



Hello and welcome to Global Sanctuary for Elephants' brand new podcast Global Rumbblings. Global Sanctuary for Elephants, or GSE for short, is a nonprofit organization with a mission to create vast safe spaces for captive elephants, where they are able to heal physically and emotionally, often from very traumatic pasts. I'm your host, Nadia Mari, and I'll be taking you to the lush jungle of the Mato Grosso region in central Brazil, home of GSE's initial project, Elephant Sanctuary Brazil, currently home to six female Asian elephants lovingly referred to as 'the girls'.

Nadia: 0:57

Hello, and welcome to episode three of Global Rumbblings Podcast. I'm joined again by Kat and Scott Blais, co-founders of Global Sanctuary for Elephants, and we will be continuing our journey into how it all began. Hi, Kat, hi Scott. How are you?

Scott 1:14

We're good Nadia. How are you doing?

Kat: 1:15

Hey

Nadia: 1:17

Okay, so episode three: how it all began. Last episode, we actually arrived in Brazil, we had a quick touchdown. You talked about Ramba, how she'd been confiscated from the circus. There was a changes in the laws, which were good because elephants were being confiscated, but they had nowhere to go. So there was an issue of where to send Ramba. She was going to be sent to TES - The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, which you co-founded. But that didn't work out. And before we actually go further into what happened to Ramba, and how he then initially you did end up founding a sanctuary in Brazil, your pilot project, Elephant Sanctuary Brazil? I'd like to touch on a few things that you talked about in the last episode. You said that you were breaking the mold every single day in the sanctuary. And you said also, that you didn't actually realize how damaged, I think was the words that you said, had damaged, how traumatized the

elephants were until you actually saw the ability of recovery that they showed at the sanctuary in Tennessee. So I think it'd be interesting for our, for our supporters, for our listeners to know what you actually meant by that. So what traumas did you see? And how did the first elephants that you got at the sanctuary, How did they recover? How did you see this recovery?

Scott 2:44

Let me start by saying it wasn't us breaking the mold; it was the elephants breaking the mold. They're really the ones that led us on this path. You know, we started this with an idea of trying to give elephants more space and trying to give elephants a better life. We had no idea how it was going to unfold. Nobody had done this before. No one had given elephants space in captivity in, you know, in any notable space. I think at that time, maybe, you know, there was maybe a couple of facilities that provided maybe an acre at the most. But no one had done any more than that. Actually, I think PAWS - Performing Animal Welfare Society had two acres for two African elephants, if I recall at the time, but that was it. No one knew what would happen when he gave elephants more space. So we went in with this just a little bit of the, you know, the dream of just giving elephants a better life. But we had no idea what that would be. Nobody did and, except for the elephants; I think they, they knew something massive was about to change. But with each new arrival, they just exposed us to a different level of recovery. And exposed us to a different level of complexity. We often know people that have worked and studied elephants in the wild know of the complexities of the species, we know the complexities of the social dynamics. You know, when everyone relates back to well, they mourn their dead and they, you know, they are very nurturing, and they know how to be nurtured, and they're very supportive of one another. And in this multi-generational, multi, extended family groups that will sometimes fragment off into 15 elephants will come back into a family or related individuals of 300 or 400 individuals. There has to be a level of social complexity there. But what we see in captivity is maybe even greater than that because you're dealing with the complexity of trauma and the nuance of recovery. And with each new elephant that came, not only were we learning or were they exposing us to a different type of recovery, with each individual it was a different journey of recovery for each individual. And what one elephant needed may be different than what the next elephant needed. And, you know, with you know, sometimes on a superficial level, you know, when Jenny who was the third elephant that came to the sanctuary (in Tennessee), she just needed to knock down a bunch of trees, you know. And while there's nothing complex about that, it was really scary initially, because we honestly thought, you know, maybe our colleagues are right, maybe elephants are going to destroy the habitat. But that was relatively short lived. It was six months of pure venting, you know, frustration, anger, sadness, whatever it was, whatever that emotion was, we can't say. But she had six months of basically knocking down anything in her path and scaring us about what was going to happen. And that quickly changed. As she started to recover, she started to feel more confident, and she started to, to ground herself again, you know, all of that stopped. And we never saw that again with another Asian elephant that came there.

