

Episode 2: Ghost Elephants of Lisima

KERLLEN VO: In the corners of Angola, legend and reality are one and the same. There are things that you can't see - like Mukisi. This is the dragon creature who lives in the highland lakes. Story has it, if you look at it, you die. But then, there are tales of things that walk among us.

TASCAM_1027S12.wav : [00:28:49] We must find the ghost elephants of Lisima.

TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:29:06] , we can find their dung, we can find their tracks, we can find their trails, but we can't find them.

KERLLEN VO: You might remember Steve from the first episode of this series. He is the intrepid South African zoologist who now runs the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project. When Steve says the ghost elephants of Lisima, he's referencing a Luchaze expression.

Steve TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:30:15] Lissima Lya Mwono, the source of life.

KERLLEN VO: Lisima is now the name of the project study area.

KERLLEN VO: Steve's quest to find the ghost elephants of Lisima is what hooked our producer, Cat Jaffee. Cat was awarded a National Geographic Storytelling grant to help us make this show.

Cat VO: The first time I really spoke to Steve about the details of what we would be doing together in Angola was just days before jumping on the expedition. I had known for months that I would be joining them in the field, but I didn't know what the story was, or what we'd be doing.

Cat VO: For the call, I was sitting in a coffee shop in my home in Colorado. We were talking on whatsapp and I asked Steve. What do you think the story is gonna be? And he tells me, "we're searching for ghost elephants." And, I figured well, that's a good enough pitch to get me on the plane.

Cat VO: Right after I got off the call, I googled ghost elephants. But the search results didn't make sense. I found a poem in the New Yorker about loss.

Type type type. Duck under of Cat reading the poem...

Ghost Elephants, By Jean Valentine, August 27, 2007
In the elephant field

tall green ghost elephants
 with your cargo of summer leaves
 at night I heard you breathing at the window

Cat VO: There was an article about a “clown cemetery” in Illinois also popped up.

Type type type. Duck under of Cat reading about the clown cemetery...

In nearby towns, a persistent schoolyard legend has it that those stone elephants mark the graves of the circus' elephants...they say that if you listen carefully you can hear the cries of animals at the nearby Brookfield Zoo mourning their kin.

Cat VO: And then there are these elephants in Namibia that cover themselves in mud to stay cool.

Cat VO: Nothing connected to Angola. So it seemed like the term “ghost elephant” was not a recognized scientific thing. It was something... else. And after four months in the region, it wasn't until my last few days that I really figured out what that something else was.

Fade into storytelling music

Cat VO: It was one of the few daylight hours in February without rain. The sun made everything sticky and hot. We were back in Tchinjanga, a village Kerllen, Steve, and I visited together in November 2019.

200211_001 clip of local people talking about where the elephants go

CAT VO: The last time we were here, Kerllen told me that a week prior, a lion had killed a family of pigs a few steps from where I had set up my tent. Despite what people may think about animals in Africa, it's actually rather unusual for them to roam so freely not in any of kind park. Which is why, this time, we were asking the local villagers about another animal sighting.

Steve TAPE: 200211_001 [52:05]: Alright, now we can move on to the discussion about elephants. We've seen signs of them up and down the rivers. Simply to know when they come up and where they go. At this time of year April or May, how long would it take someone to find an elephant?

Kerllen: translates into Portuguese and fade out...

Cat VO: When we speak with local village communities, Kerllen translates English to Portuguese, and then works with a local named Ifafe who explains details in Chokwe and Luchaze. For hours each of us stare, wait, and wonder. And every time a full sentence is translated, the thought is acknowledged with clapping and nods.

Clapping tape

Cat VO: Back and forth, Steve surveys the villager's lives and their families and their needs. And then at the very end of their conversation, he asks, where are the elephants? That's because the villagers are the only ones who have answers.

Tape from villager

Kerllen TAPE: 200211_001 [1:05:04] They say that this time of year they are probably really really South. Earlier they were referencing the different types of trees and leaves that they search for. Chicken sound

Steve TAPE: 200211_001 [1:05:40] Steve: Okay, that's helpful.

Cat VO: Tchinjanga is a village of about 20 houses in an otherwise uninterrupted, vast stretch of miambo forest that is teeming with wildlife. Termites after it rains. Sweat bees when it's hot. Hungry ants that bite our feet and form lines across the red sand in the night. This is a place where big and small roam freely, and the prize species, if you believe that they still frequent this area, are the elephants.

