

DANGEROUS DELINQUENTS

It looks very frightening, but Jabu and Doug do this every day. Doug is one half of a husband-and-wife team that rehabilitates dangerous, delinquent elephants that may otherwise be destroyed.

At Living With Elephants there is an outreach project that helps to educate local villagers in the ways of the world's largest land mammal. There is also a human-elephant conflict (HEC) mitigation project, which is a fancy way of describing a piece of research set up to try to find out why clashes occur. Doug explains that problems arise when humans and elephants compete for the same land, and his organisation is trying to establish a method of coping with situations where the elephant population puts humans under pressure, and vice versa.

Out in the bush, Doug treats his elephants just like friends. He talks to them, he gives them treats and has an incredible relationship with them. This is a bond that Doug has developed throughout his life. He's been involved with elephants since the 1970s, studying them, making films and getting involved in their conservation.

Today he cares for three

elephants – Jabu, Thembi and Morula. In return they help educate visitors on elephant behaviour. As we walk beside these colossal mammals, their trunks draped casually over our shoulders, Doug explains how these former delinquents came into his care and how they can now be trusted to interact with people.

REFORMED CHARACTERS

Understandably, Groves doesn't want to dwell on how they came to be seen as a danger, but they have been involved with incidents of HEC that would almost certainly have led to their being destroyed had not Doug stepped in to save the day. So have any of his herd been responsible for the death of a human? The answer is that they have, but Doug is absolutely certain that these gentle giants are all reformed characters.

As we walk through the bush Doug shows me a little of the daily routine of the African Elephant. We watch them feeding, pushing over trees, taking a mud bath and taking a break from the glare of the sun under some spreading acacia trees. The longer I am with these animals the more confident I feel with them and within a few hours I

start to get a feel for their different personalities.

While Doug is giving a lecture on trunk anatomy, using Jabu as his model, Thembi starts to feel isolated. Thembi – whose name means 'trust' – has never liked being apart from her brother and even after a few moments makes this clear. Marula is the quietest of the three-elephant herd, and although she has had the hardest life of all, she has also turned out to be the most gentle.

ELEPHANT SNOG

When it is time to leave they all put their trunks in the air and wave goodbye, but not before Thembi has made me an honorary member of the herd. This she does by trying to kiss me with the end of her trunk. You can't refuse; after all, as we've found out during our walk with these elephants, they can be extremely sensitive.

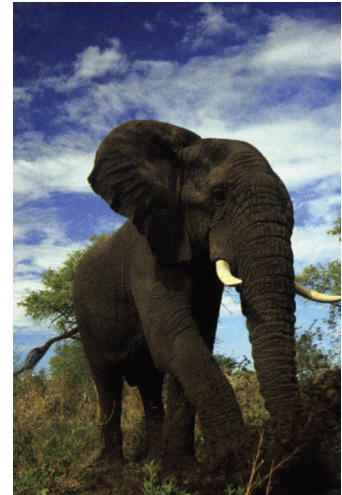
It seems an odd time to ask, but after the event I inquire of Doug if anything dangerous ever happens while he's out with his elephants. He says, 'You've got to remember that these are wild animals and yes, there are times when it can get a bit exciting.'



"Go on Nick, give us a kiss."



Elephant expert Doug Groves.



Jabu the 'sand-kicker'.

■ For more information visit www.livingwithelephants.org

George Orwell**Shooting an Elephant**

In this account, set in 1936, George Orwell is a young police officer serving in Burma, which was then part of the British Empire. He has been sent to deal with a troublesome elephant.

As I started forward, practically the whole population of the village flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of faces above the garish clothes – faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it. I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those faces behind. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant, I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behaviour. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans might see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.

There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

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