

Elephant Orphanage

by Suzanne Sherman

Four-year-old Kilaguni rushes toward Kibo, a three-year-old. His head bobs and ears flap with excitement. They playfully entangle trunks before pushing their heads together in a contest of force. Then, at the sound of a bottle being prepared by a keeper, Kilaguni and Kibo abruptly break for a midday feeding.

Both Kibo and Kilaguni came to the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's elephant nursery in Kenya when they were just infants. Kibo was two weeks old when he was found trapped in a well dug for cattle. Kilaguni was brought to the nursery with injuries to his tail and ears at six months old. Their mothers were nowhere to be found. Young injured and orphaned African elephants, like Kibo and Kilaguni, can heal and grow into healthy adults at the nursery, followed by a rehabilitation center in Tsavo National Park.

The nursery provides the elephants with food, shelter, and something else key to their survival: relationships. Elephants are highly social animals that can't survive without a family. In the wild, young elephants are raised by the females of their families—their mothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and grandmothers. Elephants form strong attachments within these groups, bonds that last their whole lives, up to 70 years. The strength of these bonds is apparent in the grief they seem to show when a member of their family dies.

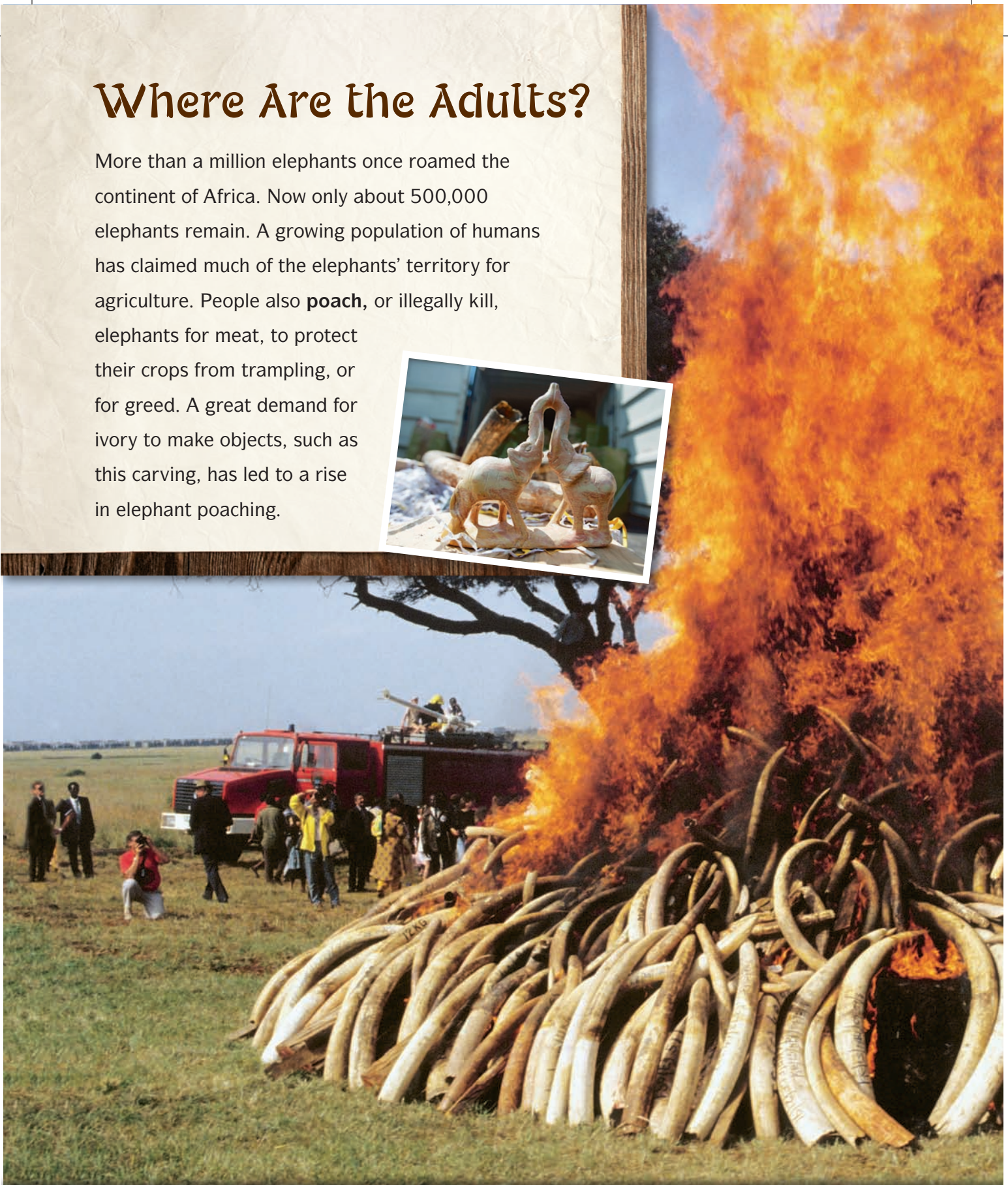
From playful to shy to mischievous, each elephant in the orphanage has its own personality. For some, the stress of losing their family can result in aggressive or aloof behavior. But with the help of fellow orphaned elephants and caring humans, most of the elephants make a full recovery.