Beat to punctuate

Cat VO: While international communities have an obsession with elephants, this is particularly the case in Angola. And if Steve can confirm that they're here, it means big things for this project - like money and support and attention.

KERLLEN VO: And that's because elephants in Angola have a painful story. A story that has transformed them into mere ghosts, haunting the landscape, but rarely seen. And their backstory helps us understand everything. Can tracking the largest land mammal in Eastern Angola ensure that the whole of the Okavango Delta region is protected? What will it take for a place -- its land, its people, its elephants -- to heal from decades of trauma? And, how necessary is healing prior to rolling out an ambitious conservation agenda?

INTRO THEME

Kerllen VO: You're listening to Guardians of the River. I'm your host Kerllen Costa. And we are a podcast exploring how to protect some of the most remote and wild places on the planet, starting with the Okavango Delta and the Source Lakes.

Kerllen VO: This is Chapter Two: Ghost Elephants of Lisima.

ACT I

KERLLEN VO: The legend of Steve's ghost elephants starts with one particularly famous Angolan.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:34:41] Henry just towers over you, he is on an elevated stand. [00:34:59] almost like on an altar. [00:35:14]... I think his feet are probably at about the height of an adult.

KERLLEN VO: This is Cheryl Braunstein (SHHARE-L). Cheryl was the head of exhibition development and planning at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, DC.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3 [00:32:46] I remember going into the Natural History Museum pretty much on my first day starting at the Smithsonian.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: I just signed all my paperwork and then I went across the mall to the Natural History Museum. And there was Henry.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3 [00:34:49] He's an African elephant.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:33:09] I think it's one of those, I think it's one of those iconic aspects of pride. I can't believe I'm working at an institution that has something like this. And I feel that an awful lot of people at the Smithsonian do have this kind of strange love affair with Henry.

KERLLEN VO: Strange, because Henry has a painful history.

KERLLEN VO: Henry is also known as the Fénykövi elephant, after Josef J. Fénykövi, the man who set out to hunt Henry in 1955.

CAT VO: Throughout this project, I've heard the story of the Fenykovi elephant many, many times.

KERLLEN VO: Our producer Cat Jaffee again.

CAT VO: And it goes like this. Fenykovi, who was a Hungarian businessman, owned a thousand-acre game farm in Southeastern Angola, which he would visit on holiday. One day, in 1954, Fenykovi was strolling by a lake, and he spotted an enormous elephant footprint in the mud. Another word for footprint apparently is spoor, which I think is interesting. Anyways, Fénykövi knew the biggest elephant on record at that time had a spoor that was two-feet long. Which made the footprint before him, measuring a whole three feet, almost a meter in length, one of an unparalleled giant.

Sound design to cut up the narration-heavy text - it would be great to have some 1950s safari tape (hopefully not too gimmicky)

CAT VO: Fenykovi tried to follow these tracks, but with no luck. However, he knew that elephants are creatures of habit. So a year later, he returned with a 416 Rigby rifle and found the same large tracks by the same lake. He followed them again, which led him to two elephants, one being the giant of his dreams. Fénykövi chased the larger elephant and with his hunting party, fired 11 bullets. He couldn't bring it down, so he ordered his aide to go after the elephant with five more shots which finally killed it.

KERLLEN VO: In the weeks that followed, they embalmed the body in salt, and hauled it 600 miles through the bush to the closest railway station. Joseph Fenykovi's goal was to hunt and kill the largest living land animal in the world at that time - and then put it in a museum. He asked the Smithsonian if they would be interested in displaying this elephant, and they accepted.

CAT VO: Which meant in 1959 the elephant was installed at the entrance to the museum, where it still stands today.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:27:18] That was a time when obviously conservation was coming into more and more of the national dialog, but also the notion that conservation was related to the taking of animals. So a lot of parks and preserves were created to maintain populations of animals for hunters. And the hunters were the big champions of some of this land preservation. And I don't think that we can really separate those two the hunter and the conservationist.

