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Elsa the Lioness: The Spirit of Born Free on World Lion Day

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[Joanna Eede](#)



(PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LLOYD / DAVIDLLOYD.NET)

There is a moving moment in the film *Born Free*, when Elsa the lioness walks across an African savannah towards the couple who hand-reared her. She had spent a week trying to fend for herself in northern Kenya. As she approaches them, they see that their experiment hasn't worked: She is thin, bloodied and limping.

Joy and George Adamson were attempting to return the lioness they loved to the wild, but her injuries proved to George that she was unable to survive in her natural habitat. She had grown too accustomed to human care. Elsa was, in fact, no longer wild.

"What's wrong with a zoo anyway?" George asks Joy. "Is freedom so important?"

"Yes!" cries Joy with passion. "She was born free and she has the right to live free!"

The 1964 film was based on the eponymous novel by author Joy Adamson. The book, which spent 13 weeks at the top of The New York Times Best Seller list, describes raising Elsa to maturity after she was orphaned as a tiny cub.

Joy's "clumsy little velvet bag" was a young lioness with "perfect manners" whose paws became damp when she was nervous and who preferred to sleep stretched out on metal-framed camp beds instead of the African earth and who who fell asleep with Joy's thumb in her mouth even as an adult. For the first few years of her life she and her two sisters lived with George, Joy and a pet rock-hyrax called Pati-Pati, at their Game

Warden's house in Kenya's Northern Frontier District. After her sisters were sent to Rotterdam zoo, Elsa joined Joy and George on safari, travelling across the ancient dry lakebed of the Chalbi desert, to the volcanic slopes of the Marsabit Mountains and to the white beaches of Kenya's coast.

The couple's attempts to teach Elsa how to hunt and survive on her own were ultimately successful, and she was returned to the wild.

Filming in Kenya

Filming of Elsa's life story began in Meru National Park, on the slopes of Mount Kenya, in 1964. The rôles of Joy and George were played by husband and wife actors, Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers, while more than twenty different lions were used to represent Elsa, including cubs sent from Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Selassie and two - "Girl" and "Boy" - who had once been mascots for the Royal Scots Guards in Nairobi.

The camera crew shot scenes from the safety of a cage, but Virginia and Bill refused actor doubles; instead, by working closely with George (the main technical advisor on the film), they were soon walking on their own with the lions, playing football with them at dawn and sharing lunches of hard boiled eggs and sardines. Virginia and Bill developed a "deep and humbling" bond with "Girl" in particular.

The Academy-award winning film was not only a box-office hit, but a profoundly life-changing experience for the actors. In her journals, Virginia wrote that leaving Africa was "agony", as was saying goodbye to the many "Elsas" who starred in Born Free. "Guided by George and Joy, we began to understand how every animal is individual and that wild animals belong in the wild," she wrote.



An Elephant Called Slowly

It was, however, the fate of an elephant named Pole Pole (Swahili for “slowly, slowly”) that was the catalyst for “Zoo Check”, the organisation Bill and Virginia established with their son, Will Travers, to challenge the keeping of wild animals in captivity.

As a two year old, Pole Pole had been taken from the wild as a gift for London zoo by the Kenyan government. She spent six weeks on the film set of “An Elephant called Slowly” in her native Kenya before being flown to the U.K.

More than a decade later, Bill and Virginia visited her in her concrete enclosure in Regent’s Park Zoo, where, as Virginia wrote, she “swayed abnormally to and fro”. When they called her name, however, she turned, trumpeted in recognition, reached across the moat with her trunk, and touched their hands. The Zoo, perhaps stung by Virginia’s criticism, tried to move the elephant to their larger country facility at Whipsnade but the move failed, Pole Pole damaged a leg and was euthanized soon after, at the young age of 16.

Founded in 1984, Zoo Check was immediately dismissed as a “9 day wonder” by London Zoo. But more than 30 years on, and just over 20 years after Bill’s death, what is now called the Born Free Foundation and its U.S. sister organisation, Born Free USA, are globally-respected, international wildlife charities with 100,000

supporters and a £5 million budget.



(PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LLOYD / DAVIDLLOYD.NET)

Born Free's appeals have raised thousands of dollars and pounds for animal rescue and rehabilitation operations in dozens of countries. The organisation exposes horrific animal cruelty: lions kept in cages knee-deep in excrement; elephants poached in their thousands for their ivory; moon bears painfully milked for bile; dolphins swimming listlessly in filthy swimming pools.

Such barbaric treatment has informed Born Free's ethos, which lies in compassion for the individual animal. It believes that animals such as lions have multi-faceted personalities, and that they express traits such as joy, regret, sadness, happiness and love: a belief borne out by Elsa and also by Christian, a lion cub bought during the swinging sixties from the pet department of London's Harrods store.

Christian the Lion

Christian spent the first few months of his life in a furniture shop owned by friends Ace Bourke and John Rendall before being placed in the care of George Adamson, who successfully returned him to the Kenyan wilds. After almost a year of living free, his emotional reunion with Ace and John on a rocky outcrop in Kora National Park was captured on film by Bill. His "embrace of love", as Virginia described it, showed that the bonds of affection were still strong.



(PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LLOYD / DAVIDLLOYD.NET)

Other animals have not experienced Christian's comfortable early life, nor the chance of freedom. Many have experienced enormous cruelty, such as Anthea and Raffi, two lions that were rescued from a tiny cage atop a restaurant in Tenerife. Born Free's photo album is peppered with similarly heart-breaking stories and images: a solitary Black rhinoceros kneeling despondently in a concrete enclosure surrounded by barbed-wire; Kimba the emaciated lioness barely able to stand in an Italian cage, her back legs weakened by malnutrition and cancer; Simba the circus lion staring mournfully through the wire mesh of his beast wagon. "Wild animals such as lions, which are social creatures, simply aren't built for a lonely, sterile existence behind bars," says Virginia McKenna. "They belong in prides in the African wilderness, with grass plains underfoot and a complex ecosystem in which to thrive".

Where possible, the organisation rehabilitates captive animals to the wild. For those who have been too physically or mentally damaged by life in a cage, the prospect of a "life worth living" is provided at Sanctuaries created or supported by the Foundation, such as Shamwari, a wildlife reserve on South Africa's Eastern Cape, Lilongwe wildlife centre in Malawi, or the Born Free Primate Sanctuary near San Antonio, Texas.

Decline in the Wild Lion Population

In the fifty years since the making of "Born Free" the threats to wild animals have grown. In 1975, estimates given by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) put Africa's wild lion population at approximately 200,000; today, it is thought there may only be 35,000 left - and some experts believe the number may be as low as 25,000. Loss of habitats, trophy hunting (approximately 600 wild lions are shot for 'sport' each year) and an increase in the illegal wildlife trade are all factors contributing to the decline. The

primary cause, however, is rapid human population growth and land-use conversion, which makes human-wildlife conflict a critical issue. Pastoral communities increasingly use lions' habitat to graze their animals, so lions prey on poorly protected livestock. Herders then kill the lions in retaliation.

Born Free is supporting new campaigns to find ways in which people and wildlife can live peaceably together, by building predator-proof livestock "bomas" (stockades) and supporting organizations such as Ewaso Lions, which promotes co-existence between people and lions across northern Kenya's Ewaso-Nyiro ecosystem, a wild country of ancient lava flows and grasslands scattered with desert rose. (See related: "<http://voices.nationalgeographic.org/author/ewasolions/>").

In order to tackle trophy hunting, Born Free USA and others petitioned the U.S. government to list the wild African lion as endangered on the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. government's subsequent decision – to list the species as threatened but with a special rule to prevent lion trophies being imported into the U.S. (currently at the rate of about 300 a year) unless they came from scientifically evaluated and sustainably managed stocks – will, if finally confirmed, drastically reduce the level of imports.

Elephant Emergency



(PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LLOYD / DAVIDLLOYD.NET)

Born Free launched their “Elephant Emergency” campaign in 2014, to fight the illegal ivory trade. “Elephants are on the brink across most of Africa,” says Will Travers, now Born Free’s President. “On average, an elephant is killed every 15 minutes and then butchered for its ivory tusks. It is a disgrace.” Virginia McKenna agrees, “How can this still be going on in the 21st century? We have betrayed them.”

Two new reports, *Ivory’s Curse* and *Out of Africa*, published by Born Free USA in association with the research teams at C4ADS, have exposed the sophisticated criminal networks that are behind much of Africa’s elephant poaching. HRH The Duke of Cambridge referred to the reports in his address to the World Bank in December 2014.

Elsa’s Spirit

An early scene in the film “Born Free” depicts Virginia and Bill (as Joy and George) taking the lioness acting as ‘Elsa’ on a trip to Kenya’s coast. They play volleyball with her on the long stretches of Watamu beach, and swim with her among the blue waters and coral gardens of the Indian Ocean. The lioness grimaces slightly as she pads gingerly into the ocean, whiskers twitching, Virginia holding her tail.

It is a remarkable scene, and the warmth of the actors’ affection for the lioness is palpable. They didn’t know it at the time, but their lives had changed forever. Ahead of them stretched years of campaigning for the liberty and dignity of wild creatures.

“I never met Elsa the lioness,” wrote Virginia, “ ... but her spirit led me to where I stand today.”



MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.



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Ron Lehman · 4 months ago

As my wonderful deceased Mom always said "you'll never miss them until they are all gone." How right she was and now we need more people in the world to 'miss' them so they won't be all gone.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ›



laine · 4 months ago

i really think you guys could add more details to the text about Elsa the lioness

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ›



Carol Finn · 10 months ago

I have had enough of Two Legged Human Cruel Scum treating Animals, Wild or Domestic the way that they do, and nothing is done about it, there must be something that can be done, please count me in. These Filthy Poachers should be Shot on the Spot, because they are no good, and never will be. All the Governments in these Countries are no good either, they do Nil.

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