

HighBeam Research

Title: BUSH BABIES; Within weeks of her birth, Saba Douglas-Hamilton met Virgo the elephant in the African bush that was home to them both. Their friendship spanned 26 years, so when the BBC needed someone to make two documentaries on elephants, Saba was the obvious choice. Nigel Blundell meets the woman whose love of wild places and animals has led to a career in television.(Weekend)

Date: 12/29/2001; **Publication:** Daily Telegraph (London, England); **Author:** Blundell, Nigel

Saba Douglas-Hamilton was introduced to her extended family when she was six weeks old and her mother carried her on to the open grassland of the Great Rift Valley and showed her to the elephants. That was the first time that Saba met Virgo. Virgo was a very special elephant. She already knew and trusted Saba's father, Iain, and mother, Oria, who lived and worked in Lake Manyara National Park in Tanzania. So when Saba was born, it was perfectly natural for one new mother to introduce her first born to another. After all, they would be spending much of their lives together.

Virgo came forward slowly, with her own calf padding alongside, and reached out her trunk. She ran it gently over the tiny new body, sniffing curiously. Smell is the elephants' primary sense and, although Saba only knows of this meeting through her mother's account, Virgo undoubtedly remembered the scent of Saba long afterwards.

"As I grew up, she remained a friend," says Saba. "I would go into Manyara to visit all the 500 elephants there, but it was Virgo I really wanted to see." Virgo was easily recognisable because she had been born with a single right tusk and she was always the shy one, the gentlest of the herd.

Tall, tanned and expressively lithe, Saba Douglas-Hamilton is still a creature of the African plains. Even her name has an African resonance. She had initially been named Iasa by local tribesmen, but, because she was born at 7pm on the seventh day of the seventh month of 1970, she was renamed Saba, which means seven.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton had first come to the northern Rift Valley as a 20-year-old student in 1962 to study the elephants of Lake Manyara National Park for his PhD and stayed to fight ivory poaching. He was to become one of the signal voices warning the world of the threat to East Africa's big game. Along the way, he married Oria, a farmer's daughter, and they had two children, Saba and Dudu, who is a year younger.

"I grew up knowing two things," says Saba. "That my father was a hero and that

elephants were part of my family. I grew up with them, in Manyara and then in Kenya, where I went to school. I spent as much time as I was allowed in the bush, watching elephants and learning how to behave when close to them.

"When you are around one particular family a lot, they begin to recognise the vehicles and then, if you are especially privileged, the occupants. So, as a little girl, I knew elephants intimately and luckily a few of them knew me, too.

"The elephants I knew best were a bull called Casimir, a formidable matriarch called Boadicea and, of course, Virgo, who was a young girl of 18 when my father first met her in Manyara. She had been as curious about him as he was about her and one day she dared to bridge the gap and put her trunk in my father's hand. That sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. I don't think there has ever been such a trusting relationship between a human and a wild elephant.

"Because of my father, Virgo trusted me, too. When I was only four, I'd stand at the edge of the herd and Virgo would come over to greet me by sniffing all around my head with her trunk while I patted her on the legs."

Getting close to elephants was much more difficult in those days. They were naturally wild and aggressive. Nowadays, they are much more timid, partly because they are accustomed to tourists, but principally, and perversely, because of the illegal ivory trade.

When a family group is threatened, the matriarch, usually the largest and most ferocious, will come forward to challenge the interloper. Because the largest animals also have the largest tusks, they are always the first to be shot by poachers. The smaller, more timid animals remain. Man has therefore already genetically altered the nature of the species.

"Matriarchs will always put themselves between their families and danger, even when they are incredibly frightened themselves," says Saba. "Boadicea was probably the fiercest I ever knew - huge, loud and absolutely terrifying. She was a queen of elephants with a very large family to defend. One of my earliest memories is of her making a warning charge towards us, storming out of the bush, trashing the trees with her tusks. I was petrified. Now all the ferocious ones have been shot, including Boadicea."

