



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: 1:03

Hello, and welcome to episode five of the Global Rumbblings Podcast. I'm again joined by Scott and Kat Blais from Brazil. Hello from Germany.

Kat: 1:06

Hello Nadia. (laughs)

Scott 1:08

Hey Nadia, how are you doing?

Nadia: 1:10

Hi, Scott. I'm fine. Where did we leave off last week? We arrived back from a one-month trip around Brazil. And we're back in the States. You looked at properties, you looked, or possible properties. You got to know the country better. You got to know the climate better to see what was suitable for your elephant sanctuary. And it's December 13. Now isn't, is that right? December 2013. So what happened then?

Scott 1:41

Well, (Kat and Scott laugh) everything changed really fast for us. Actually, we actually, we didn't come back to the United States in December 2013; we actually left directly from Brazil, because we got a call about Ramba losing body weight. Actually, you saw it in a photo, I think Kat got a photo of Ramba. And she just didn't look good. And we were concerned because she was not

only losing body weight, she was losing muscle mass on her head, which is something you normally see with older elephants that are starting to have diminished health or just elderly condition. But it happened pretty fast, faster than we'd see with just general aging.

Kat: 2:21

Yeah, but we knew she had kidney problems. So we weren't sure if her kidney disease had advanced to the point where we would have to start talking about end-of-life care or what we were gonna have to do. So we decided that what would be best was to go see her in person.

Scott 2:37

So we left from Brazil on I think it was even Christmas Eve, went back to, we went back. I remember actually being in Argentina, in an airport in Argentina, and...

Kat: 2:48

Oh, that's right because nothing was open.

Scott 2:50

Nothing was open. There was nobody traveling. It was very surreal, actually for Christmas day.

Kat: 2:55

Yeah, because we found like one restaurant that served terrible pizza, but it was the only thing we could get to eat because it was like, (everyone laughs) yeah, when you work with animals, holidays end up meaning much of nothing for the most part.

Scott 3:08

But it was surprising that an airport holidays was kind of nothing. I mean, nothing. No one, nothing was happening. It was really strange. So we ended up...

Nadia: 3:08

Yeah, that's weird, isn't it?

Scott 3:16

I mean, normally, I remember traveling in the US on holidays and it was always crazy busy. So it's kind of surreal, a little bit, in Argentina. So we ended up back in Chile to check on Ramba. We were there for I think two weeks, two or three weeks, and found that a lot of what was going on with her was just diet related.

Kat: 3:33

Thankfully

Scott 3:34

Yes

Kat: 3:34

It was all that she wasn't getting enough food.

Scott 3:37

And we, actually, after that, you know, she started improving. She started looking better, her stool condition, her feces were looking better, after a few days of changing diet and cutting fresh grass and just kind of changed the whole routine for her there. And kind of reinforced some things that needed to be done because she is a special needs elephant.

Kat: 3:59

Sure.

Scott 3:59

So we ended up going back to the United States with an increased urgency for Ramba. And so one of the last things we did in Brazil was we were talking to some folks that had some land that was available. I think we mentioned this in the last episode, if I recall.

Nadia: 4:17

Yeah

Scott 4:18

And we found a land that we could possibly use as a, possibly, a long-term place or even a temporary place depending on how things were going to unfold. We went back to the United States, and we started talking to them a little bit more; things are moving forward. We're trying to get agreements to be able to use their land and trying to finalize a contract, but there was issues. That was our first time learning that nothing happens in Brazil between like a week before Christmas, and Carnival. And between those two, (Nadia and Kat laugh) between that period. It is really hard to get anything done in Brazil. So we kept waiting for contracts and communications, and it was really, really slow. A lot of people on vacation, and, because this was an entity, a nonprofit group that we were working with, it was all about, you know, they had a Vegetarian Society that actually owned the property. And they use the property for retreats. And after how many conversations when we were in Brazil, with people that spoke English who were part of the association and with people that, you know, with a translator, and with primary people from Elephant Sanctuary Brazil, talking in Portuguese to people from the organization, we have no idea how it just didn't register. But finally, in our conversations, maybe right around Carnival, middle of February, beginning of March, they finally wrote a letter and realized that once elephants have access to the property, they can't go on hikes in the middle of elephant habitat. It is...

Nadia: 5:50

Oh, I remember. Yeah, you said that they thought they had this sort of, I think we touched upon that very briefly. And they had this, I'll say, sort of romantic notion of their retreat guests wandering amongst elephants. And...

