



For You Alone

Elephants Without Borders

Directed and filmed by Mike Holding

Produced by Tania Jenkins and Mike Holding

Researcher: Kelly Landen

Afriscreen Films For BBC and Animal Planet. BBC Productions, Bristol

Reviewed by Linda Pfothenauer

Perhaps one of the most important and urgent conservation challenges to have emerged in the past quarter century is that of the African elephant. As a flagship species, its fate effectually determines the fate of all other wildlife.

And while the elephant is one of the most intensively studied animals in Africa, it is still little understood. Uncovering the mysteries of these land goliaths' movements across vast and complex landscapes thus lies at the heart of their long-term survival.

The recently released documentary, *Elephants Without Borders*, filmed by Afriscreen films for BBC Natural World and Discovery's Animal Planet, recounts ground-breaking research that has begun to do just that. It places the viewer on a journey of discovery that researcher and ecologist Dr. Michael Chase has been pursuing for the past eight years – to discover the ancient migration routes of northern Botswana's burgeoning elephant populations, now estimated at 150,000, the largest contiguous population of savanna elephant left on the African continent.

Many experts believe there are too many elephants in northern Botswana, while local villagers complain of increasing human/elephant conflict, as human settlements expand and elephants come to raid and destroy their crops.

Some experts are calling for drastic action – saying that as many as 60,000 elephants should be culled, to reduce their numbers, bring human/elephant

conflict under control, and avoid the destruction of their – and other species' – ecosystem.

Taken in this context, the absolute urgency of this critical research is understood. And this evocative film puts the viewer squarely at its centre. We follow the elephants walking hundreds of kilometres along ancient routes and trails, across immense wilderness - from Botswana's Chobe National Park, north across its borders to the Caprivi, and further north to Zambia and Angola, and south to the inhospitable Makgadikgadi Pans. "If I could discover how elephants move across these vast highways, perhaps I can understand their survival strategies," Mike says.

First collaring a large bull elephant (Max), and later a female matriarch (Bontle) leading a breeding herd, Mike begins to piece together the gigantic puzzle that comprises these elephants' ranges.

With sophisticated satellite data-gathering collars that can give the animals' positions every two hours, Mike finds Max's range to have been 13,500 square miles, the largest home range ever recorded for an African elephant. The animal travelled from the rich woodlands of the north to the harsh salt pans of the south, crossing international borders. Bontle's range was recorded at 13,800 square kilometres, contrasting sharply with the average recorded African elephant range at 2,000 square miles.

"After years of guesswork, the elephants are showing us their rangelands from season to season. This is a clear indication of how much wilderness they need," said Mike.

But Bontle also leads Mike to another revelation. In southern Angola he follows her to a massive elephant gathering where over 5,000 elephants have converged at a water source. Mike believes that this congregation is not accidental, and that elephants interlink to communicate to one another vital information about survival strategies.

Bontle's wanderings – and Mike's pursuit of her – also help him to understand some of the dangers Botswana's elephants face. We see a clearly stressed Bontle and her family herd in the Caprivi (at the Botswana/Namibia border) scrambling across dry floodplains, fleeing gunshots, as farmers drive them back into Botswana. We see their movements blocked by Botswana's veterinary cordon fences, set up in the 1960s to control the spread of foot and mouth disease.

"Botswana's elephants are now surrounded by fences and people.

Botswana's wilderness areas are surrounded by countries that are fast developing," says Mike.

But Mike believes there is a solution, and it lies in the country of Angola. He has observed elephants that have travelled huge distances, even crossing the Chobe River, to return to their ancestral lands there.

Angola – now at peace after years of civil war – has resuscitated its wildlife reserves, where previously its elephant populations had been decimated, and from where surviving elephants had fled to Botswana.

Wishing to revitalise its tourism industry, these reserves are now protected, and can offer safe haven to the unnaturally large herds that have accumulated in Botswana.

"Many elephants are trying to return home," says Mike, "and we can create safe corridors for them to do so."



He proposes the establishment of a system of corridors, to give the elephants safe passage across ancient migration routes back to Angola, and to relieve the bottleneck in Botswana.

The question now remains – exactly where should these corridors be located?

The film leaves the viewer at the threshold of yet another journey – as Mike collars a great bull elephant which he believes is making its way to Angola. Having successfully completed the first chapter in this epic quest of discovery, Mike now faces a daunting task – to travel back in time, perhaps hundreds of generations back, and come to understand the migration routes set out by the ancestors of Botswana’s present-day elephant populations. Once gathered, this data would be used to draw up the corridors that Mike proposes.

For anyone interested in elephants and passionate about their conservation, this excellent film is a must-see, giving an international platform to a monumental project that aims “to ensure that elephants have the freedom of Africa... and that elephants and people can learn to live peacefully together.”