Because of increasing political disputes, the Tanzanian border was closed in 1978 and the Douglas-Hamiltons were forced to leave for Nairobi. Soon afterwards, ivory poaching in Manyara exploded. Saba refers to it simply as the "elephant genocide".

Separated from his elephant family, Iain Douglas-Hamilton took on a new challenge - to save from extinction the elephants of Uganda, which was in turmoil following the overthrow of Idi Amin. Their new home, set high on a bank of the Nile in Murchison Falls National Park, was known by the locals as "Mummy Queen's House". Built for the Queen Mother in colonial days, it had been a beautiful three-bedroom bungalow, but all that was left was a shell, with no doors or windows.

"We slept on the floor," says Saba, who was 11 at the time. "At night, we jammed camp chairs into the doorways to stop the hyenas coming in. A family of hippos lived on the bank of the Nile just 50 yards away, so we had to be careful about wandering around."

Iain Douglas-Hamilton had been given the task of restoring Uganda's three national parks. Under Amin's lawless regime, poaching had become endemic and it was a race to prevent the big game from being obliterated. Elephants were in particular danger. The thousands that had once roamed Murchison were down to a mere 300.

"My father had to find the former staff," says Saba. "Amin's soldiers had been picking up anyone who was a member of the wrong tribe. The warden of one of the parks had been arrested and put in a tipper truck with a load of disabled people from the streets of Kampala.

"They were being taken to a bridge over the Nile to be tipped into the river above Murchison Falls, but the warden managed to escape and join us."

Iain Douglas-Hamilton was also in danger. "He was shot at all the time," says Saba. "His plane was hit three times by gunfire from bandits on the ground. He flew between the parks wearing a flak jacket and sitting on armour plating."

For a girl about to enter her teens, life in Uganda was frightening. "The country was torn by civil war," says Saba. "We'd watch the rival forces fighting it out across the other side of the Nile. Everything had been looted. Nothing worked. It was a desperate time, lots of gunfire, people starving, children with bloated bellies. I would go with my mother into Lusaka to hand out food to the children. It was an extraordinary place."

When she was 13, Saba was sent to boarding school in Britain, then to St Andrew's University to study African social anthropology. Her thesis, on "concepts of love and sexuality as articulated in song, poetry, dance and day-to-day conversation" among the Muslim fishermen of the Kenyan coast, handily took her back to East Africa.

Her father, meanwhile, was gaining an international reputation as a documentary filmmaker, author and pioneering conservationist. He embarked on a series of pan-African surveys that proved that the elephant populations were dwindling at an alarming rate as ivory poaching increased greatly in the 1980s.

It was inevitable that Saba would follow in her father's footsteps. She first worked in Namibia for the Save the Rhino Trust, which delivered the black desert rhino from extinction, then ran a conservation programme for American university undergraduates in Tanzania, before finally joining her father in 1997 as executive officer of his charity, Save

the Elephants.

The organisation's field headquarters moved to Samburu National Park in northern Kenya, the last place on Earth where there is a large, free-ranging elephant population. There, Iain's team of researchers began radio-collaring and satellite-tracking all 750 animals. It has recently provided details of some surprising and mysterious behaviour.

With military planning, elephants send a reconnaissance party into new territory and then wait up to three weeks before moving the whole family there. And when two herds approach, they remain 18 to 25 miles apart while performing pirouettes around each other, coming together at seemingly predetermined intervals.

How and why do they do that? Saba's theory is seismic communication. "We believe infrasound travels in waves through the surface of the Earth and that the elephants pick it up through their feet as far as 20 miles away. That might explain their uncanny ability to sense where there is rain. It's possible that they are picking up seismic waves from thunderstorms hundreds of miles away."

