

Hope for Big Life in East Africa

Written by Stephanie M. Dloniak
Photographs courtesy of Nick Brandt

NICK BRANDT'S ICONIC IMAGES ARE HELPING TO CONSERVE ICONIC ANIMALS AND TO ENSURE THEY CONTINUE TO ROAM THE EARTH PROTECTED FROM MAN.

IGOR WAS IN HIS PRIME. An impressive bull elephant, he was almost half a century old when Nick Brandt captured his portrait in 2007. Igor drank peacefully from a small waterhole near Amboseli National Park in Kenya, just beyond the shadow of Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro. He was completely relaxed as Brandt photographed him from a vehicle on the opposite side of the muddy pool.

Brandt named the image simply, honestly - *Elephant Drinking* - and it is notable for the angle, the light, and an unusual elegance. With Igor's portrait Brandt achieves one of his main goals, the depiction of "animals simply in the state of Being." Gazing upon Igor we are somehow drawn into his life, and can feel the relief of that drink of water in an otherwise parched landscape. We also sense a heaviness... perhaps the effort required to hold that massive head up with the weight of the world on those shoulders.

Unfortunately, Brandt also achieved the second part of the goal he stated in his 2004 essay - to show the animals "...in the state of Being before they no longer are. Before, in the wild at least, they cease to exist." Two years after Igor posed for the camera, poachers killed him for his ivory tusks.

Unbeknownst to Brandt, Igor and his portrait would soon become iconic, both for Brandt's unique fine art photography of Africa's vanishing wildlife and for the wildlife conservation foundation he would create less than a year later.

Brandt learned of Igor's unfortunate fate in 2010 when he returned to the region to photograph for the final installment in his recently completed three book series *On This Earth, A Shadow Falls Across The Ravaged Land*. It was near Amboseli that Brandt saw what he described in *A Shadow Falls* as the "sight that hypnotizes me more than any other

here in Africa" - hundreds of elephants crossing the dusty, cracked earth of the vast dry lakebed under endless African sky. He had spent an incredible number of hours there observing and photographing wildlife over the previous six years, and his photos of elephants and other animals on that lakebed are some of the most evocative in the series. But this visit was different and Brandt soon learned things had changed in Amboseli. Elephants that used to let his vehicle approach within feet - just inches even - would run away before he got to within half a mile. Igor was not the only elephant killed the year before and many of the friendly old bulls Brandt knew had vanished. The year 2009 had in fact given Amboseli its worst drought in living memory and Africa a huge upsurge in elephant poaching.

Brandt was devastated. It got worse. Over the next few months he heard of, and at times saw, elephant after elephant that had been killed, some of whom he had photographed and countless others he had spent time with. And he learned of the worsening plight of other species in the ecosystem - giraffes shot for bushmeat, zebras snared for pelts, lions speared or poisoned after killing livestock.

He wanted, needed, to do something to stop the devastation. "I knew I had collectors who would donate (to the cause). I asked 'Who should I donate to?' But there was no strong endorsement," Brandt says. The Kenya Wildlife Service had few resources and was already too thinly spread. Other conservation groups had other mandates and precious little funding. Frustrated, Brandt finally



Big Life Ranger with Tusks of Elephant Killed at the Hands of Man, Amboseli 2011.

contacted Richard Bonham, an honorary warden, safari lodge owner and committed conservationist who lives in the nearby Chyulu Hills. Bonham was already working to protect wildlife in the area with the Maasailand Preservation Trust, which he founded in 1992.

"I will never forget when he contacted me. He emailed me with a series of ideas that he had to address this horrific escalation in poaching, and (asked for) my thoughts on who might help implement them. My answer required little thought." Bonham writes from his home at ol Donyo in the Chyulus. "I was already involved in wildlife security (and) anti-poaching here in the Chyulus where we pretty much had things under control. (But we were) being restricted by funding (and were) unable to move out into the other community lands which make up

the greater Amboseli ecosystem, and where most of the poaching was taking place. I already had a plan in my head, which I told Nick, and he said: 'When are you ready to start?' My answer was: 'Yesterday,' and that was the beginning of what Big Life is today."

