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World's Elephant Expert Visits Ecology Center

Cynthia Moss, considered by many to be the world's greatest specialist in elephant behavior, has brought her extensive data to the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS), part of the University of California, Santa Barbara for help in fine tuning a statistical picture of her unique information from Kenya, and to work on a book about elephants.

Moss, who was recently written up in Time Magazine (Feb. 28) in their "Heroes for the Planet" section, lives in Kenya where she first set up her elephant project in 1972.

Although she is not formally trained as a scientist (she got her degree in philosophy at Smith College), with her extensive fieldwork, Moss has become the leading expert on elephant behavior, according to other leaders in the field.

"Each female elephant knows at least 100 others, plus their calves and probably most of the adult males," said Moss. "This is more than any other mammal. They have the largest social network of any land mammal, which is perhaps one of the reasons they have such large brains."

Moss studies the elephants living in Amboseli, a park of about 150 square miles in the Kenya, which is one of the least disturbed groups of elephants in Africa. There are about 1100 elephants there, and they live in matriarchal groups of about 15

each, according to Moss. Status is based on age, with older females dominating. The females cooperate in finding and sharing food, raising calves and finding mates.

Moss has followed individual elephants now for about thirty years or at least half of their life span. Each of the 1100 are known and Moss has developed a system of photographing their heads in profile, to show each ear with it's unique markings and veins.

"It hasn't been that easy running a project in Africa for 28 years, but when it's going well, it's wonderful," said Moss who has written four popular books and made several films. A new version of one of her popular books, Elephant Memories, will be published in June by the University of Chicago Press. Currently at NCEAS she is working on a scientific edited book covering the behavior, demography physiology, feeding and ranging behavior of African elephants.

In defense of the elephants, Moss has ventured far into the political world of international treaties to protect wildlife. Over the years, her speeches, books and other writings have helped raise consciousness about the vulnerability of elephants to plunder for their ivory tusks. Moss is pleased that the recent CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) voted to continue a ban on ivory trade.

In Kenya Moss goes out in a four-wheel drive vehicle with her Kenyan research assistants, or sometimes an ex-patriate colleague from the U.K. or the U.S. The elephants know her car and allow her to move in right amongst them. She has given each elephant a name or code number. According to Moss each elephant also has its own distinct personality.

That's the interesting part. The more difficult part tends to be raising funds and continuing her crusade to protect the animals. But when you see her face light up, beaming as she discusses her favorite beasts, you know she is living the life of her dreams.

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