The greatest blow to the work of Save the Elephants came when, in 1997, the Convention of the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) relaxed the ban on ivory export in three countries: Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. "That doesn't sound much of a concession," says Saba, "but the problem is that if you trade in ivory, then you feed the demand for ivory and there is a huge demand for it. When the total ban on ivory was originally imposed by CITES in 1989, the entire international trading network closed down, the price of ivory dropped and people at last stopped killing elephants. Lifting the ban will restart the slaughter.

"So the CITES decision in 1997 was a horrendous blow to me and my father. We realised that something we loved so very much was in danger of being devoured by money and politics and corruption. It was awful; it was ugly."

Encouragingly, at last year's CITES conference in Nairobi, 33 African states voted to reject a reopening of the trade despite pressure from southern states, principally South Africa and Botswana.

"The notion that the ivory debate is a dispute between Africans and Western wildlife activists is not true," says Saba. "The vast majority of African nations are against the trade, but theirs is the quiet voice of the continent. They just don't shout the loudest. The southern African states want to make money from their large elephant populations, but they have never been exposed to the kind of poaching that has gone on in the rest of Africa."

Saba has seen the results. "During the elephant genocide of the 1980s, the population fell from

1.3 million to 600,000. In Manyara, all the old girls my dad had known were slaughtered by poachers.

"Only three survived. One was named Tuskless because she had no tusks and was therefore useless to ivory poachers. One was Broken Leg, a female with one useless leg who survived only because the poachers believe that if you kill a handicapped animal the handicap will pass to your family. And then there was Virgo.

"Virgo, our Virgo, miraculously survived. Why her? She had one single long tusk, but it was good ivory so she should have been a target. The rest of her family, Boadicea and all the great matriarchs, had been killed around her, yet somehow she escaped. The shy young lady I had known was now the largest and probably the oldest female left in Manyara."

It was not until 1990 that Saba saw Virgo for the first time in a decade. The ivory trade had just been shut down and the border with Kenya reopened, allowing the Douglas-Hamiltons to return to Tanzania. They arrived in Manyara unaware of the fate that had befallen their elephants.

Their first shock was when they saw that the park, which had been a beautiful, open grassland with acacia trees, had turned into a mass of thick, tangled, thorny bush. Then they realised that most of the larger elephants, which normally break down the bushes, had gone.

"We looked for Virgo in her general range, never expecting to find her," says Saba. "We looked and looked for a week and one day, by complete chance, she stepped out of vegetation in front of us. We stopped the car. All our hearts were beating.

"We didn't know what to expect. All we knew was that the elephants in Manyara had become very frightened. There had been terrible poaching and very few tourists, so they had naturally been running away from vehicles.

"But Virgo just stood there. Slowly, her family emerged and took up position behind her. My father got out of the car and walked towards her until there was only about six feet between them. He began calling gently: 'Virgo, Virgo. How are you, my girl? What's the matter?'

"And you could imagine that, in all those years since she had last seen him and had last smelled his smell, all her associations with man had been of violence and death. All the elephant carcasses she had come across would have had their faces chopped off and would have smelled of man. She had seen her family and all the other elephants of Manyara being slaughtered around her and suddenly this person had arrived and stood right in front of her and, being a man, was an immediate threat.

"She didn't do anything but put her head down and stretch her ears out at 45 degrees, which meant she was listening, and you could also see that she was thinking, very slowly, but very deeply. An elephant's whole world is smell and she was obviously going back in her mind, thinking: 'Do I remember this man?'

"She stood there for about 10 minutes and we were all in the car just weeping with the emotion. Then suddenly, she remembered her family and she just whisked around and went back into the bush. My father turned to us and he was so moved that he said: 'It's better that she learns to distrust us.' "

Saba did not see Virgo again until 1996 when, again by complete chance, the old elephant emerged from the bush and walked across the track in front of her car. Virgo ignored the vehicle and the encounter was over in seconds.