Scott 6:01

Yeah, so I couldn't remember if we talked about it or not.

Nadia: 6:03

Sharing space.

Scott 6:04

Exactly. So that was part of our trip back in the United States was realizing that wasn't going to work. In the meantime, things started rolling forward, different contacts, people were really enthusiastic about our time that was there. And that's when we realized we have to start putting pieces in place to actually move to Brazil. And by middle of June, end of June 2014, we were ready to move back.

Kat: 6:29

I like that you look at me. It's all a blur.

Scott 6:31

It is a blur. (everyone laughs) You're so much better for

Kat: 6:34

Not for dates.

Nadia: 6:36

It's always better. It's always better looking back, isn't it? It's always better looking back, like in school. You know, school was a great time. But when you're actually there? I don't know. I mean, I made the mistake. I would admit that I thought that in Brazil, you speak Spanish, but you don't. You speak Portuguese. So obviously, if you say you decided to move to Brazil, you're not only changing country, you're changing culture, but you're also changing language. So I mean, that's a huge step.

Scott 7:01

It was a huge step. But again, going back to Ramba, that was our motivation, we have to make something work for Ramba. We had no idea how much time she had. And little did we know at that point how long it would actually take. But we moved here with a lot of optimism. And you know, people, we, we're selling everything at home, had a nice yard sale and said, you know, moving to Brazil, everything must go. (Nadia laughs) And people thought we were nuts from moving to Brazil until they heard what the purpose was. And people really embraced it. It was a small town. And people really supported the idea of trying to do something for elephants in South America. And even folks here in Brazil were super enthusiastic and a lot of pieces were in motion. And by the time June rolled around, and we decided we were actually moving there and sold everything. And we arrived here with a promise of land, money, and a car.

Nadia: 7:55

Money? Money as well?

Scott 7:56

Yeah, money as well. Yeah, actually, it was supposed to be about \$100,000. So the exchange rate was a little bit different at that point, but is equivalent to 100,000 US dollars. And then we had...

Kat: 8:08

Which for a nonprofit that's just starting out of nowhere, that is a nice amount of money.

Scott 8:12

Yeah, and a land of almost the same size of what we end up having now. But 1000 hectares was going to be donated. And then we had the city who was going to give us a car. So we're like, hey, great, we can actually make this happen. We already have talked to the authorities who are super enthusiastic about helping to push permits forward. And so we had this, you know, this beautiful vision and dream in front of us. (Kat laughs) Arrived here, (Scott laughs) we arrived here June 24, 2014. Late in the evening, spent the night, actually went to a small animal welfare, small animal rehab clinic and they have facility, a small sanctuary...

Kat: 8:55

See, you remember this all much better than I do.

Scott 8:57

...where we were going to be meeting with some of our team members. But they also had a couple of acres that we might be able to use for Ramba as well, they had about 10 acres that we might be able to use. So we started there. And that's when the primary person from Elephant Sanctuary Brazil met up with us and told us on June 25: (Kat laughs) Sorry, the money is not here. We don't have any and I don't know that it's going to be available. We have no idea when it's going to be available. So wishing that we would have known that 24 hours earlier. However, also with that strong drive that Ramba's waiting and we still have land and we have a car. So we...

Kat: 9:44

And a place to stay.

Scott 9:45

And a place to stay. That's right the city was going to give us a place to stay. And then (Scott laughs) this is when life got really interesting. You know all this enthusiasm, all the excitement it was still there. You know everyone's still motivated. You know, we moved from, we left Sao Paulo, which is where this small sanctuary was, animal rehab and wildlife sanctuary was, we went from there to Mato Grosso, the state we live in now of course, and but the property that was going to be donated was actually in the neighboring state in the state of Para, which is

basically Amazon. You know, so the city closest to it is actually in Mato Grosso. So the city and the mayor of the city really loved the project. The mayor of the city was friends with somebody that the president of Elephant Sanctuary Brazil knew and he had this contact and the city mayor had some people that she knew that had land. She talked to somebody that said: Hey, yeah, I'll be happy to donate my land to this. 1000 hectares. I have it in Para; it's not been used. It's perfect. It has water, has trees, it has some pasture, you know, ideal, and the city was going to let us use a house in the city. Moved to the city north of Mato Grosso. On the way, on the car ride there, we nearly got into a head, a head-on collision. (Kat laughs) We are on a two-lane road going from Sinop Mato Grosso, until Guaranta de Norte. It's a city that we're going to be living in, Guaranta de Norte. And on the car ride there, we actually had to swerve off the road to avoid oncoming traffic who's trying to pass several trucks. At the same time, that person veered off the road and just barely missed a head-on collision. And then we arrived to Guaranta late in the afternoon, late in the evening. We were very grateful that Petter Granli, who is from ElephantVoices, on the board of directors of Global Sanctuary for Elephants, and a huge reason why Elephant Sanctuary Brazil was being formed, he joined us for this first trip also for arrival, met us up in Sinop at the airport and then had a bit of a delay because of the near head-on collision. A little bit of damage to the vehicle, but we were able to carry on, made it to Guaranta later that evening.

