

The Swazi Eleven

Tom French, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, spent six years studying zoos and wrote about his experiences in his book *Zoo Story*. His book opens with the story of eleven elephants who were taken from Swaziland in Africa and flown to zoos in San Diego and Tampa.

It was August 21, 2003 on a Thursday morning. The elephants were in the hold of the plane in crates. Some of them were sleeping on their sides; others were awake and drinking water. Mick Reilly was with them. He and his father ran the Mkhaya and Hlane Game Reserves in Africa where the elephants had lived. Mick had grown up with these elephants. "It's not so bad," Mick told the elephants as he refilled their water.

Mick was tired. It had been a long fight to get the elephants on this flight. Animal rights activists had tried to stop the elephants from going to zoos. Groups like Born Free and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) filed a lawsuit and wrote angry letters. The government and even the local newspapers of Swaziland had blamed Mick and his father for sending the elephants to zoos. Mick was upset. Didn't people understand? The elephants couldn't stay on the land.

There were too many elephants living in the Mkhaya and Hlane Game Reserves. They were ruining the land. Elephants eat for up to eighteen hours a day. When they eat they tear bark off trees and even knock trees down. Elephants had destroyed so many trees that a big part of the parks was now only black and dead trees.

Animals like eagles, owls and vultures had no place to nest. In addition, the black rhino, one of Africa's most endangered species, also needed the trees to eat. Now the rhino had no food. If the situation continued many animals and plants would be wiped out.

Mick and his father tried to find another park nearby, but South Africa was overrun with elephants. No park could take any more. The Reillys looked in other places in Africa but there was a threat of poaching. They did not want their elephants to be shot as trophies and have their tusks sold on the black market.

In other parks rangers had killed elephants to make sure the population stayed low. Mick didn't want to kill his elephants.

Of course, none of this was the elephants' fault in the first place. In Swaziland, as in other parts of Africa, elephants have struggled to survive. Humans have taken so much land in Africa and occupy so much space that most animals are confined inside game parks. Fifty years ago there weren't even any elephants in Swaziland. They had all died or been killed off by hunters. Mick's father, Ted, tried to help. He built three parks to protect endangered species. The elephants arrived in 1987 and they survived so well in the parks, there were soon too many of them.

Humans had created this problem. Now it was up to humans to fix it. Zoos were the only option.

"On this plane I'm giving them a chance," Mick thought.

Before his family had agreed to send the animals to zoos Mick had visited the zoos and talked to the keepers. He saw that the elephants would be treated well and given as much space as possible. He said the animal clinic at the San Diego Zoo was better than any hospital in Swaziland.

The zoos offered to pay \$12,000 for each elephant and Mick and his family would use the money to protect the other animals in the park and buy more land for the animals.

On August 15th the courts denied the lawsuit filed by animal rights groups. The elephants would go to the zoos. Four would go to Tampa to the Lowry Park Zoo and the other seven were headed to San Diego.

As the plane began its final descent toward Tampa, the elephants were restless. Mick knew the trip could not be easy for them. Surely, they would wonder about the strange noises and rumblings around them. Surely, they would be confused. He was certain the elephants were hungry after the long flight. Mick went to the elephants and stroked each one. “*Kunekudla lukunengi,*” he told them. “*There’s lots of food where you’re going.*”

Adapted from *Zoo Story*, by Thomas French
by Kelly Boland Hohne