CAT VO: One thing that really sticks with me from the story...is what about the other elephant? The smaller one, that was there next to Fenykovi's target. It saw the killing and I'm guessing it lived. Steve tells me that elephant herds have distinct cultures, survival tricks, and wisdom that they pass to one another. He says they experience grief, trauma, and loss. Apparently, they even stand around the bodies of their dead, stroking each other's trunks in what some call elephant funerals. After seeing what it saw, where did this surviving elephant go?

KERLLEN VO: If you're thinking about the distress that one elephant experienced, the following decades in Angola may be some of the most traumatic in human-elephant history. Enough trauma to affect not only Henry's surviving witness, but to force a whole population of elephants into hiding.

Begin war music for war for independence.

KERLLEN VO: In 1961, just five years after the Fenykovi elephant was shot, Angola began their fight for freedom from 400 years of Portuguese rule. It was called the Angolan War of Independence, which marked the beginning of 40 years of conflict.

Steve TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:31:25] elephants most certainly were mortared, shot at with AK 47s, the older ones, will carry wounds from those times and memories. // [00:33:18] the memory of the war and the trauma that they experienced, their families being broken up and targeted. They are sentient beings, same as we would remember they will.

Angolan civil war sounds or clip/elephants running & sounds

KERLLEN VO: Right as colonial rule was ending, a new war was well underway. In 1975 the Cold War set its sights on the independent Angola as an ideal battleground to fight the spread of communism. China, Cuba, the U.S., and South Africa all wanted to control who would be the next leader of Angola.

KERLLEN VO: Having been born into the Angolan Civil War, it feels like it's been going on for a big part of my life. Even today, when I drive through most rural towns, I still see crumbling buildings from bullets and explosions. The war continued on and on because the international community enabled it.

Cat VO: I think it's important for people in the US to know this, because this was a war we supported and contributed to. The biggest opposition leader Jonas Savimbi flew around the world to raise money, including four visits to the United States. In one instance, he even had a fundraising dinner with former president George. HW. Bush. And what couldn't be funded by international powers came from what Angola still had a lot of at the time - diamonds...and ivory.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:55:01] this very notion of ivory is something that can only come out of death. An elephant must die in order for an ivory object to be created.

KERLLEN VO: Elephants were used as target practice. And their ivory was sold off to buy more weapons. If the elephants weren't being shot at. They walked in fear of landmines in the ground beneath them -- exploding without warning. During this conflict, Angola became one of the most heavily mined countries on earth.

Steve TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:33:00] Elephants have a stronger sense of smell than a bloodhound. Hundreds of thousands of sensors in their trunk so they can smell arms caches, AK 47 bullets, military personnel and vehicles many, many kilometers away. [00:33:16][15.2]

KERLLEN VO: So elephants, like humans, became casualties ~~of war~~. During the war, and the time since its end, the elephant population dropped from 50,000 to 4,000 elephants. That's like saying out of every 10 elephants, only one survived.

The existing elephant population remains elusive. Even acquiring this statistic to share with you took weeks of research and cross-referencing. But elephants weren't the only ones to suffer losses.

The cost in human life was over half a million people. The life expectancy rate for the country dropped to 40 years. The humans and elephants that survived now both carry this trauma with them.

Steve TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:28:50] the ghost elephants of Lissima, are traumatized by decades of war. //

KERLLEN VO: This is what Steve means when he says ghost elephants. He's talking about the walking dead. Elephants that have seen some of the most horrific violence against their kind and still live to tell the story.

Steve: [00:29:12] they are hiding from us. ~~Elephants are good at surprising you. They've surprised me many times. They walk silently and~~ we have gone out there and put camera traps on the trails that we know of and they have turned those cameras over. We still do not have a photograph of a ghost elephant.

[Music Break]

Act II

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [29:25] So, you know, the notion that these animals were something to be conquered, to be destroyed, that you proved your prowess was really prevalent in the age of the big game hunter.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:41:22] So I think that we as a culture today have almost globally had a fundamental shift in how we think about elephants.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3:: [00:29:56] You think about Babar, you think about Horton. And these are incredibly sympathetic characters that kids can relate to and have tremendous empathy for. And so we no longer think of these animals as something that we do want to destroy, but rather much more as a poster child, as much as a panda is for conservation. Elephants are right there with them.

Cheryl TAPE 20201204_Okavango_Cheryl_int.mp3: [00:41:55] I think that it's just a phenomenal transformation of the human psyche.

