ARE WE THERE YET?

NATURAL TREASURES OF UGANDA
ARE WE THERE YET?

by

Dennis Lubega

Illustrated by Nicholas Kagongo Arinaitwe
“My name is Irene and I’m a baby elephant. My family has descended from a long line of well-bred elephants who have been, since the beginning of time, among the lucky families able to enjoy living in Queen Elizabeth National Park.” The little elephant stood about one meter tall and addressed what seemed to be an acacia tree, a mongoose, and three dung beetles.

“I think our good luck is associated with our pure blood and excellent choices in marriage. Whatever happened in the days when planet earth was being formed certainly prepared this part of the world to be home to a wide range of animals and birds, all who bowed daily to the regal elephants.” Irene loved to boast about who she was, her heritage, and the long history of her family in Queen Elizabeth National Park.
She continued, “You see, Queen Elizabeth National Park is blessed by nature. It has plenty of food for the diverse inhabitants that call it home. And the elephants are the most blessed of all.”

She broke off a limb from the acacia tree and held it in her trunk on display, as if she were admiring the beauty of the plant more than the nutritious nature of it. “As far as what animals of this planet eat, elephants are naturally spoiled. While many animals eat only grass, we herbivores are able to eat grass, bush, and trees, as well.”

“Irene, where are you?” called Irene’s mother from behind the large acacia bush. “Who are you talking to?”

“Here I am mother,” replied the young elephant. “I’m just playing with my pretend friends one last time before we have to start off on our next journey.”

Irene had assembled lots of rocks lined up in rows around her. She called them the thrones where all of her visiting “royal friends” would sit. This ensured their comfort when bidding her farewell.

“You have always had such a great imagination. Who are your friends today?” asked Irene’s mother, curiously peering over the top of the acacia bush. “I don’t want you to tire yourself too much with any more long speeches in front of your many fans. Celebrity elephants must rest, too, you know. I don’t need you falling behind tomorrow and you know
we’re going for a very long walk.”

“Oh, I’m not performing today. I finished that last week. Remember, I told you about my sold-out dance performances?” Irene explained with enough enthusiasm to convince and charm anyone into thinking she really was the famous ballerina she thought she was. “How long is the walk tomorrow, mother?”

“It will be quite far, at least thirty kilometers to a feeding area where we were one year ago. Do you remember the place where we grazed around the time you wanted to pierce your ears and make an anklet out of that Bakonzo belt you found in the high grass?” She replied. “As I recall, that savanna had the greenest bushes around this time last year.”
“My, my, mother! Tell me you are only joking. I don’t recall ever wanting an anklet.” Irene protested shyly, knowing that she changed personalities so often that it was hard for anyone, except her mother, to keep up with her.

“Yes, dear. You do go through fashion phases, don’t you! But don’t worry, we all wanted an ankle bracelet at one time or other.” Irene’s mother thought back to when she was only a teenager and she tried braiding her own anklet out of five vetiver plants. It lasted only a day before she tired of retying it every ten minutes. She giggled at the thought of her daughter being so much like her.

“But mother, the place in that far off savanna must be so changed by now we won’t be able to recognize it! Think about all the savanna grass that sprouts with the slightest drop of rain. How will we ever find the place?” Irene challenged her mother’s memory at every chance she could, knowing very well that no matter how much she begged to differ, her mother had the most incredible memory of all the matriarchs of Queen Elizabeth National Park.

She had become the matriarch, or leader of the herd, when my grandmother had passed away after sixty long year of life. My mother was now the oldest female in the herd and all the other elephants, my sisters and aunts, looked up to her to lead us.

Irene’s mother simply answered, “You don’t remember the last time we went on a long walk? I
kept telling you the whole way that we would find what we were looking for. And you must have asked me one thousand times if we had arrived yet!”

“Will father be traveling with us this time? You know how much I love to be around him and his friends.” Irene asked doubtfully. “He might be able to lead us to a closer green pasture.”

“Of course not, sweetheart,” answered Irene’s mother, knowing that when the conversation turned to this, Irene was simply being rebellious. “I’m the matriarch and that’s my responsibility.”

Irene’s mother took her role of matriarch very seriously. It was a huge honor for her to be the dominant female in a herd of elephants.
“You know that your father is the patriarch of his bachelor herd. He would not accept me or you to join in his herd of male elephants.” Irene’s mother reminded her of the time that her father and his male buddies ran two kilometers just to loose Irene and her sisters.