So with Barbara, an elephant who was very individual, very, not antisocial, but very

independent. She explored the far extent of the sanctuary, walked faster and further than anybody else did. And she really thrived on having her own space. Knowing her wisdom or feeling her wisdom, we think she had a lot of work she was doing with, you know, some sort of spirit entity out there, because she came back all smiles from her explorations. But she also had a lot to teach the other elephants. One thing with Barbara, and I don't want to go into too many stories about each individual, but I think it ties into some of what we learned, or the mysteries of what were unfolding. And helping to define all that we didn't know, was what happens at the end of life. And all of this was, in hindsight, because we had no idea. We knew Barbara wasn't well, but we had no idea she was going to pass. But two weeks leading up to her passing, she actually spent one full day with each individual elephant in the herd.

Nadia: 6:53

Oh wow.

Scott 6:55

And that was, you know, there was three elephants that were really close at the time: Shirley, Jenny, and Bunny, and they were side-by-side-by-side all the time. But for this time period, in this last two weeks of Barbara's life, each one of those individuals would step away and spend the entire day with Barbara. At the end of the day, they'd go back to the others. And the next day or two days later, we'd have the same thing happen again, where she would take a new, different individual, and Barbara would pull them away. And it was very passive. It wasn't trying to corral them out of the herd, it was just say, 'Hey, I'm here. You know, Jenny, let's have a talk.' And Jenny would go and spend the whole day with Barbara, and then Shirley did the same thing. And Tara did the same thing.

Nadia: 7:35

So what's that sort of like saying goodbye? Was that...

Scott 7:38

It was a behavior that we had never seen before. And, you know, we can only speculate as to what that was. There's no way for us to understand exactly what's going through those conversations. But it seemed like she had something she needed to share. And she was what we always considered wise beyond measure. She just seemed to know what life was all about. She's the one that took us on this journey, more than anybody, of what sanctuary really means for these individuals.

An elephant that didn't play for the first year at all. And then, you know, it's also a time when we started experimenting with different modalities of treatments to help through their emotional recoveries, with flower essences, essential oils. And just less than a week after we started using flower essences on Barbara, she started playing, vocalizing for the first time. And she had been in for a year. All these different things were happening that we just hadn't experienced before. And, again, started to show us a different level of, just a nuance of what it is to be an elephant, what it is to be an elephant in captivity, and what it means to have sanctuary. What we thought

was sanctuary was just giving them space and freedom, autonomy. Those are all very critical, but also superficial compared to what they actually need for that complex compound, very dynamic recovery, that honestly never stops.

Kat: 9:08

The reality is when they went into TES they thought they knew a lot about elephants and sanctuary showed them, well the elephant showed them, that what they thought they knew was nothing. But we're seeing the same exact thing here. You know, we started the sanctuary in Brazil with a different level of confidence and a different level of understanding of elephants and going into it thinking we knew what sanctuary was after all the years in Tennessee. But once again, as is typical for when you work with elephants, (Nadia laughing) they like to show you you have no idea what you're talking about, and that they are showing us that what we left Tennessee with thinking was sanctuary has only compounded here and, not that it was superficial, but we are finding a very different level of sanctuary here in Brazil.

Scott 10:00

Yeah, with each passing year, our conversations became more complex. And many times realizing, as Kat pointed out, elephants reminding us how much we don't know. And I think even now, even after, what, 30 years, or I don't know how long it's been of working with elephants in the sanctuary-type setting, close to 30 years now, we still seem to have no idea the depth with which they're going to take us. We have very different conversations now than we had before. We understand nuances in a way that we didn't understand before. And that was all through the lessons that they taught us. So going back to your original breaking the mold, you know, we broke the mold by saying, hey, let's give elephants more space. But after that, it's just been the elephants taking us on this journey of what it is for, what sanctuary is for them.

Kat: 10:57

And it reached much further than just the sanctuary gates. I mean the, you know, sanctuary for elephants didn't exist at the time. Right now, it's natural for people to say, when an elephant has an inappropriate life, send them to sanctuary. You know, back when this started, that was not a statement you would hear from anyone because, not only did it not exist, but they didn't understand why it was needed, and the benefits that actually happened when elephants were given a chance at sanctuary and given choice and given companions.