KERLLEN VO: It is a phenomenal transformation - in places where people don't actually live with elephants. But life on the ground with them is quite different.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV: [00:56:39] And the elephant he pulled the vehicle away. He just pushed them away. When I am waking up, I was between the legs of elephant

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV: [00:54:43] And I didn't count it, but it looked like 20 of them.

KERLLEN VO: This is Water. He is a WaYei poller and guide from Botswana who works with Steve on each expedition - you met him in chapter one. He's describing this one time when he took three private guests into the Moremi Reserve, a protected area in the middle of the Delta. They were driving in an open vehicle. It was early evening. The guests spotted a group of 20 savanna elephants. They asked Water to go closer. Water drove near the herd, and then saw something that made him turn off the motor at once.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV: [00:54:47] Inside there was a tiny, tiny baby. Looks like to between 1 to 2 weeks.

KERLLEN VO: A little baby meant that the other elephants would be very protective, and Water didn't want to draw attention to himself. He was eying the herd, when from the other side of the car, an elephant charged the vehicle.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV:[00:56:51] then I was running away. I didn't feel I want to get back in vehicle because I thought I just save from my guest from the elephant.

KERLLEN VO: Water ran behind a termite mound. Then a tree. He hid. And then ran. And hid. Then ran. But the elephant was smart, angry, and wouldn't be fooled.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV: [00:59:39] and then I hear the Elephant shout.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV: [00:59:50] and then he hit me with the trunk.[00:59:58] I fall to my back. And then the elephant, he kneeled down close to me.

Mr. Water TAPE 191207_007_Water.WAV:[01:00:08] And the tusk went through my jacket. [01:00:19] And then he tried to open my stomach. [...] And then the tusk went in between my underpants or with my trouser. ~~I was very lucky because he didn't break my bones just skin. [...] And then I was laying down like I'm dead [...] Cuz when you move they know you are still alive so they come to finish you. And now I tried to. Sure, they'll find him going. Definitely mellow.~~ And then I feel like no one to help me. [8.3]I was very lucky. And then I was scared to open my eye. I think maybe the elephant is still there, but he was gone.

KERLLEN VO: One of the guests picked up Water, who was crying, holding his side, and shifting in and out of consciousness. Water's stomach was sliced open, down to his waist. When they finally made it back to camp and Water recovered, he told his boss he didn't want to guide anymore. Beyond the gashes across his body, Water was rattled.

KERLLEN VO: For people like Water, elephant attacks are simply an occupational hazard.

Koki Tape 191218_003: This fence is like this for the elephants

CAT Tape 191218_003 : What does it look like?

Koki Tape 191218_003: It's a regular fence but it has electric pins sticking out to shock the elephant in case it comes close.

CAT VO: I'm sitting on the passenger side of one of the project's land cruisers while Koketsu Mokodi, or Koki, drives us through the Delta. Koki is the Botswana Country Director for the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project, the NGOWP.

CAT VO: Koki is short and tough. She whips the Landcruiser around sandy drainages like it's a newly paved neighborhood. Smells of Magwinya, translated as "fat cake," coat the inside of our car. It's basically a fried dough that looks like a donut without a whole. We have a dozen of them with us to bring to people in the Delta.

CAT Tape 191218_003 what does it look like right now?

Koki Tape 191218_003 Right now Thankfully because of the rain there is nice short green grass which makes it more--very attractive. It takes away from the depression of the recent dryness we experienced.

CAT VO: Right now is known as the wet season, meaning it's supposed to be raining here, but it hasn't.

CAT Tape 191218_003 But is there any water in the river?

Koki Tape 191218_003 There is absolutely nothing in the river except for dead animals.

CAT VO: Beds are dry, and there's still not enough water or food for the animals in the delta.

CAT Tape 191218_003 There are a lot of cows grazing the landscape. And then there's also been a lot of, like, dead cows. Like there's one right there.

Koki TAPE 191217_003_Koki.WAV There are more than one dead cow. Let's drive over and see. There are 3 carcasses currently...

Koki TAPE 191217_002_Koki.WAV: [31:15] We've got a problem of human wildlife conflict. ~~We are the only or, you know,~~ we are holding the burden for many of the other regions in terms of elephant populations. Our landscapes are changing.