Nadia: 12:06

When you say Elephant Sanctuary Brazil, you haven't actually founded Elephant Sanctuary Brazil yet.

Scott 12:12

It was in the works. Yeah, the formation of the organization was in the works and the way that was I think we introduced, if I recall, which was ElephantVoices got involved here in South America. So during this time, we're actually doing the paperwork of to, to legalize the association, Elephant Sanctuary Brazil.

Nadia: 12:34

Okay, got it.

Scott 12:35

Right. (Scott laughs) So we arrived and now, of course we, as we said, money, car, property, a place to live. And we had no money; that was announced. So we get there and there's a place for us to stay. There was supposed to be furniture there and, and it's just not what we expected. We arrived to...

Kat: 12:59

In our defense, our standards are not, you know, we're low maintenance. You know, it's not like yeah, it just... (laughs)

Scott 13:09

We've spent weeks and months sleeping on bales of hay to take care of sick elephants. You know, we've yeah...

Kat: 13:17

We're pretty easygoing.

Nadia: 13:19

Okay, but maybe a toilet and sort of some form of running water. (Kat laughs) A mattress...

Scott 13:24

There was running water, there was a toilet, there was a shower.

Nadia: 13:27

Okay

Scott 13:28

There was a shower and there were, there two foam mattresses, actually four foam mattresses. When you put all four of them on top of another and sit down on them your butt still hits the floor.

Nadia: 13:37

(everyone laughs) Oh no.

Scott 13:40

And then there was the issue of they had gone in and done a cleaning, external cleaning. But they actually didn't open up the bathroom cabinets, which were an inch of mouse dung. Maybe, maybe more, mouse and rat dung. It was a little rough. We actually spent most of that first night

Kat: 14:02

scrubbing

Scott 14:02

scrubbing and cleaning and cleaning and scrubbing and scrubbing and cleaning. But it was a place to live.

Nadia: 14:08

So they had left cleaning stuff there?

Scott 14:10

Yeah, they did. It was a place to live. It was free. The city's so supportive, everyone is still super enthusiastic. And we get to take a look at the new property tomorrow.

Kat: 14:18

Yeah, we had a fan, we had mattresses. I mean, it was definitely doable. But we were starting to wonder how smart of a decision it was after losing the money, almost getting in a huge car wreck, (Scott laughs) and then showing up and finding out this is where we were going to be living but, you know, again, still have the motivation of Ramba and all the elephants in need. So trying to stay positive, enthusiastic, and we're like: it's okay. We'll go see the property. It'll be great. It's all good.

Scott 14:48

We get to go visit the Amazon forest. Basically...

Kat: 14:52

...it's right below.

Scott 14:53

It's in a transition zone and, depending on where you are and, you know, it's very diverse - goes from more savanna to forested areas and it depends on the property. And it varies quickly. So we go to look at the property and we have somebody driving the car who is from Brazil, I think somebody from the city actually was with us. And we go to look at the property. And it's definitely not your normal roads, as we already saw in Tocantins - we talked about the one property where you drive off the, drive off the main road onto what looks like tire tracks going through a field. And somehow that's a road to the property. It's a little bit rough getting in there. But we then explored the property all day. Oh, I know what happened. I've forgotten the way there is, the first time we crossed the state line. Oh, goodness. So we cross the state line. And at the state line there is security, police security and security guard. The police is actually insinuating that we have to pay to enter. And the guy who was with us or driver's actually from the city not too far away, he said: No, I work for the city. You know, we're not going to play this game. And he said: Okay, carry on your way. So we didn't know, we knew very, very little Portuguese at that point. But you can tell something was askew. When we talked about it later, it came up that he was asking for a bribe or he will find something wrong with your vehicle. And, you know, fine you or arrest you.

Nadia: 16:25

Oh, I see. So that, no, there aren't any interstate controls? Otherwise, in Brazil, it was just a...