"We needed a massive infusion of money and training," says Brandt. "One of my biggest collectors gave us \$500,000 a year for the first two years." They got to work quickly. Within six months Bonham had recruited about 60 new rangers from the local Maasai community. Five outposts were set up in the areas worst hit by the poaching.

"The impact was immediate, numbers of poached elephants went down as well as the poaching for bushmeat, which was also rampant," Bonham says.

A successful start, but Big Life faces formidable challenges. Ivory prices soared to over \$2000 a pound last year with the demand from China and other countries in Asia. A recent report by the wildlife trade monitoring groups that are part of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) stated that 30,000 - 35,000 elephants are illegally killed in Africa each year to supply that demand. This is almost 10% of the remaining wild population, and is unsustainable. The number and overall weight of "large-scale" ivory seizures (greater than 500kg) in 2013 exceeded any other year since records were first kept in 1989. The global demand for ivory, poor governance at national levels, and poverty at local levels are the three key issues that will need to be addressed in order to stop the poaching of elephants.

While some organizations channel their resources towards the goals of decreasing the demand for ivory and enacting new legislation, Big Life mainly focuses on work that can be done at the local level, and that will have an

impact not only for elephants but the other species in the area - including the local Maasai people.

Brandt explains that on the ground in Amboseli, "the most effective use of donor money is ranger salaries and informant networks. The only hope is to support the community."

Big Life now employs more than 300 rangers, runs several tracker-dog units, and has expanded operations across the border in northern Tanzania. By providing employment and education, and by working closely with the local communities and the relevant wildlife authorities, Big Life and its partners (conservation, development, and tourism groups) hope to conserve wildlife both directly through anti-poaching efforts, and indirectly by fostering a sense of ownership and value of wildlife.

Kenya has about 30,000 elephants today, and the Amboseli area is home to about 1,500 of them, according to Cynthia Moss, the Director of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants. For more than 40 years, Moss has chronicled



Elephants Walking Through Grass, Amboseli 2008. Leading Matriarch Killed by Poachers, 2009.

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the stories of these elephants, including Igor. She is convinced Big Life is making a difference.

“Igor was a member of the IA family when I first met him back in the early 1970s. He was the son of Isabel, the matriarch, and he was a mama’s boy. Most males leave their natal families by 14 years (of age), but he stayed until he was 19. He followed Isabel around like a calf,” Moss writes from her research camp in the heart of Amboseli. “So I knew Igor from the time he was 14 years old in 1972, watched him grow up into a magnificent bull, and mourned his death in 2009 when he was 51 years old. The death of Igor also spurred Nick to start Big Life, for which I for one am eternally grateful. Without Big Life I am sure we would be finding poached elephants on a weekly basis.”

While getting Big Life up and running, Brandt continued to photograph for *Across The Ravaged Land*. Donations and proceeds from the sale of selected limited edition prints featured on the Big Life website go directly to efforts on the ground. There is no end in sight for the poaching and bushmeat crises, and Big Life needs all the funding it can get to maintain and expand their anti-poaching work and other activities.



Elephant Drinking, Amboseli 2007. Killed by Poachers 2009.

The final book in the trilogy includes three series of photographs that extend away from Brandt’s earlier work, in a direction that is at once familiar and eerie.

“It is no longer appropriate to photograph this world as a paradise. I can’t show the world as romanticized with the destruction we see,” Brandt explains. For the first time humans are included as subjects, and the images of Big Life rangers holding or pushing tusks on that very same lakebed where Igor and other dead elephants used to walk are powerful symbols of loss. Symbols we simply have not seen before. Brandt continues to keep things on the darker side with various hunting trophies, mounted not on a wall but within the natural landscape, and posed calcified animal bodies found along the shores of Lake Natron in northern Tanzania. Death is sublimely beautiful here, but it is still unwanted.



Elephant with Exploding Dust, Amboseli, 2004.

Brandt's love of animals led him to his chosen path as an artist, and in *Across The Ravaged Land*, he writes that: "photography was merely the best medium to convey my love of, and fascination with them." Putting his art directly to use for wild-life conservation through Big Life is perhaps the best expression of that love now.

Long may his work continue. Our world is richer and our lives bigger for it - in art as well as elephants. ○

Big Life Foundation ° www.biglife.org
Nick Brandt photography ° www.nickbrandt.com
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