Ivory Trade Orphans

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust runs an orphanage that rescues and rehabilitates orphaned baby elephants from far and wide in Kenya. Recently, while in Kenya for a safari holiday, I had the privilege of being taken on a ‘behind the scenes tour’ of the elephant orphanage that is located on the outskirts of Nairobi in Kenya. Heavily dependent on charitable support, the orphanage can accommodate about 30 elephant calves, each of which has a keeper who cares for them day and night. During the day, the elephants roam as a herd with their keepers in nearby woodlands and forests. Just before sunset they return to their individual stables to have a very big drink of milk, get rugged up and retire to sleep for the night. The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust has successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated over 150 young elephants back into the wild elephant herds of the Tsavo National Park in Kenya.

Tragically the majority of these baby elephants are orphaned when their mothers are slaughtered by poachers who then cut off the tusks to sell on the illegal ivory black market. If not shot by the poachers, the elephant calves are left to fend alone, so they are frequently malnourished, sick, disorientated and traumatized by the time they are rescued.

Elephants are currently being ruthlessly and savagely slaughtered in Africa at the rate of one elephant every fifteen minutes. That is 30,000 elephants killed each year in Africa.

The trade in ivory is a multi-billion dollar industry, with most of the ivory going to China to be carved into ornaments. In Beijing for example, one can obtain a degree in the fine art of ivory carving, and the sale of both legal and illegal ivory is openly evident. Ivory trinkets are highly prized by the rising affluent middle class as symbols of their wealth, status and power.

There are some growing and powerful initiatives to counteract the ivory poaching. However the callous poachers are heavily armed with the same guns and missiles used by the military in combat, and with the help of night vision goggles and helicopters they descend and kill swiftly. Poaching is an extremely lucrative business that is fuelled by poverty, greed and corruption, and it is also intimately connected with some terrorist groups.

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust deserves our generous support for the dedicated work they do for animal welfare. During my visit to the orphanage, I was touched by their work so I ‘adopted’ an elephant, and will provide regular donations to the Trust. However, the David
Sheldrick program can only hope to assist these orphaned victims of the ivory trade. It cannot stop the ivory poaching.

More powerful strategies are needed to diminish the demand for ivory, but the best way to achieve this goal is not clear. One approach is to make the possession, processing and trading of ivory illegal in those nations, such as China, where it is currently a legal activity. More controversial is the idea of harvesting the tusks from anaesthetized elephants, and ‘flood- ing the market’ with cheap ivory, thus making the ivory trade unattractive to the poachers.

As the largest living mammals on earth, elephants are such majestic and wonderful animals. What a tragedy it would be if we do not do enough, soon enough, and the elephants in the wild become extinct in our lifetime.

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