



OBITUARY

# Iain Douglas-Hamilton (1942–2025)

## Champion of Africa's Elephants

**D**r Iain Douglas-Hamilton, the Scottish zoologist who transformed the world's understanding and protection of African elephants, died in Nairobi on the night of 8 December, 2025 aged 83.

A towering figure in wildlife conservation, Douglas-Hamilton began his life's work at just 23, launching the first scientific study of wild elephant social behaviour. That pioneering research laid the foundation for all modern elephant behavioural science.

As the elephants he studied came under escalating threat from the ivory trade, his work evolved from science into determined advocacy. During the poaching crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, he helped expose the slaughter that wiped out more than half of Africa's elephant population in a single decade. His meticulous, science-based evidence played a critical role in the 1989 international ban on the ivory trade.

In 1993, Douglas-Hamilton founded Save

the Elephants (STE) to secure a future for wild African elephants. Under his leadership, STE pioneered GPS tracking and aerial survey techniques that revolutionised elephant monitoring and are now standard conservation tools. The organisation's work has focused on understanding elephant intelligence, protecting critical habitats, and fostering coexistence between elephants and the communities that share their landscapes.

When a new surge of poaching claimed an estimated 100,000 elephants between 2010 and 2012, Douglas-Hamilton again emerged as a leading global voice. His testimony before the US Senate in 2012 helped galvanise international action, contributing to the closure of major domestic ivory markets worldwide, most notably China's in 2018.

In 2013, he co-founded the Elephant Crisis Fund (ECF) with the Wildlife Conservation Network. By 2025, the Fund had mobilised more than US\$40 million, supporting over 500 projects with 120 partners across 44

countries to combat the ivory trade and promote human–elephant coexistence.

Together with his wife, Oria, Douglas-Hamilton co-authored two influential books, *Among the Elephants* (1975) and *Battle for the Elephants* (1992). His life and work featured in numerous documentaries, including the BBC's *The Secret Life of Elephants* (2008) and *A Life Among Elephants* (2024).

His achievements were recognised with many honours, including an OBE (1992), a CBE (2015), and the Indianapolis Prize (2010).

"Iain changed the future not just for elephants, but for countless people around the world," said Frank Pope, CEO of Save the Elephants and his son-in-law. "His courage, determination and scientific rigour inspired everyone he met. He never lost his curiosity about the minds of one of the planet's most extraordinary creatures."

Dr Douglas-Hamilton is survived by his wife Oria, his daughters Saba and Dudu—both conservationists—and six grandchildren. ●