

Impressions of Amboseli

Cynthia narrates how she has come to understand and appreciate the ways of elephant families that she has closely studied

BY JOHN FOX

October 30, 2017. Arrived at the camp. Amboseli is still dry, the rains have not yet arrived but the heavy heat suggests they are building. Three elephants are playing in the bright marshy green grass around the tent. White egrets and emerald winged hadadas – I grab my oil paints out of the car and paint until dusk.

This is an extract from the diary of British artist Sophie Walbeoffe, quoted in her book *Impressions of Amboseli*, which she has produced with Cynthia Moss, an American well-known for her research on the elephants of Amboseli.

Cynthia founded the Amboseli Elephant Research Project back in 1972. In the book, she explains that it was a time in East Africa when elephants were losing their habitat to agriculture, their migration routes were being blocked, and poaching for ivory was on the increase.

But Amboseli was an exception. Elephants were freely moving in and out of the Amboseli basin on trails they had been using for centuries. They shared their range with the Maasai, who didn't kill elephants for meat or for trophies, and who didn't fence their land or practise agriculture. So, Amboseli was an ideal place for collecting data on a relatively undisturbed population of elephants. Cynthia's project has become the longest-running study of wild African elephants in the world.

Eighteen years ago, Cynthia went to an art exhibition called 'Painting in the Clouds'. On the wall was a painting of Amboseli from the top of Kitirua Hill looking west. She bought it. She treasures it. The artist was Sophie.

After a number of years, the two women met. Sophie had published a



One of Sophie Walbeoffe's paintings.

book of her paintings of Lamu. Cynthia told her about the Amboseli painting she had bought. And Sophie said she often travelled to Amboseli to paint because she loved the landscape and the wildlife.

'That was the beginning,' Cynthia says. 'We soon started talking about a book like her Lamu one, but with her paintings of Amboseli and some words by me. That is our book: *Impressions of Amboseli*.'

Last Saturday I went to the launch of Sophie and Cynthia's book at The Matronze Gallery in Langata. It was an event they shared with Rupert Watson, whose intriguing *Peacocks and Picathartes: Reflections on Africa's Birdlife* I reviewed a few weeks ago. Peter Blackwell was also there, the wildlife artist who has illustrated Rupert's book with his drawings.

Sophie's paintings of Amboseli are

beautiful; Cynthia's writing about elephant behaviour is engaging; together, they have produced a beautiful and engaging book.

You can see the colour and atmosphere of Sophie's painting in the example that is shown here.

'I find it more exciting, and easier to capture movement, depth of field, and colour by working from life than by only using a photograph,' she says. 'You feel and see the animals, like no one else has. Your picture has a life of its own.'

Cynthia writes about her first experiences of Amboseli and the start of her studies there.

She sketches the history of the region and describes the Amboseli ecosystem.

She celebrates its abundance of wildlife and, in particular, she tells how she has come to understand and

appreciate the ways of the elephant families of Amboseli she has closely studied.

She is aware of the population growth and the changing land use practices that threaten the wilderness areas of Kenya.

'I could get very discouraged and think about giving up,' she says, 'but all I have to do is go out and sit in my Land Rover among the Amboseli elephants and all thoughts of abandoning them and the glorious ecosystem in which they live is abandoned.'

The book is published by the Amboseli Trust for Elephants in Langata. If you want to know more about its work, or to buy the book (at Sh3,000) go to www.elephanttrust.org or ring 0728-760090.

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