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FIRST HAND: Fleeing the Samburu Floods

By Trish Strachan, who travelled to Kenya with
Farside Africa in March 2010

In March I spent the most wonderful five days staying at the Douglas-Hamiltons' Elephant Watch camp, near their Save the Elephants research facility in Samburu, Kenya.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton is one of the world's leading authorities on African elephants. I chose to visit their camps on a five-night trip to Kenya to see for myself the elephant families and research work that I have read so much about. Iain's wife Oria designed and established Elephant Watch Camp where we were looked after so well by local Samburu staff and warriors who guided us each day. Their local knowledge and interest in the animals, birds, wildlife, plants and trees ensured we gained such an insight into Samburu.



And then, on our last night, we were awoken urgently by Oria, asking us to pack quickly because the Ewaso River was flooding fast. The river was a torrent of noise, waves were lapping towards us as Oria drove us out of the camp to higher ground where we parked and looked back towards the camp. Dawn rose at the start of, ironically, a beautiful blue sky day. Oria had radioed members of the Save the Elephants research camp to ask them to drive over to collect us and take us back to their camp. As they drove us back, the track was continually blocked by raging rivers that 15 minutes earlier had been dried up sandy river beds. Heading further away from the river, we were driven through the bush on detours until we reached Save the Elephants only to find that the camp had also been devastated by the sudden flood. The water had rushed in so quickly that the staff had only time to move the vehicles up the hill next to the camp. We joined them and watched helplessly as tents and equipment were washed away and only the thatched roofs remained of the research facility above the water. Over the radio we heard Oria call in help from local helicopters, commercial and military, to rescue six members of her staff stranded up trees and those at other camps and to then transport us out of Samburu. The morning wore on, hot and sunny, as

we watched the water rising, carrying debris, and helicopters circling overhead. After all those in danger had been rescued, one of the helicopters landed and carried us over the flooding river to the airfield where we could wait for Air Kenya to take us to Nairobi.

The flood was totally unexpected and had never happened before, even in the rainy season. The devastation is immense. Several camps have been destroyed, bridges washed away, homes and jobs lost. The camps need to be rebuilt to sustain the very important tourism and its economic benefits in the area and Save the Elephants has to rebuild and re-equip their research station, which needs thousands of dollars. Their work in research, protection, grassroots and education is so important to the welfare of African elephants. That said, the future of African elephants cannot wait, so the staff are salvaging what they can and have been out in Samburu looking for the elephants as soon as they could and work has already started on rebuilding Save the Elephants research station on the hill where we had waited on that fateful morning.

What does Save the Elephants do and how can I help?

Apart from the ongoing battle to stop the poaching of elephants for their ivory tusks, current projects include monitoring the movement of elephants by radio collars. Tracking the movement of elephants by satellite increases knowledge and understanding of these complex animals. There is also a practical benefit: farmers can be warned if elephants leave the open reserve and threaten their crops. It is essential to smooth the fragile relationship between people and elephants to prevent retaliation against the elephants. Another project which is successful is to incorporate beehives into the fencing around cultivated fields. Elephants are fearful of bees so turn away when they disturb the hives on the fencing. Work experience at the research facility is offered for school leavers from farming communities to encourage understanding about elephants.

For more information and updates see www.savetheelephants.org and www.elephantwatchesafaris.com. Contributions towards the rebuilding of this project can be made at

<http://www.justgiving.com/savetheelephants>

Farside Africa would like to add that while trips to Samburu are currently not possible while the camps are being rebuilt, we hope to be able to send clients there again soon and highly recommend it as a very special and unique destination.