KERLLEN VO: This is a totally different type of human-wildlife conflict than in Angola. If elephants in Angola are ghosts, elephants in Botswana might feel a bit like gangs. Over the last nine years, Koki has watched Botswana's elephant population grow and grow, because while Angola was recovering from war, Botswana made the killing and hunting of elephants a criminal offense. Yes, this was to protect the elephants. But also to grow tourism, which makes up 12% of Botswana's economy.

Koki TAPE 191217_002_Koki.WAV: Mind you. When the ban was put in place, there was no consultation in the areas that were highly affected all throughout the country

Koki TAPE 191217_002_Koki.WAV: [00:33:00] populations of elephants rose and the destruction on local villages was very evident. But because, you know, we had a leadership that was hell bent on protecting wildlife, the voices of the people well fell on deaf ears.

....Collectively, the communities of the country decided, no, we need to bring back a system that has worked before, that has benefited certain communities before....And so whether I personally agree with it or not is not that the matter. The matter is that the people who are most affected by it should have a voice in how they want to manage these animals.

Botswana has experienced a big drought over the last decade. Thirsty, and hungry, elephants have been roaming through villages more than ever. And so local people pleaded to lift the hunting ban. As a result, during the 2018 election, one candidate promised to listen, and then was elected president. When you hear this next clip of a protester in the US, you might be able to guess what the new president did upon entering office.

LasVegas Protestor: 00:00 President Masisi how can you say you care about wildlife when you lifted the ban on killing elephants?

KERLLEN VO: Here's the scene. It's a ballroom in Las Vegas. Glowing squares of pink and purple frame the stage. President Masisi stands patiently, hands resting on a glass podium. And there in the audience, a protester screams.

...By lifting the ban, you are condoning the culling and murder by locals [0:15] and foreign trophy hunters on one of the continents most targeted animals. Not only that, but it is ethically wrong. It is inhumane, especially when there are proven common

sense means in managing the human-elephant conflict, which wouldn't cause harm to the elephants.

KERLLEN VO: When Mokgweetsi Masisi was elected to govern Botswana, he lifted the hunting ban. And as you can tell, this did not go over well with international audiences.

LasVegas Protestor: [00:45] This is is not the answer. You have blood on your hands!

Masisi: I wish she would sit down so I can talk to her.

LasVegas Masisi [3:44] So you have the bombs that go off here and sometimes it has guns in the hands of people who should not have them. And you have landmines. And so what do the elephants do? They migrated, we have a lot of refugees.

KERLLEN VO: Masisi is talking about Angola Which is a mere 60 km north of Botswana. All around these elephants was war. And the war still lingers in the landmines beneath their feet, in the deserted tanks by the road. If the elephants in Angola move just a little bit south to Botswana, no more explosions or gunshots.

LasVegas Masisi [5:15] And you know what it means for our people, many of whom are subsistence farmers, poor village folk, [5:31] who have never fought a war in their lives, who are loyal, law-abiding citizens..

KERLLEN VO: It means that many of the local people of Botswana don't want to carry the environmental and financial burden of all the region's elephants any more. So, they started asking, "Wouldn't it be simple enough to just move elephants back into Angola?"

MUSIC

ACT III: Wildlife Corridor

Steve TAPE

TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:37:56] Well, the biggest problem for elephants moving into Angola are landmines. Like I said, they have a sense of smell stronger than blood. And so they can smell landmine fields. They can avoid them once they know what they are. But to learn that, they have to go through a traumatic event with one of their family members The Angolan government have made an incredible gesture, an investment of 60 million dollars to the Halo Trust to clear all landmines as far as they can in southeast Angola. That's not going to happen in a year. It's going to happen in five or 10 years. So by 2030, I would say Angola will be a lot more ready to accept tens of thousands of

elephants. The roads will be built. Technology would have advanced so we can transport them more safely. It's just not the right time now.

KERLLEN VO: One of Steve's biggest concerns is that by introducing more of Botswana's elephant population into Angola, it could cause problems for the resident ghost elephants. And local communities, like Tchinjanga.

Steve TAPE: [00:45:22] The risk for human wildlife conflict? Very high because you don't want an elephant that's stressed out. And that'll happen if you just parachute this poor thing into the upper catchments of the Okavango, it's going to go straight to the first village and try and eat those crops because it'll have no other option. It won't know where to find specialized food items that you do find up there.

LasVegas Masisi: And for many of you who might know of the Okavango Delta...