Social bonds are key to an elephant's well-being.

Where Are the Adults?

More than a million elephants once roamed the continent of Africa. Now only about 500,000 elephants remain. A growing population of humans has claimed much of the elephants' territory for agriculture. People also **poach**, or illegally kill, elephants for meat, to protect their crops from trampling, or for greed. A great demand for ivory to make objects, such as this carving, has led to a rise in elephant poaching.

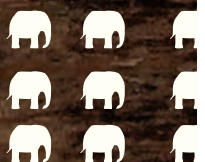



ELEPHANT POPULATION DECLINE

4

Less than half a century ago, there were an estimated 1.3 million African elephants. Habitat loss and poaching has brought the number down to around 500,000.

1979





Elephant tusks are taken from poachers and burned. That shows the government's resolve to end poaching.

Tens of thousands of elephants are poached for their tusks each year. In 1989, a worldwide ban was placed on ivory trade. The ban seemed to be working. Replacement materials were found to make objects, such as piano keys and billiard balls, that were once made of ivory. Some wild elephant herds began to make a comeback. But ivory from elephants that died of natural causes could still be sold. In China, Thailand, and the Philippines, ivory is carved into religious objects such as statues and charms. The value of religious objects such as these has made the price of ivory soar. Now, dealers with dollar signs in their eyes obtain and sell any ivory they can get, even if it means elephants were poached for it. The law against poaching is difficult to enforce and many get away with breaking it.

Elephant tusks are actually enlarged incisor teeth used mostly for defense by both males and females. The tusks continue growing over the course of the elephant's life. With tusks up to six feet in length, adult elephants are most sought after by poachers. Many young elephants are left to fend for themselves—such as many of the orphans of the Wildlife Trust.

2012



One white elephant represents
100,000 elephants in the wild.

Growing Up

Raising elephants in the Orphans' Project is a three-part process. From the nursery, the elephants progress to a rehabilitation center. Then they begin the transition back into the wild. Baby elephants depend on their mothers' milk for the first two years of their lives. In the nursery, human keepers feed the baby elephants every three hours with bottles—large bottles! It took the project's founder, Daphne Sheldrick, and her husband decades of trial and error to get the ingredients for the milk formula just right.

Human keepers and fellow elephants create a surrogate family for the orphans.

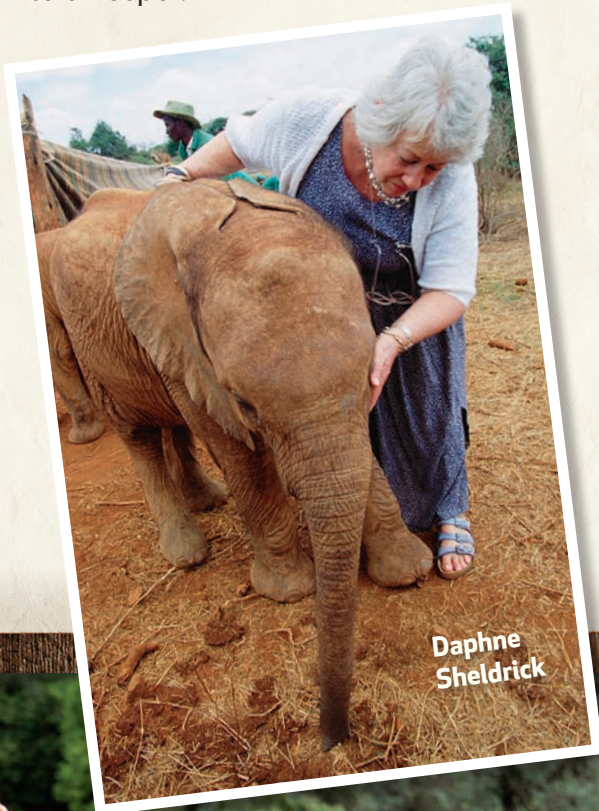
Older female elephants especially enjoy caring for and protecting the younger ones. Keepers stay with the babies 24 hours a day. They feed the elephants, keep them warm with blankets, give them plenty of time for social play, and even snuggle up next to them at night. Keepers sleep next to a different elephant each night so the elephants don't attach too strongly to only one person.

Around the age of two, when the orphans are no longer milk dependent, they are moved to one of two rehabilitation centers in Tsavo East National Park. There, keepers introduce the elephants to the bush, where



Caring nursery keepers act as stand-ins for the baby elephants' family members.

they learn to browse on natural vegetation to supplement their milk diet. At noon they have a mud bath, and at night they sleep in protected housing, though no longer next to a keeper.



Vegetation is not the only thing the orphans discover as they venture into the bush. There they will meet wild elephants for the first time. From encounters with wild elephants, orphans learn things humans can't teach them. For instance, they learn how to communicate over long distances using infrasound, rumblings too low in frequency for us to hear. When they are five or six years old, orphans may decide to stay out with wild elephants for a night or two. One adventurous female learned to open the gate with her trunk to let herself out to visit a wild herd. These escapades mark the beginning of the orphans' transition back into the wild.



