



Dick Houston, Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe

Elefence and The Roots Of Heaven

From Ashtabula to Garba Tula How I Got Started on my African Journey And the Founding of Elefence International

By Dick Houston
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Through the many years of my living and working in Africa, I'm often asked what set my heart on the adventure continent. Why did I take on the elephant's cause? Like so many obsessions, they begin with real-life heroes and a book. So....

I was 14 years old when I first saw *The Roots of Heaven* at my hometown theater in Ashtabula, Ohio. It's a classic John Huston movie filmed on location in Africa in 1958. The theme of the movie haunted me enough that I later checked out the book at the local library. The author is Romain Gary.

The story revolves around a man named Morel, who had survived a WWII concentration camp. During his ordeal he dreamed of elephants who represented freedom and liberty to him. He made a promise that if he survived the horrors of the concentration camp, he would go to Africa someday to save the elephants from poachers and the ivory trade.

I too dreamed of saving elephants, but it seemed an impossible dream for a teenage boy whose family background was made up of blue collar workers and farmers. I remember how hard my dad worked, sometimes 7 days a week as a tool-and-die maker. Such wild dreams of a crazy boy obsessed with getting to Africa seemed beyond the reach of reality.

However, I never gave up on the dream, working my way through college to get a bachelors and a masters degree in English and history, later getting a job with an oil company in Maracaibo, Venezuela to save money to eventually take off for Africa.

As fate would have it, when I finally made it to Africa in 1967, I crossed paths with the right people who steered me in the right direction -- and I eventually ended up operating small camping safaris across Africa with a British partner. Later, I was befriended by some of my childhood heroes, such as the legendary old Kenya game warden and conservationist, George Adamson of *Born Free* fame. George lived in Kenya's Northern Frontier district of *Garba Tula*. A true slice of the Old Africa. It was there I became passionate about conservation.

So, in a nutshell, this is how I ended up running small overland safaris across thousands of miles of Africa's dusty tracks, crossing the Sahara sands, the Congo's primeval jungles, following elephant herds, sleeping on the ground under billions of blinking stars.

As the years passed in Africa I began to see more dead elephants than living ones. In the late 1980s Kenya's elephant population plummeted from 125,000 to only 14,000. The rhinos in Kenya were no longer seen in the wild. Africa's total elephant population has dropped from 1.4 million to only 350,000 now -- and continuing to decline by 30,000 a year fueled by the Communist Chinese ivory trade. Do the math.

I understood enough about elephant family life, their dedication to their young, their lifetime friendships between herd members. So I was sickened by the slaughter. I've seen their carcasses strewn obscenely around the bush, even their heads cut off for the ivory. I've been on anti-poaching treks with rangers and once came across an elephant bull killed only minutes before, his blood dripping into the African earth. I get weary of naysayers who wring their hands and say..."well, there's nothing I can do." I'm a great believer that sometimes the sins of omission are greater than the sins of commission.

I thought of the words of the character Morel in *The Roots of Heaven*: "It is not possible for a free man to catch a glimpse of the great elephant herds roaming the vast spaces of Africa without taking an oath to do whatever is necessary to preserve for ever this living splendor."

It doesn't take a stretch of imagination to see what galvanized me to envision *Elefence International*. My old British friend **Bruce Lowe -- a partner with Taft Law in Cleveland -- founded Elefence as a charity 26 years ago. It was his generosity, and his own vision of what Elefence could be, that set everything in motion. [please see Bruce's bio below]**

Our premier projects in Zambia and Zimbabwe were funded by generous individual donors, as well as major grants from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conservation Fund. They have helped Elefence support anti-poaching rangers with radio communication equipment, radio towers, a school for the rangers' kids, houses for rangers, a holding facility for rescued orphaned elephants, solar water towers for elephants in Hwange National Park, solar wells for villages, food programs for hungry kids, and paying high school tuitions for high-achiever students in impoverished village schools.

On our website, Elefence talks about the state of the elephant today, and our Elefence conservation projects with our field partner, Wildlife Action Group in Malawi. You will read how our conservation mission helps save not only elephants and other wild animals -- but also helps safeguard villagers' ecosystems. The local communities are at ground zero of human-elephant conflicts. (Note that the Elefence logo is an amalgam of an African man and a woman blending into an elephant.)

I'm sometimes asked what I think is the most important task for elephant conservation today. My answer is one word: **education**. You teach the local people how wild places and wildlife, especially elephants, maintain ecosystems. As a result, *you actively support* villagers with conservation projects in the field to secure their day-to-day livelihoods.

We can turn the tide to save the elephants and other wild animals. The people need *incentives*. We're doing that in Malawi with the fencing project [see www.elefence.org] to safeguard elephants -- and safeguard people from crop-raiding elephants with our village and education projects. Elefence does not take a penny for the building of the fence, and employs *only* local village people for its construction.

But time is fast running out for the elephant as human encroachment continues to gnaw at the forests. This is why we are desperate to finish Phase Two of the fence (Dedza Salima forest) to secure the area for perpetuity. Help us make an impact, direct from Northeast Ohio to the heart of Africa.

Certainly the roots of heaven were planted in my own heart of Africa.

Dick Houston

President

Elefence International, Inc.

An American non-profit 501(c)3 charity

Cleveland, Ohio "The Heartland of America"

All tax-deductible donations can be made by visiting our website www.elefence.org



Bruce Lowe, Our Founder

Bruce J. L. Lowe, ELEFENCE **Founder** and Legal Counsel, is a partner with Taft, Stettinius & Hollister LLP, Cleveland, Ohio, where his practice focuses on international law and litigation, general business and commercial litigation and business bankruptcy matters. He is President of The Greater Cleveland International Lawyers Group, and has been honored as Lawyer of the Year by *Best Lawyers in America* for Litigation-Bankruptcy (Cleveland) 2020. Bruce has been ranked and honored by *Chambers USA* as one of America's Leading Lawyers for Business, Bankruptcy /Restructuring (2022). In addition, he's listed as an Ohio Super Lawyer.

Bruce is Chair of the British - American Chamber of Commerce of Ohio and has also served as Honorary Legal Advisor to Her Majesty's Consul. He is past chair of the Bankruptcy and Commercial Law Section of the Cleveland Bar Association. He holds BA and MA degrees from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University and the Degree of Barrister at Law from the Inns of Court School of Law, and is a member of the Honorable Society of the Middle Temple, London, England.

"Bruce's guiding hand has helped ELEFENCE become a much respected and honorable charity dedicated to help resolve human-elephant conflict in Africa."

--The Trustees of Elefence