KERLLEN VO: This is Botswana's president Masisi again.

LasVegas Masisi: it originates in Angola, in the highlands of Angola. And thankfully, this government of Angola has recently designated a whopping 9 million hectares of land to form part of the transfrontier parks.

KERLLEN VO: the nine million hectares of land he mentions is nearly the size of Portugal. It also includes the region Steve has been permitted to manage for the NGOWP.

KERLLEN VO: There is pressure from all around to move elephants from Botswana to Angola. This pressure is coming from local people, President Masisi, international donors, and not to mention, the elephants themselves who have outgrown the resources Botswana can offer them. Proposals involving helicopters, trucks, and conveyor belts are being passed around a number of international organizations. Steve's clock to find the ghost elephants -- their habits, migratory patterns, and population size -- is running out... But Steve says wait.

Steve TAPE TASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:43:31] first, we need to understand the survivors, the ghost elephants.

Cat TAPE: 200210_003 [1:40] So Steve how did you arrange to have this helicopter...

Steve TAPE: 200210_003 [1:48]The helicopter is also going to be flying circuits to the south of us looking for the ghost elephants of Lisima. This elephant population that is very cryptic and poorly known and we are going to start this year to understand their movements, their behavior and in the coming years find ways of protecting them.

Cat TAPE: And they are Savannah elephants?

Steve VO: These are... fade out

Sound design

KERLLEN VO: I'm in the car with Cat and Steve. We're driving around Tschinganga, and clouds are piling on top of each other in the distance. It will be raining here momentarily. When it pours, the roads become like rivers. The sand resets itself. And all footprints and traces of elephants are washed away. This is one of the reasons why the villagers' stories are essential.

Steve TAPE: 200210_003 [3:00] Apparently this landscape is a contact point for forest and savannah. This community here have reported 10 years ago having seen forest elephants come down. These are typically elephants you find in the Congo, Northern part of Angola. It's a very interesting elephant population. They have had a really tough time of it the last few decades. But now hopefully they have the opportunity to come back. It's our job to create a safe space for elephants any way we can in Africa. This is a big opportunity for that.

KERLLEN VO: So there's something important to know about elephants...It is in an elephant's nature to knock things down. They pull at branches. Rip up tree roots. Peel-off bark. This is how they find food. If their foraging space is small, they are destroyers, and will totally wreck a forest. But if the space is big, their damage can actually make a forest grow.

elephant/tree sounds

Steve TAPE: ITO [1:00:50] So he'll be standing around here for a couple of hours, crushing everything down. And feeding randomly on all these trees. You can see they're all torn apart. So he's opening up a clearing here. And as a steward, he's left this one. He's gonna let it grow up. They are choosing and managing this landscape. It's such an important function. And without them the balance that we speak about is lost.

KERLLEN VO: If Angola can first be made safe for elephants - with anti-poaching policies and training with local communities, Steve thinks elephants will return on their own. No conveyor belts or helicopters required.

Elephants like to swim. Like, really like to swim. They can swim 50 kms, or 30 miles at a time. They move through river systems. And Steve is working to connect and protect them all.

Steve TAPETASCAM_1027S12.wav: [00:55:03] The vision was to join the sources with the delta, the beginning with the end--source to sand, creating a one and a half thousand kilometer corridor several hundred miles across spanning that basin across its entirety. [00:55:39] Now,, if we do not protect the sources the Lisima landscape up at the top has no resilience and neither does the Okavango Delta. Both systems become incredibly threatened. Elephants as a species really become threatened. And so the wildlife

corridor is a way of creating a, safe space for elephants to expand into. And obviously, elephants are ambassadors for the other animals that they live with. They're the big engineers of the forests, planting the trees and breaking them down. And so elephants move up, lions, roan antelope everything else is going to benefit.

KERLLEN VO: Governments, Conservation organizations, and local communities have already created a transfrontier area to allow for elephant migrations across the borders of Angola, Botswana, and three surrounding countries. What Steve wants to safeguard are the waterways running BETWEEN each of the parks. If he's successful it will be the largest transfrontier wildlife corridor in the world. Kind of like an elephant super highway.