Irene always thought that belonging to a bachelor herd was really exciting because the patriarchs often grow to be very big and can weigh up to 7.5 tons! With such giants around, she felt quite safe from any predator or poacher.

Another perk of hanging out in the bachelor herd was that it was always entertaining to watch the
guys cool down after a long walk in the sun. While all elephants splash water on their ears and backs to cool down, the bachelor herds seem to make a huge spectacle out of the practice. It was a natural instinct that elephants had, a way of cooling the blood vessels in their ears by fanning them while wet. This, in
turn, would cool them down as their blood circulated around their large bodies. However, Irene thought of it more like a game. She loved to run around the ankles of her father and his friends as they cooled themselves, splashing around in what seemed to be the largest fountain on earth. It was even better than playing in the rain.

Irene was always caught trying to hang out with the bachelor herds. She was usually kicked out or left behind. She constantly argued with her brothers about their herds, but in the end she tended to like being closer to her mother and all the sisters and aunts that made up her herd.

“Mummy, do you think that Aunty Sebunya will be joining us on the walk tomorrow? She seems to be getting quite big with her pregnancy. It seems like she has been pregnant forever. I feel very sorry for her having to carry all of that extra weight on such a long journey. Maybe we should not travel the long distance all at once.” Irene’s mother knew by the direction of the question that Irene was not only beginning to think ahead and mentally prepare herself for the upcoming journey, but she finally was resorting to her normal tactic of trying to postpone a long walk.

“Now, now, Irene. Aunty Sebunya is a very happy elephant. She has wanted a baby for many years and I know that she has all of the strength in the world.” Irene’s mother then told her something that Irene
was sure she had heard at least a hundred times, if not a thousand. "Even pregnant females are able to walk long distances. We are sturdy and strong by nature, and that is what makes us prouder than
anything else. Did you know that I was 22 months pregnant with you when we walked in a herd for ten hours?”

“I know, I know, and everyone treated you like a queen the whole way.” Irene declared. “That’s why I am the princess of Queen Elizabeth National Park!”

“Well you are indeed a princess, at least to me and all your pretend friends.” Irene’s mother laughed out loud before she could stop herself. “I gave birth to you that night after the long walk along the shore of Lake Albert. I was so afraid I would deliver you before we made it to our destination and then what would we have done?” With that final thought, then began to rest and relax in preparation for tomorrow’s walk.

They started off early the next day on the trek to the distant savanna. True to form, Irene asked every ten minutes during the entire thirty kilometer walk, “Are we there yet? How much longer? “

Her mother could only push ahead smiling the whole way, thinking about that difficult journey several years ago when Irene was in her stomach, kicking and shouting for ten hours non-stop, “Are we there yet? How much longer? I’m ready to be born!”

THE END
1. Are elephants herbivores or carnivores? *The elephant is an herbivore that likes to eat trees, bushes, and grass.*

2. How much can a male elephant weigh? *Male Elephants can weigh up to 7.5 tons. They’re considered to be the heaviest land mammal on Earth.*

3. How long is the gestation period for a female elephant (how long she stays pregnant)? *22 months*

4. Besides for hearing, why do elephants have such large ears? *Elephants use their large ears for cooling the body.*

5. What is the dominant female called in an elephant herd? *The matriarch*

6. What are male elephant herds called (herds with only male elephants)? *Bachelor herds*
Learning more about nature allows us to understand our environment, respect our wildlife friends, and share our experiences with others.

Be a friend of the natural treasures of Uganda and act responsibly when interacting with your environment.

About the Author

Dennis Patrick Musisi Lubega began his interest in stories at the age of two. Then it was mostly children’s stories on TV and folktales told by his mother. Dennis has never lost this passion. Although he trained in business studies, the forty year-old recently decided to begin a new career as a writer for children and young adults. As a result of this decision, he has written several stories--The First Claim, The Laughing Lion, The Short Giraffe that Wanted a Little Respect, The Monkey Christmas Dinner, and Late on PLE Day, among others. The Natural Treasures of Uganda series of environmental education books is his first set of books to be published. Mr. Lubega lives in Kampala, Uganda, and is married with one child.

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