

Africa's Elephant Kingdom

The National Mall is blossoming with big screens. Kitty-corner from the Air and Space Museum's Langley Theater on the Mall is the new IMAX theater of the Natural History Museum. Nestled within a just-completed renovation of the west courtyard of the museum, the theater was financed in great part by the Discovery Channel, and, appropriately enough, its IMAX premiere IMAX is the Discovery Channel Pictures' *Africa's Elephant Kingdom*.

For the animal-friendly channel, it is a fine choice of subject: a close-up, even unique, look at the grandest--and probably the most intelligent--wild land mammal in its fascinating, familial setting. The film focuses on African elephants (the ones with the big ears) in Amboseli National Park on the southern border of Kenya, a mostly plains area in the shadow on Mount Kilimanjaro. It eschews the standard documentary format to tell a tale of one pachyderm family.

That story is narrated by the massive, 60-year-old "Old Bull" (voiced by actor Avery Brooks), who introduces us to his clan, led by his cousin, the venerable matriarch "Torn Ear," as the family welcomes its newest member, christened "Little Bull." We follow the playfulness and progress of the newcomer in the ponderous, but very nurturing bosom of the clan--made up entirely of females and youngsters. Separately, Old Bull tells us of the solitary life of bull society, a world of wanderers who train for the day when they must fight for dominance and mates. Drama intrudes with the coming of a drought, which sends Little Bull's clan piteously roaming across sun-cracked earth and past bone-white trees. Yet when the rains do finally come, a new season resuscitates the clan and endows it with another new elephant calf.

This simple, "Circle of Life" story is a concession by the filmmakers to the family audience which they hope will see *Africa's Elephant Kingdom* over the next umpteen years. It unabashedly anthropomorphizes the elephants, tugging at our sympathy (as if we needed it in observing these magnificent beasts) by signaling all of the traits they share with humankind. This can make the film cloying at times, yet it can also be undeniably touching, especially in scenes where the elephants' genuine fellow-feeling is evoked--as when they tenderly caress the bones of dead elephants. These animals don't have to be made human; they just have to be seen as sentient creatures.

The real kick of the film isn't the story anyway; it's the finely observed details of elephant life that the IMAX process shows us. These include the spectacular setting of the African savanna and the delicate rituals of the clan itself. Some sequences are unique in the nature documentary realm, such as a full-blown assault by one matriarch on the film crew where she comes to envelope the screen. Another incident, where elephants from a totally different clan observe a dead infant, then come over to touch it and appear to commiserate with the baby's mother, was unique in 30 years of observing elephants for Iain Douglas-Hamilton, one of the world's foremost authorities on elephants and scientific consultant on *Africa's Elephant Kingdom*.

Most particularly, it is the film's riveting close ups that make the viewer so intimate with the elephants' elastic black hairs, deep, wistful eyes, wondrous Slinky trunks--right up to the leathery lattice that is their hide. The film makes you feel both the dry dust in the elephants' nostrils and the sweet mud that slides down their backs.

(The film is not formally rated, but should be considered a "G," although smaller children may have problems with the scenes of dead elephants.)

(June 1999)

A Chat with Iain Douglas-Hamilton

From his early twenties, Dr. Iain Douglas-Hamilton has made a name as an authority on the African elephant. His landmark study of elephant behavior in Tanzania's Lake Manyara National Park won him a Ph.D. from Oxford and led to the book *Among the Elephants*, a popular study co-written by Douglas-Hamilton and his wife, Oriana, which introduced laymen both to the complex world of elephant society and to the bush-living Douglas-Hamiltons. He was in Washington last month for the opening of *Africa's Elephant Kingdom* and to talk about his role in the IMAX film.

As the movie's scientific consultant, Dr. Douglas-Hamilton's principal role was to help the film crew learn how to behave around the elephants and capture the animals' most interesting behavior. During the six months of shooting by producer/director Michael Caulfield and his crew, a daily duty was going out in a light plane every morning to scout elephants to use that day. In this task, Douglas-Hamilton was aided immeasurably by a young Masai woman, Katito Sayielel, who, he said, "could identify 900 individual elephants by sight."

The naturalist, now a native of Kenya, selected Amboseli game park as a site because the elephants had been well studied and were quite habituated to man. "The elephants eventually got habituated to the camera, too," he said. "We could get very close to (them)." Getting the right footage wasn't always easy, of course, Douglas-Hamilton added, mentioning an example of one mock charge that ended when "the whole of the lens was covered in elephant spittle." Aiming to get a shot of a live birth, the film crew tracked a pregnant cow for 24 hours, but failed to get the shot, having to settle for covering it in the narration.

He noted that, for a picture billed for the entire family, the filmmakers had agreed to show "no humping or dumping," although one very discrete mating sequence (at a distance) is included. Douglas-Hamilton also admitted to "helping nature along a little," in the sequence where littered elephant bones are sensitively fondled by members of a herd. The bones were "provided" by the filmmakers rather than found naturally in the wild, but he defended the sequence because it depicted "real behavior that has been observed many times." It is among the most touching moments of the film.

Douglas-Hamilton was one of the key voices crying out against the "20 year Holocaust" against the poaching of the East African elephant which ended in 1989 with Kenya's ivory ban. In 1993, he founded the "Save the Elephants" project, an effort to secure a future for the species and develop a sounder relationship between the elephant and man. The project will receive a portion of the proceeds from screenings of *Africa's Elephant Kingdom*.