

## **TRAUMATISED ELEPHANTS SAVED BY ARA**

*An anonymous 'phone call to Steve Smit who contacted fellow activist Michele Pickover, also from Animal Rights Africa (ARA) started off a chain of events culminating in a massive humanitarian operation involving the relocation of nine traumatised elephants from the Thukela Biosphere Reserve near Weenen (place of weeping) in KwaZulu-Natal, to the Sanwild Sanctuary in Limpopo Province.*

In 1993 ten young elephants survived a cull in the Kruger National Park (KNP). They were captured as they stayed close to their dead and dying mothers. The traumatized calves took with them the memories of their families deliberately butchered in front of them by the KNP.

For one 18 month old the trauma was just too much and he did not make it. Twelve years later the eldest male was hunted. Another male, 2 ½ years old on arrival, also died. Unfortunately we do not know the circumstances of his death. The surviving seven formed their own family unit and started having babies of their own. The group now numbers nine.

But land that had been their home for the past 14 years had systematically shrunk because of land claims and lack of management in the biosphere. Mark Calverley, who owned the Zingela Safari and River Rafting Company and who was one of the original people who brought the young elephants to the Biosphere, estimates that what had originally been 100 000 hectares had dropped to about three or four thousand. The biosphere, which once had more than 30 members, disbanded in 2000 as a result of a number of successful land claims lodged in the area. As a result, fences had not been maintained and the elephants had been able to walk through onto the adjacent farmland, causing damage and great unhappiness in the area. As Calverley remarked, "The government buys land; they don't buy the animals on it. But then what happens to the animals that live there? One cannot expect the owners whose land is being bought to remain responsible for animals once they are gone." So the elephants now found themselves landless and in March this year it was decided to get the happy hunters in to remove them. This was when ARA came into the picture and managed to negotiate a last minute stay of execution.

The priority was to find a suitable home for the elephants and to start fundraising for the move, a massive undertaking involving the logistical nightmare of organizing the rescue and translocation, upgrading the fences at Sanwild and acquiring the necessary permits. Costs were estimated at R 900 000.00

But, as Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881) had said: "Every noble work is at first impossible", and so for the next eight months the activists worked towards the goal until it was all systems go in mid October when the translocation team had arrived at Weenen together with the helicopter. It was just a matter of finding the ellies, darting and loading them and driving off. The latest report about the elephants' whereabouts was that they were a mere five kilometres down the road.

And then there were unexpected complications. The elephants had moved to an inaccessible place to the side of a hill covered in dense bush. The team had to return to base and re-strategise.

Douw Grobler, a wildlife veterinarian and experienced translocation specialist,

considered it best to dart two of the elephants and fit them with radio collars. Then the next day they could easily be found and translocated. The helicopter took off again and darted the matriarch and a bull who were by now in the valley. The collars were fitted.

However, Dr. Grobler was rather puzzled by their out-of-character response to the helicopter. They went totally berserk. It then transpired that, not only had they watched their families being butchered, but while in the Biosphere they had been harassed with helicopters and shotguns firing rubber bullets. So how were they to know that this helicopter was there to help, not kill them?

The next day they had, under cover of darkness, moved even further away from the planned capture site and into an even more inaccessible area – this time high up on a hill. And so the capture was postponed.

This brought a new problem – more money would be needed to start the rescue operation all over again. But by this time the plight of the orphans and the courage and determination of the animal rights group had captured public imagination and the extra money was donated.

On Friday 10<sup>th</sup> November the process was started all over again. Within eighteen hours the entire rescue team from as far away as Cape Town and Pretoria was assembled on site and the rescue got underway. This time it went well. All the elephants were darted, loaded into trucks and transported to their new home at Sanwild, a sixteen hour journey north. The youngest baby, who had sustained a tear in her ear when she was accidentally gored by Gangile, was stitched up by the veterinarian when they got to Sanwild.

There were tears in the eyes of many when the first elephant, a large bull, stepped tentatively from the truck onto the offloading ramp, stood for a while sniffing the air and then rambled down into the holding boma followed by two other elephants. Elation turned to trepidation for a few anxious moments when they broke out of their boma within three minutes after their arrival and stormed off, but a day later they had all settled in an area not far from the boma, exploring their beautiful new home surrounded by hills, a mountain and tranquil valleys – with not a human in sight.

We think they will be happy there.

*This operation was made possible through donations from international organizations such as the Bill Jordan-, Born Free- and Brigitte Bardot Foundation as well as local organizations such as African Blessings and Beauty Without Cruelty and many ordinary, animal-caring South Africans.*

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Before I refute every hunting lie ever espoused, let me begin with a quote from the great philosopher Pythagoras: "As long as humanity continues to be the ruthless destroyer of other beings, we will never know health or peace. For as long as people massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed those who sow the seed of murder and pain will never reap joy and love."

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