focusing on her work, Daphne brought the wondrous ways of elephants and the natural world to the attention of people outside Africa. Scientists have confirmed findings about elephant behaviour that Daphne observed and shared long ago. She helped people better understand these giants and their incredible capacity for love and forgiveness, qualities that she believed we could all learn from to better ourselves. She ever stressed the importance of our recognising that we are not separate from nature, she would say "...we need the natural world far more than it needs us". Daphne was a teacher to us all and her legacy is immeasurable. Daphne died knowing that she will continue to make a difference each and every day upon a land that she held so dear to her heart through the work of the SWT, thanks to a dedicated team she leaves behind. Daphne was fortunate to live long enough to witness the successful reintroduction of over 100 orphans returned to the wild in Tsavo East NP.

For those wishing to know more about who Daphne was, I encourage the reading of her autobiography; *An African Love Story*, which presents the most wonderful window into her life as seen through her own eyes. (See colour plates: page viii).