Scott 11:32

For years, you know, we continue to hear from people that didn't want their elephants to go to sanctuary because the more we learn, the more we shared. And the more we shared, the more powerful the movement came to move elephants out of these deprived, impoverished environments, and send them to a more complex life of sanctuary, a life of recovery. And people started to understanding more of what that meant, again, even still it was very superficial compared to what we understand now. It was still much more complex than the way people had talked about it previously. And we still saw, even today with this conversation continues with zoos that say, 'Hey, our elephant's going to die on transport; they're not going to know how to

adapt, you know, they don't know what it means to be a family; the only family they know are the caregivers that have been with them.' You know, these arguments continue today. But that all started at the early days of anti-sanctuary when people were getting pushed to move elephants to give elephants a better life, to try to push back against all of these incredible stories that were coming out. But, you know, with each of these resistances, with each zoo that was so resistant, it actually became more profound with the depth of impact the sanctuary had on each of those individuals.

You know, one of them is Bunny, who lived alone for 47 years. And we, she was a little bit aggressive in her past. We didn't know what it was going to be, to introduce an elephant that hadn't been, had that level of solitary environment. We had solitary elephants that came to the sanctuary, but none that had been alone for that length of time. For 40 of her 47 years in captivity, she was alone. So from the time she was seven or eight years old, she was alone, until the time she moved to the sanctuary. And she came and within 24 hours, she was completely embedded in the herd. She trumpeted so many times in those first three days that she actually caused the blood vessels in her nose to burst and she was giving herself a bloody nose.

Nadia: 13:32
Oh wow.

Scott 13:33

She was elated beyond anything that we could have imagined and, just, almost overnight, just became seamlessly integrated into the herd. And not only just, you know, integrated, immediately was a valued member of that group. And to watch how this was unfolding and how these elephants all come from relatively dysfunctional, captive lives of, you know, zoo or circus of life on chains or life in a solitary environment. Every elephant that came, we saw this type of impact. And it just became more and more profound. As herd dynamics grew, as they became nurturing, as they became more united. I mean, they just, it became seamless, beyond all reason, beyond all expectation.

Kat: 14:24

And then as these stories spread and people started to see what a life for elephants could look like, and what a life for captive elephants should look like because, ideally, they're not in captivity at all. Then that started to shape how society viewed captive elephants, how they viewed sanctuary, which, of course, pushed progressive legislation towards making changes for the care of elephants because of what they had seen at sanctuary. And that included things like bullhook bans and all sorts of legislation from the US to here in South America where, you know, you're talking about banning performing animals, which they want to introduce a national ban; there's already 11 states that have banned it. There are individual, I want to say places in the United States, because there's a lot of cities, there's not the same response in the US as there is here, and in other countries and Europe. But all of that, you know, a big part of the catalyst for all of that was the realization of who elephants were as individuals and the life they deserved. And a lot of that came about from seeing what they went through at sanctuary and

allowing people to understand without being very in their face about 'this is wrong, you shouldn't do this,' so on and so forth, which works for some things. It reached a different audience, because it was a softer approach. It was getting to know the individual elephants and watching the progression from who they were when they arrived to who they truly were meant to be, you know, at least in captivity, when given a chance. And people bonded to the individual elephants, and the stories resonated with them. And it caused them to look at elephants differently and realize how much of who they were as a species was missing from who they were in captivity.

Nadia: 16:38

So these stories show the resilience of elephants and also their ability to adapt, because that was one of the many things that were said. And as you just said, is still being said that elephants won't be able to adapt. They can't, you know, get back to their natural behaviors or their instincts, but your work at TES and the elephants showed that this is what is possible. But they can jump back. And even if they were in captivity for years and years, they, they do learn and relearn who they are.

Kat: 17:15

Unfortunately, I think the reality for captive elephants is they are, to their detriment, resilient to a fault. They will adapt to many situations that honestly they shouldn't, that are extremely unhealthy for them both mentally and physically. But they seem to, I don't know, they seem to go on to a degree that you don't really think would be possible. And they show that we just, again, it's another way that we just don't understand their limits.

Scott 17:51

And at that point, you know, we had no idea truly the level of resilience that they had. I mentioned earlier that the depth of conversation we're having now is vastly different than the conversations we were having even five years ago or 10 years ago. But at that point of the sanctuary, we still had no idea the depth of resilience that they had. And even now with the, you know, where we are, I don't want to jump too far, too forward too fast. But with Pocha and Guillermina and everything that they just showed us, I mean, coming from the life they had, it just further defines or redefines one: not only how much we don't know, but two: how profoundly resilient they truly are.

