

Jumbo's last stand

I crouched down in the sand behind a fallen tree, breathed quietly, and stared in awe as a great herd of over 200 elephants trooped by.

The bulls raised their trunks and trumpeted—mighty roars that echoed off the thick boabob trees. Baby elephants trotted obediently alongside their mothers while adolescent males fought playful skirmishes. Above the procession, a thick cloud of white dust kicked up by the elephants rose up to the burning blue African sky.

This happened last fall in Botswana's Okavango River delta, one of Africa's last unspoiled wildernesses. For me, the rare sight of such a large herd was a spectacle as majestic and beautiful as the Taj Mahal or any other of man's works. It was also a marvel that I may never see again.

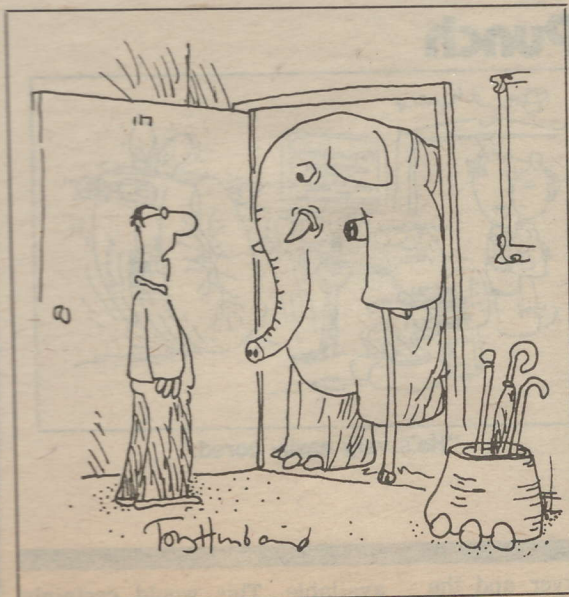
As anyone who reads by now knows, Africa's elephant population is quickly being slaughtered to the brink of extinction. Happily, most civilized nations have recently banned imports of ivory. Japan, China and Hong Kong are noteworthy exceptions. Many African nations have just announced they will also ban exports of ivory in an effort to stop poaching.

All this is long overdue.

I wish I could take every woman who wears ivory jewelry and anyone who buys those horrid, fussy Chinese ivory carvings and make them stand in front of a rotting carcass of a slaughtered elephant, two bloody sockets where its tusks were cut out. And women who love ivory should see baby elephants crying beside the bodies of their butchered mothers, just as women who crave fur coats should see what happens to animals caught in leghold traps.

But humane awareness is finally coming. Last week a poignant report appeared showing that those lowliest of creatures, pigs, enjoyed playing with toys and were actually very friendly. Chickens produced more eggs when given a doll to remind them of their mothers. Science has discovered the obvious. A painful reality, since most of

Punch



"Yes?"

ERIC MARGOLIS



us don't want to know that the creatures processed in our factory farms have basic feelings not very different from our own.

But awareness may be too late to save the wild elephant. Poaching will go on in most of Africa wherever elephants are found. Too many African officials and politicians secretly profit from the ivory trade. Only three African nations have a viable wildlife protection system: South Africa, Botswana and, to a lesser degree, Kenya.

If you're going to be reincarnated as an elephant, rhino or even a three-toed gnu, I suggest you do it in South Africa. That favorite devil-country of the left is the only place left in Africa where it's safe to be an animal.

South Africa's excellent game parks, animal management policy and suppression of poaching should be models for the rest of the continent. So plentiful are South Africa's elephants that culling must be carried in to keep herds and their habitat in balance. For this reason, South Africa still exports ivory—the proceeds from which go to finance animal management programs.

But there's another danger threatening elephants that has been barely discussed: After man, elephants are their own worst enemy. The first thing that strikes you when visiting an area inhabited by elephants is the vast destruction they cause.

Elephants, who are voracious eaters, have a passion for the young, tender leaves growing at the tops of trees. To get them, they smash down the tree, munch its top and amble away.

In Botswana, I saw vistas of shattered or fallen trees stretching out to the horizon. It looked as if a small nuclear weapon had leveled the forest. When elephants get through smashing, they move to another area and begin again. They can't live without shade so must keep permanently on the move. This was fine when there were as many elephants as people in southern Africa. Today, land has run out. People are pressing onto elephant grazing lands, so many elephants have been confined to reserves. In fact, in a few more years, the only living elephants in Africa will be in reserves.

Yet, tragically, elephants keep smashing down the trees on their reserves. As an old Rhodesian game tracker told me, "I love these bloody beasts but they're destroying their own habitat ... soon, they're going to bloody kill themselves."

He may be right. Once the trees go, the land dries out, vegetation and smaller animal life die and the elephants start succumbing to sun stroke.

There seem only two answers: Either give a small number of elephants a large habitat in which to roam—really a sort of zoo on a grand scale—or else feed them tender leaves. It would be tragic to see the mighty elephant turned into a house pet. Babar would certainly add that if man can burn and hack forests, why can't elephants topple a few trees as well.