WALLACE
THE HIPPO BOSS

NATURAL TREASURES
OF
UGANDA
WALLACE THE HIPPO BOSS

by

Dennis Lubega

Illustrated by Nicholas Kagongo Arinaitwe
"It’s time to come out of the water comrades, at last the sun has set," I called out to my fellow hippopotamuses so that I could be heard clearly by all of them.

I was their boss and they liked calling me that. "Hey, boss! What’s up boss? Where to now, boss? You’re the boss, boss!" At times it got annoying. I always reminded them politely that I preferred to simply be called ‘leader’ or ‘protector’, even ‘chief hippo’ would be better than boss. They never called me by my name, Wallace. I suppose it is not catchy enough for the hip hippos.
Although there are times when I could be very strict with them about behaving themselves, deep in my heart I truly cared for every single hippopotamus on the vast savanna within Queen Elizabeth National Park.

They must have been very hungry, I thought to myself. We’d spent almost the whole day in the Kazinga Channel waters, trying to escape the blazing heat. I felt sorry for them, especially the females, who were by far the majority. Now we were all anxious to leave the water and go out to graze.

“Which pastures are we grazing today, boss?” asked Simppo, my youngest daughter. Simppo was usually shy. She was very hungry, though, and whenever she got hungry, she forgot everything except eating. It’s as if she lost all fears and inhibitions when her stomach began to growl. Sometimes I could even forget she was around, she was so quiet, but not when it was time to graze.

“I’m afraid the nearest pastures have all been sun-scorched and the grass has turned brown. We will have to look further away,” I explained to the herd. Most of my fellow hippos did not like to go too far from the water for fear of getting burnt by the sun or running into predators without the protection of water close at hand. Some of them were afraid of drying out, although we were always careful,
because of our sensitive skin, about the amount of time we chose to stay out of the water.

I always had to remind the herd that we could protect ourselves if danger was near. Hippos have been gifted by nature in many ways. One of those gifts is that we can run quite fast. A healthy hippo that keeps its body fit can run as fast as thirty-five kilometers per hour. Many humans are afraid of us because of this fact. I think they are afraid we could shame them in their international Olympic Games as they compete for medals according to their speed. I’ve always wondered what sort of spectacle
the hippos would make if we held similar races. I wouldn’t mind having a gold medal to brag about with friends.

“I promise you all that if we keep moving, and looking in all directions, it won’t be long before we find green pastures,” I assured everyone. “And if we have to, we can just run like wild to get back to the Channel.”

Simppo giggled at the thought of a school of hippos running at full speed to find green pastures and then running even faster to get back into the water. She was easily amused by such images.

When I order all the hippos under my command to spend the day in water, I was sure that the decision was fair for all of us. It was the nature of how hippos had to live. As the dominant male hippopotamus, the ‘boss’, I know that if we stay too long on land, the strong sun would cause us skin problems. The sun in Queen Elizabeth National Park can get terribly hot during the dry season. Even our thick skins could not protect us from drying out in such heat. With ten to fifteen centimeter skin, we can keep our bodies cool and moist, as long as we stay in the water for long periods of time.

While finding a green pasture for my school to eat was my main concern that afternoon, I was also worried about my wife, Hillary. She was expecting a
baby and complaining of stomach pains constantly. I knew her time to give birth had not yet arrived as I’d been counting her pregnancy by the day. I was very excited to have a new calf join us, especially by Hillary. Not only is she the most beautiful hippo in all of the Park, she is also talented and witty. I laugh constantly when she is around, telling jokes about tourists and other mammals who watch us from afar. Hilary should have been a comedian. She is only four months pregnant and quick mathematics tells me that she has another four months to go before giving birth.

“I hope this baby is a boy,” Hillary told me one day soon after we’d discovered that she was pregnant.
“Are you saying this as a joke?” I asked her. “You know very well that I prefer girls!”

“That’s exactly where we disagree!” she retorted, stamping her front feet repeatedly on the ground.

“I doubt I’ll ever experience the joy of raising a boy hippo!” shouted Hillary. “You’ve promised that you would chase off or kill all my boys before they turn three! What’s interesting is that you never bother the girls. But this time round if it’s a boy, I swear that you won’t touch him. I’ll hide him away so well you’ll never find him. I just cannot understand why, in the name of the stars, you chase away or kill your own sons.”

“I’ve told you before, but I’ll repeat it for you one more time. I hate competition. If I leave a baby boy hippo to grow old, he will take away my school of hippos, including you, and create his own school. He will try to replace me as the dominant male hippopotamus! Do you expect me to stand by and simply watch?”

“School? Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha!” she laughed heartily. “It is so funny that everyone refers to our group of hippos as a school. I’ll never get used to that. Goodness, where are our teachers? Who is the head teacher? Where are the copy books and who stole all of our pencils?”
I waited for her to laugh her heart out. When she was done, it was my turn to laugh.

“Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha!” I laughed much longer than she had. She had really amused me, like always.

“We’re like a school of fish, sweetheart. Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha! Hem ha ha!” I laughed on and on. “You don’t see fish swimming around with books and pencils, now do you?”

As I moved away, I thought to myself that even though I may have this primitive habit of killing
young male hippos, I wished Hillary could understand that I’m not the only dominant male hippopotamus that does so. It was another one of those natural habits that we do because we have to, not because we want to. It’s the way nature created us.

There were other things we did that were misunderstood by many others, including humans. For example, many of the local people of Queen Elizabeth National Park have always thought that hippos were God-fearing animals! According to them, we made a deal with God at the time of creation in which we agreed, in exchange for being allowed to rest in water all day, that we would not eat fish. The idea was to leave the fish for humans.
and other creatures.

They think that when our cheeks appear swollen and onlookers suspect that we have broken our agreement by eating fish, to prove our innocence, we open our mouths wide to the skies so that God may see that there’s nothing inside. This is another idea that Hillary loved to make fun. We all knew that this action was simply just another natural movement to help us digest our food.

Humans are funny about looking for reasons to explain everything when most of things are the way they are because of the nature of life.
So we were on our way to find greener pastures before dark. I was sure we would find what we needed. We always did. That was the way nature took care of us. By nature I was the “BOSS” and by nature I was a very lucky hippo to live in Queen Elizabeth National Park with Hillary and Simppo by my side.

Family and friends are great, especially when we have to stay in a school all day, everyday, for the rest of our lives!!

THE END
1. What is a group of hippos called?
*Hippos live in groups called schools.*

2. How fast can a hippopotamus move?
*35 kilometers per hour*

3. Why does a hippo mother care for its baby male hippo longer than its baby female hippo?
*To protect it from being killed by the dominant father*

4. According to local beliefs, why do hippos open their mouth very wide to the sky?
*To show God that they are not consuming fish*

5. How many hippos were there in Queen Elizabeth National Park when counted in 2006?
*3,000*

6. How long is the gestation period for a female hippo (how long she stays pregnant)?
*8 months*

7. Why do hippos wallow in the water during the day?
*Even though its skin is 3-4 inches thick, the hippo is very sensitive to sunlight. That is why they prefer to wallow in the water during the day to avoid skin problems and dehydration.*
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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