Kat: 18:33

And we don't mean for 'how much we don't know', to be such a common thread (Nadia laughing). There are decades of experience with elephants, you know, between the two of us; there's decades actually by ourselves. There is a lot we do understand, but I think there is an ignorance to believing that there isn't always more to learn. And the reality is with, especially with elephants, if you remain open to what they want to share with you and what they want to show you, you should be learning until you're done working with them. I mean, there's just, there's always something so.

Scott 19:12

Yeah, and the lessons now are definitely more nuanced. It's so much more nuanced, it's so much more detailed, and they just seemed like as soon as you think you know, they just show you that there's another layer that you're yet to learn.

Nadia: 19:24

That is something that is then very, I'm just wondering, difficult, say for normal zookeeper in their everyday, in their everyday work, maybe to have the time to do that. I know from the, from the Japanese it was, there's often one zookeeper who does various animals and they don't have a clue about an elephant, you know, because they just say, 'Oh, yes, I go in at nine o'clock. I feed it and then I go away again.' So I don't know what it's like in the States. I think in Germany, it's you know, the, you do have dedicated zookeepers, but if you're talking about such nuances in their behaviors and what they're telling humans I mean, you really need a lot of time to listen and to understand what they're saying. And if they are so resilient, would it be right to say that they are then misunderstood in zoos? Because their language? Their messages are just not being read and understood? And therefore everyone says, 'Oh, they're fine. You know, she's been standing there for 50 years in that little concrete pit and she's fine.' So everyone has to learn more...

Kat: 20:29

Yes and no. Like everything elephant, there is no easy answer. Yes, elephants are definitely misunderstood in those environments, but they are also not expressing who they truly are in those environments. Those environments are so limiting, you know, there is no real choice in the matter. You know, they get up every day at the same time, they eat at the same time, they walk the same four steps, they, you know, their training is generally at the same time. It's so repetitive that their brains just shut off. It is making the motions just getting through the day. We had, back to elephant stories, we had an elephant who, in Tennessee, she first arrived, she went into stall nine, the last stall, showed her where the waterer was, it was on the left side, she went and she drank. Two days later, she went into stall eight, which has a waterer on the other side. And she literally stared at the wall back on the same side, just not understanding why there was no waterer there. I mean, the level of thinking that shuts down in an animal that is so complex is astounding. That same elephant went to a pile of logs, you know, you're talking about she had access to 2200 acres at the time. And she stopped. She had been on the same exhibit forever. For her, that was the end of it. She thought that was it. I mean, it was only 100 yards away from the barn. We tried to walk around to show her, we drove around with the four wheeler, another elephant came around and showed her that she could walk around, and I don't even remember how long it took her to realize that it wasn't the end of her little world.

Scott 22:16

That pile of logs is only 15 meters wide. And it's wide open on both sides. But she couldn't see it. It's almost like her eyes were not trained to look past five yards, or five meters. And she, she just couldn't fathom that there's an opening on the side. She saw that boundary and, as Kat said, it's like she had been trained to see once you arrived to solid barrier there's nowhere else to go. Yeah.

Kat: 22:39

So I mean, they're a fraction of who they are in those facilities, because so much of them - their social nature, because either they're in forced groupings, they're with an elephant they don't trust, they're solitary. That aspect of them shuts off. So there's an emotional depth that's completely shut off. It's, they are not a representative of who they actually are in those situations. But they also have learned not to express themselves.

Scott 23:12

Nadia, to your question about zookeepers saying a certain thing about who their elephants are. You know, as Kat already just mentioned, you know, the sterility of the elephant mind. We also believe there's a sterility in the zookeeper in mind. And when they talk about who their elephant is -

Kat: 23:28

- and that's not in an insulting way -

Scott 23:30

No it's...

Kat: 23:30

For clarification, we aren't dumping on people who are caregivers at zoos, because there are actually some lovely caregivers that we have met at zoos that adore their elephants. And you know,

Scott 23:42

...and they are brilliant people. This is not an intelligence thing. This is exposure to a different style of seeing how elephants are. And when you see your elephant a certain way, day after day after day after day, for years on end, it's impossible not to see them for that face value. It's what you're living each day. So, imagine them being something different is difficult. The same way it's difficult to imagine, you know, a son or daughter or my mom or my dad being a different individual. No, they are who I think they are, or maybe not, if we change their environment. And when you change the environment the elephant lives in, you are going to change that individual. If you move the zookeeper into a different environment, that individual will also change and grow. But the elephants are not showing the people everything they're capable of because of the environment. The keepers are also not understanding what elephants are capable of, because of that environment.