Scott 16:31

There are, there are controls, but they take advantage of being in the middle of nowhere. And it doesn't, it's not always, especially up there. This is, this is a town, Guaranta de Norte. It had, at that point, had only existed for 30 years. It was a very new city. All of this region was very newly developed. 30 to 40 years before, 50 years before it was, they said, Wild West. It was, it was you know, a lot of gold mining. A lot of a lot of the Wild West, it was very, very...



Nadia: 17:07  
Wild West mentality?

Scott 17:10  
Every man for themselves, every person for themselves mentality. So...

Kat: 17:13  
Lots of guns, lots of people doing what they wanted that, most of it wasn't legal. It's just one of those areas where they tell you don't go, you know, 15 minutes north of here.

Scott 17:24  
Yes. So we learned at that point, or throughout the next couple of weeks, actually. But I think it'll help perspective, give perspective, we learned that a lot of the lands that people had were basically given by the government to people. A lot of people from the south took advantage of this, moved up from the south of Brazil, move up to have this basically free land, if you put it into agricultural use for minimum 10 years to support your family. And, unfortunately, a lot of the lands were not fully regulated. And this is where we get into the next part of the story. So we look at the land. Before, let's go back to the, when we were in United States. We kept asking about, you know, land documents, ownership rights, you know. He's gonna donate it outright, you know, asking just a ton of questions about the land access, safety, security; there's no water, there's no electric, no running water. There's no electric. There's a spring on the, water on the property. But that's most of the rural properties in Brazil don't have any sort of running water. You either dig a well, which is actually even rare up there. You just use the springs because there's an abundance of springs, freshwater springs, all over this region and all over Mato Grosso. So we start digging, we look at land, it's okay. It's not perfect by any means. But it's workable, and the soil's not great. So we ended up having meetings with some folks from the city. I think Petter was there at the time too. It is right after that, because we were questioning about the strength of the soil and the fertility of the soil. And they started talking about, we had several agronomists and folks from the agricultural sector that met with us and said: No, no, this is fine. It's no big deal. This is all you have to do. Step one, step two, step three, you know, piece of cake your land will start growing more grass in a heartbeat. Of course, all of this is being translated to us. Looking back at it now, realizing how much wasn't fully translated, (Kat laughs) or how much they didn't divulge of what it really means. Step one, step two step 12. Step 257. And maybe at the end, you'll have grass is what they actually meant.

Nadia: 19:36  
What was growing there at the time then?

Scott 19:38  
It was forest. It was gradual forest, it wasn't really hardy, compared to much of the area that we have, had seen. And realizing now I know that's part of the motivation for him to donate, I think is, just you realized he wasn't able to do much for, with agriculture purposes.

Kat: 19:54

Yeah, I mean, it wasn't like Amazon. It's not, it wasn't thick forest, but it was a lot of, I mean, it just wasn't healthy soil, you know, a lot of spindly trees, a lot of wispy grass, there just wasn't, you know, that much that was really taking hold there at that point.

Scott 20:12

But then again, you're saying, hey free land? You know. And let's find folks that can help us make it, help us improve it, you know, over the years to make it better for the elephants. And then we started digging into a few other things on that property over the coming days, we started understanding more of what this land use actually means, and started talking to more people. And realize that there's actually a lot of restrictions on the land; it's, you know, part of the agreement to you for the government to let you use it is you can't transfer it to anybody else. And you have to show an agricultural benefit; you actually show it, have to show a profit off the land in order for it to be, in order for you to maintain the ownership of that. So we started understanding more what those parameters are. And the more we dug into it, and the more we asked very specific questions is when we started to learn, this isn't going to work. This donated land is really not an option.

Kat: 21:16

So no land, no money. Oh, we found out that we were going to have no car either.

Scott 21:23

That came a little bit after still, I think it was, I think it was in a couple of weeks, because at this point, they're still saying it's going to take about three months to get your car. But we'll be able to get that for you. So we still had some...

Kat: 21:34

Yeah, but we had no car in the process. So we had to rely on whoever.

Scott 21:38

But with no property, we weren't exactly going anywhere. The reason for the car was to be able to go back and forth between the city and the property to be able to develop the property, or start development of the property and start scoping things out and see where we're going to put our army tent, which is what we're going to be staying in initially, because there are no structures on this property at all.

Nadia: 21:55

Just going back a bit on what you said regarding using the land - you could have it for free if you use it agriculturally. Would that at the time then have been a no-go for the sanctuary? Because I mean, obviously you're not using the land agriculturally when you've retired elephants there. Was that just for that property?