The saga of Saba, Virgo and the lost elephant family arose again earlier this year when she accompanied her father on a trip to Britain to discuss a television documentary about the work of his charity. The meeting was with a BBC executive, Sarah Ford, who not only produces many of the Natural History Unit's major wildlife series but is also its unofficial talent-spotter. Saba, who had been used as an adviser on a few previous wildlife documentaries, was signed up to make the two programmes about elephants. They are being screened next month.

She was also introduced to Alastair Fothergill, who had just completed his blockbuster Blue Planet series and was seeking a partner for a unique television experiment - to test human survival skills against a group of chimpanzees.

"Saba was a natural for it," he says. "She understood the African bush and could work with animals, but was used to the big, wide spaces and had never experienced the claustrophobia and darkness of the rainforest. That's what I wanted: she and I would go into the jungle as two people who knew something about the subject, but who were totally out of their environment. We had distinct roles, I as the primate expert and she as the survival expert."

"I was the forager and he was the big brave hunter," says Saba. "It was a strange necessity and we naturally fell into that rhythm."

For their experiment, Alastair and Saba were abandoned in the Tai Forest of the Ivory Coast, where the temperature is 85F and the humidity is 90 per cent. They had miniature cameras, but no food, water, knives, tools or safety devices. Their only means of survival was to follow a group of chimpanzees and live as

they lived.

The humans slept under the trees where the chimps nested. They awoke with them at dawn and followed them through the rainforest until dusk. They watched the chimps tear a colobus monkey apart and eat it alive. Apart from that, they ate only what the apes ate: mainly fruit and termites. They themselves felt they were being eaten alive by insects.

"We even groomed each other as the chimps do," says Saba. "We pulled the thorns out of each other and inspected our infected bites and boils. Nothing heals in that humidity and your skin looks as if you've spent the day in the bath. We became dirty, smelly, dehydrated, disoriented and downright exhausted. We felt like giving up after two days."

In fact, the pair survived five days and four nights before abandoning the experiment when, by chance, the chimps led them close to a village. Their ordeal will be shown on BBC1 next month as *Going Ape*.

Fothergill is full of praise for Saba. "She is a future star for sure," he says. "She has fantastic knowledge, wonderful enthusiasm and she doesn't worry about getting dirty. Oh yes, and she looks great."

Saba has just been lined up to become a joint presenter, along with Jonathan Scott and Simon King, of the next series of the long-running Big Cat Diary, to be shown later this year. Before working on that, however, she returned to Tanzania with a film crew on a more personal mission: to take her father back to Manyara to try once more to find their favourite elephant.

"I reckoned Virgo would have been about 55 and nearing the end of her life, so I wanted her and my dad to see each other one last time," she says. "They had not met since 1990, but I felt sure that, for her, there was still this one man whom she'd known all of her young life, who smelled different from other men, who meant something to her.

"We looked everywhere for her. I was so desperate for her to be there that, as we drove around, every elephant I saw made my heart leap into my throat."

When, after a week's search, they came across members of Virgo's extended family, but without the old matriarch, Saba finally had to admit she was dead, probably through old age.

Her teeth would have begun to wear down and she would simply have starved. Her family would have stayed with her for as long as they could. When she slumped to the ground, they would have placed their tusks beneath her body and tried to raise her back on to her feet.

"I have seen them do that with poached elephants," says Saba. "It is the most tragic sight on earth. Elephants very visibly mourn for the loss of one of their family. They also have a fascination with the bones of their dead. If they come across an elephant carcass, they'll linger over it for ages and put the bones in their mouths and smell them and touch them and taste them. Sometimes, they will lift a bone, take it away and finally throw it some distance."

That is what would have happened to Virgo. She did not die unmourned by her family, neither elephant

nor human.

`Elephant - The Search For Virgo' will be screened on January 20 and `Living With the Elephants' on January 27, both on BBC2 at about 5.15pm. To find out more about the charity, visit www.savetheelephants.com.

`Going Ape' can be seen on BBC1 on January 9 at 9pm.

This document provided by HighBeam Research at <http://www.highbeam.com>