Back Into the Wild

The final step of the Orphans' Project is the reintroduction of the elephants into the wild. This happens when, and only when, an orphan chooses a wild family to join and decides to leave for good. The elephants are torn between joining the wild group and leaving their orphanage family. They will often leave and come back many times.

Eight to ten years can pass during this in-between phase, in which an elephant has "one foot" in each world, before it is fully wild again.

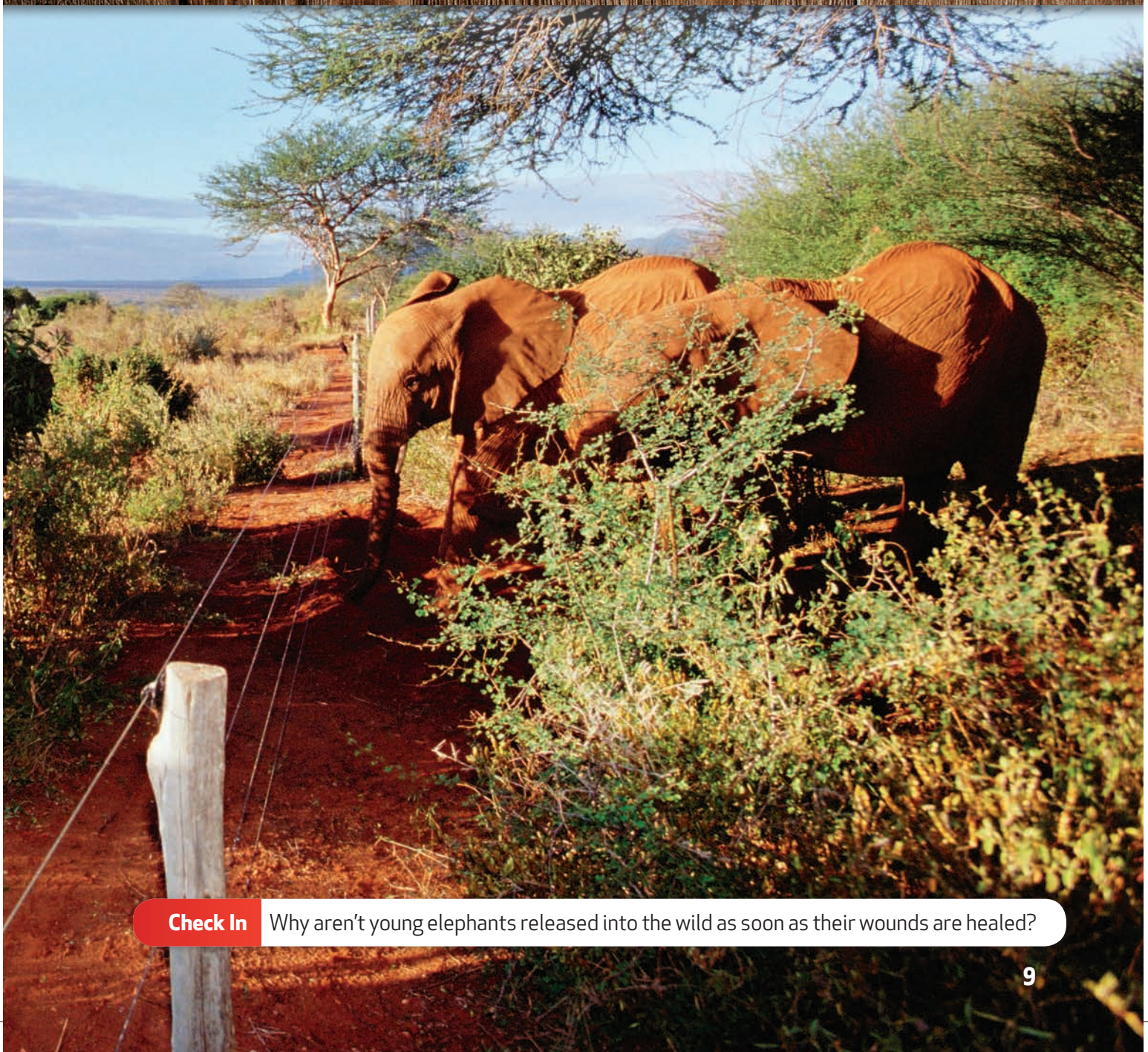
The Orphan's Project has been very successful. Most of the orphans that survive recover fully and function as healthy adults. So far, more than a hundred

Orphan and wild elephants mingle over a fence.



elephants have been raised and returned to the wild. And they come back to visit! Famous for their exceptional memories, elephants never forget their keepers. One female leader, named Emily, came back to visit the keepers many years after living in the wild. She had something she wanted to show them. It was a new baby!

At the time of this writing, Kibo and Kilaguni are thriving in the rehabilitation center. Kilaguni has taught himself to balance a football on his back and can drink on his own, holding the bottle with his trunk. Years from now, when they are ready, Kibo and Kilaguni will venture out to the place where they were born to roam, the African **savanna**.



Check In Why aren't young elephants released into the wild as soon as their wounds are healed?