Scott 22:14

All of the properties that were under that type of government-donated or government-provided land. And the big factor there, the owner cannot change ownership.

Nadia: 22:29

Yep

Scott 22:30

He cannot pass that on, he can't donate it, it would have to stay in his name. And by staying in his name, we have no safety. And not only that, even if we could use part of it for agriculture, even if we could find a way, and we had talked about it with, you know, bananas and other things that we could possibly grow. (Nadia laughs) We had talked about options that could be used because, again, it's free land. But this is, you know, you have to remember this is not a 24 hour conversation, this is over probably two or three week time that we started pick all these, put all these pieces together and started again, reading between the lines of what all this, what the restrictions really were. So with him not being able to sell it or being able to donate it, it needed to stay in his property and having to have agriculture purpose that he had to show the profit for, because was in his name. It was just getting too muddy. So this has, I mean, just way too many red flags.

Kat: 23:25

I mean, the reality is, in order to put elephants there, you know, you build fences that cost a million dollars. You can't make that sort of investment without the security of knowing that all of these things could possibly fall through. I mean it was just, you know, it's not like a dog shelter. You know, it's not just a building with stuff inside, you know, you're talking about, you know, acres of fencing that costs a whole lot of money, and big barns. And then, of course, transporting elephants, which is a whole other thing and you just can't, that sort of wiggle room just isn't an option. I mean...

Nadia: 24:06

It has to be your property. You can't you can't have that financial risk on a property that doesn't belong to, that which legally wasn't, wouldn't even be allowed to be given to you. So yeah, so we've got no car, we've got a sort of a very uncomfortable mattress to stay on. (everyone laughs)

Scott 24:24

But we have a mattress.

Nadia: 24:25

You've got no money, you've got no land. We skipped the moving part because we, I said I don't like moving, so what did you actually have with you? So would at this time? Would this have been the time that you were saying: Okay, this is not going to work? You know, we've sold our house and everything and our stuff in the US; we're gonna move back?

Scott 24:44

Oh, no, you know, there was still a lot of promising things. You know, we still had a city mayor who really wanted to help the project. You know, we still had some support from the government. We still had elephants in need that needed an option. And we were in an area that was promising climatically; it was beautiful and there was a lot of lands available that were relatively cheap also. So there's still a lot of elements that are promising.

Kat: 25:10

You know, we, I think we've mentioned it before, it's a really hard thing to walk away from.

Scott 25:16

Yeah.

Kat: 25:16

You know, again, we just visited Ramba fairly recently; we know that, in general, health-wise, she already had issues, but the scenario that she was living in made everything so much worse, and that there always was that possibility that, you know, she could pass away due to lack of care in some respects. And it's just, you know, I think at this point, we kind of laughed. We were still in the laughing stage. (Nadia laughs) And it was a little, indicating that in such a short time period, how much had fallen through. And of course, we didn't really speak Portuguese. (Scott laughs) So we, we found some new best friends that were English teachers, who we actually love to this day and still talk to - they're actually teaching some of our caregivers how to speak English, which is very, very nice. But yeah, at this point, it was, we were still okay, we still thought we can make it happen. You know, there's enough positives surrounding everything that we'll keep pushing forward, and we'll figure out how to make this happen.

Nadia: 26:31

Okay, then we'll, we'll talk about that then in our next episode. So thank you very much for your time today.

Scott 26:42

Thank you, Nadia. Yeah, this is, this episode was not the light and fluffy one, you know, all hope and excitement in the beginning and less than what are we 20 minutes later? A little different scenario.

Nadia: 26:55

But you're, you're still laughing? I mean, we're laughing as well, because we had a few technical, a few technical problems between Germany and Brazil today, internet-wise. So I hope our wonderful producer Amie can sort all that out. Yeah, thank you to all our listeners. And we'll catch up then in two weeks' time. Yeah, we'll be continued traveling around Brazil with you looking for suitable properties, hopefully finding money and having a car. Till then, take care.

Scott 27:25

Thank you, Nadia. And we look forward to talking to you in a couple of weeks. Yeah.

Nadia: 27:30

Yeah okay. Bye.

Scott 27:32

Bye. Bye.

Kat: 27:32

Bye

Nadia: 27:33

Okay, listeners. Do send us an email at [podcast@GlobalElephants.org](mailto:podcast@GlobalElephants.org). We look forward to hearing from you. Take care and catch up in two weeks' time.