Kat: 24:37

And then you have things like circus that make it much more complex because these elephants are actually taught not to communicate anything. You have circus elephants where they can't even look at their keepers without being punished for it. So, you know, there is this, you'll hear that an elephant became aggressive out of nowhere. You know, they went from zero to 100.

They were fine and then they lashed out. And often there are signs that are missed. But in some instances, they are elephants that are taught that, you know, 'don't even look at me.' If you are being hurt, if you're uncomfortable, if you're insecure, it doesn't matter; you don't express any of these things. Don't even look at me. So it seems like you have elephants who are going from one extreme to the other. But this is a behavior that has been formed by the life they've lived.

Nadia: 25:33

Communication on both sides. Communication from the elephants and communication from humans. I mean, apart from now circus elephants, because that does sound, seems to be a very different matter when you say that they are trained, you know, not to not to look at their, their humans. I remember some of your, I think it was Mara, the caregivers actually came when she was rescued to Brazil, and were astonished how she changed. You know, how she carried herself, how she, you know, walked around, the noises she made. So that few days of them joining her, that must have opened their eyes as well.

Scott 25:37

And you know this was not just with Mara. I mean, this has happened for years with each, every time a former keeper comes to see an elephant they are just blown away. And again, we can go into story after story after story of this, because they change so profoundly to the point that you know, sometimes they're unrecognizable.

Kat: 26:33

Sometimes, though, they (the keepers) don't come back for six months. And then by the time they see them, they're so vastly different, that they're amazed. Because, again, you had Dulary who, again, lovely caregiver at the zoo, adored her, took really good care of her, thought she knew who she was. And then she came to visit her at sanctuary six months later.

Scott 26:54

So this, this particular caregiver said, I wouldn't have even recognized her.

Nadia: 26:59

Amazing

Scott 26:59

Everything looks different about her. This is a completely different individual and that's six months only, you know, after arrival. And you know, the physical transformations are astounding. You know, yes, we talked about the condition of the skin and you know, even the shape of their toes and how much natural care happens to their general body, but everything changes in their presence, in their spirit, in their soul. And that comes out through their expressions in their face. You know, these elephants changed dramatically in an unrecognizable way to people that have known them for 15 years. I'm gonna touch back on communication for a second. Because Kat talked about the punishment of with zoo, I mean, with circus elephants or dominated elephants. But there's another level of suppression, and that is simply not listening. So the elephants will try

to communicate, but if you don't know, if the caregiver doesn't know what they're actually trying to, what they're supposed to be watching for. It sounds like, it feels like to the elephant, or it seems to us anyway, that it feels like the elephant is: my voice is falling on deaf ears, so why do I even bother trying? And they truly stop trying to communicate. If there's punishment or not, they just stopped trying to communicate; they just give up on it. And a wonderful topic for another episode. What it means when they find their voice. And that is something that is, we could talk for 10 episodes, it is unbelievable what happens when they have their voice.

Kat: 28:26

And one of the important things we do as soon as elephants get to sanctuary, and it is a foundation of the relationships we have with them, is to try to encourage any sort of communication - even negative. You know, we want one of the first things that they start to understand to be that we want to hear what it is they have to say: good, bad, indifferent, whatever it is. And even when it's something super tiny. And they see that for the first time in 30 years, someone actually picks up on what they're trying to communicate and, not only do you hear it, but you understand it, as best as you can because we're imperfect that way, but you also respond in a way that shows them that it matters - whatever it was they were trying to communicate. A light bulb goes off and like the next thing they try to communicate is much more significant. And it goes on and on and it kind of snowballs from there on. But it is the tiniest of little things we're looking for initially to show them it's different here. We see you, we hear you, and it creates such a big shift even like you said, for Mara. Within three days, you know people that have been with her forever.

Nadia: 29:45

Talking of seeing and listening I see that our wonderful producer Amie is giving us the countdown that we've come to the end of our episode. As always I could listen to you for hours and then Kat will say yes, luckily Scott can talk for hours, but we'll have to catch up next week. So thank you for your time. Thank you for our listeners for joining in again, and send us an email, like and subscribe to our podcast wherever you catch your podcasts. Have a wonderful week and take care. See you next week. Bye.

Kat:
Bye.

Scott:
Bye, thanks again Nadia.