Steve [00:43:55] they will typically follow the rivers. You've got to find out seasonally when they would encounter ghost elephants. If you're introducing them to that population, The ghost elephants like to attack them. No one's going to hurt each other. They're going to follow each other and learn from each other. We need to retain that cultural knowledge that is taught from mother to daughter to son in the ghost elephant population. And we need to protect that like it is the most important thing. It is the secret to having elephants up there. And secrets are learned over many, many generations [00:44:34][10.4]

music/space

Outro: Adjany + Human-Elephant Connection

CAT VO: Way back at the beginning...when I tried to explain what this podcast was going to be about to other people, I would watch their eyes glaze over... until we got to the elephants. It wasn't the the indigenous folklore, nor the lofty mission to protect a critical water system, it was the elephants. Heck, I'm not totally proud of it now, but it was how Steve hooked me. I remember thinking to myself, these ghost elephants are surely the story. But my relationship with it all has changed in my months of being in the field. And I left with a deep desire to help the NGOWP tell a very different narrative. What started with elephants, came to be very, very focused on the humans.

AdjanyKerllenIntv: [00:03:46] The proudest moment from that expedition was the elephants.

Cat VO: You may remember, Adjany, from the documentary, Into the Okavango and episode one of this podcast.

AdjanyKerllenIntv: [00:03:53] The moment that we finally realized that we there were Angolan elephants was a point of shift in between the Angolan consciousness and my self consciousness. ~~We spent months and I think the documentary shows that very well.~~ We spent months, um, hearing about the elephants, but we never saw one. And the

point that at the border, we finally saw the elephants, it was that, um, expectation of hope that it is possible that we actually have everything to be successful in terms of conservation, in terms of biodiversity, that we still have it all. I think I think that was the proudest moment as an Angolan. And it was a very difficult, um, feeling to describe

KERLLEN VO: Elephants are one of the biggest draws to the Okavango region. And it makes sense. Sometimes, they're standing by the road and their ears are flapping in the heat. Other times, they're traveling in herds, carving pathways through the Delta's waters. Magnificent, beguiling, almost human-like in their familial relationships to one another. It's hard for me to look at their faces and not somehow also see myself, or the face of someone I love.

KERLLEN VO: But this infatuation we have with them, it's like...a fictitious romance. When you see them, you become mesmerized by them. Maybe you want to conquer them, like a hunter. Or maybe, you want to protect them, like so many of us do. But it's almost as if, once in this trance, we forget the bigger macrocosm The very thing that science teaches us, that we are part of a holistic ecosystem, we too often overlook. And instead, we focus on the one species that intrigues us. Sometimes it's elephants. And sometimes...it's humans. But if being an Angolan has taught me anything, it is that to truly save either, we must think about them both.

KERLLEN VO:

Church singing with the stompers...

Church singing, stem 1, the welcome song....

Church singing with the stompers ducks underneath this text.

KERLLEN VO: Next time, on Guardians of the River, we head to Tempue to hear from local communities on what protecting this region means to them,

Hear a massive chorus of the church stompers

and how they are handling outsiders coming into their villages for the first time since the civil war.

And the music carries us on lightly underneath the credits. Overriding whatever we had before for greater ease.

CREDITS

KERLLEN VO: You're listening to Guardians of the River, a podcast about the quest to safeguard one of the world's most remote and wild lands. I'm your host Kerllen Costa.

This story was written and recorded by Cat Jaffee and House of Pod in partnership with the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project. This podcast is funded through a National Geographic Storytelling Grant and the Wild Bird Trust.

KERLLEN VO: If you're new to podcasts, you can find a guide on how to listen to this show, and support the project at wildbirdtrust.com. You can also find this podcast on Spotify, Google Play, Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to great audio

KERLLEN VO: Our fact-checker is Aimee Machado. Our Producer is Juliette Luini. Our illustrator is Fernando Hugo Fernandes. Our audio editor and sound designer is Jason PATon. We had story editing help from Rebecca Mendoza Nunziato.

CAT VO: I read part of a poem by the late writer Jean Valentine. And a segment about the clown cemetery from the Chicago Tribune. Links to these pieces, as well as more resources are available in our shownotes.

KERLLEN VO: A big big thank you to Geração 80 in Luanda. And thank you always to Dr. Steve Boyes and John Hilton of the Wild Bird Trust who have sponsored and supported this production.

KERLLEN VO: And from me Kerllen Costa and the team - Moyo Weno