

# Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



## Episode XI: A Dam for Sand? by Tricia Berry

We spent our last day in Tsavo traveling to see the sand dam Joe and I funded to help provide water for elephants and the other wild animals in the area. A sand dam is a simple, low-cost, and low-maintenance rainwater harvesting system consisting of a reinforced concrete wall built across a seasonal sandy river with a hard rock bottom.



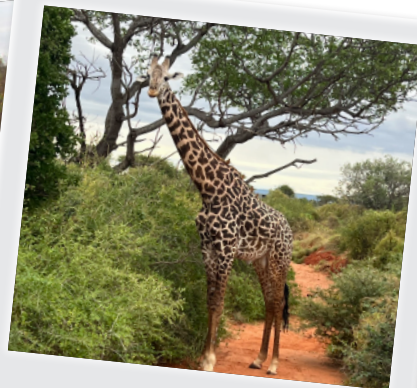
One of the sand dams:  
simple, but effective.

When it rains, the dam captures sand-laden water behind it. As the water on top of the sand evaporates, a reservoir of clean water lies beneath the sand. This can be accessed by elephants through digging with their legs, trunks and tusks until it transforms into a drinking pool. These pools can then provide water to other wildlife.

Sand dams are particularly effective in semi-arid regions. They are almost maintenance-free and can last for decades. We had asked Debbie more than a year ago if Richard had any special needs and he mentioned that because of the drought, the area could use additional sand dams. Richard has plans to raise money so that the park will have at least 20 sand dams to supplement water availability in times of drought.

The drive to see the dam took many hours with the experienced and knowledgeable Tsavo Chief Conservation Officer Kyalo (pronounced "Challo"). The drive was another adventure, full of sightings of wild animals including many curious elephants, zebras and giraffes. It was fascinating to see the foliage change as we drove. We started our game drive in a sandy scrubby area but were soon looking across a vista of tall grasses. Huge baobab trees dotted the landscape, each one more massive than the one before.

Near the first sand dam, we were joined by two additional Tsavo Trust conservation staff, a man and woman with many years experience regularly checking the game cameras set up at the sand dams to monitor their use by park animals. The first sand dam we visited was built 4-5 years ago. It was important to see it for comparison, as it takes many years for sand dams to fully mature. What surprised Debbie, Joe and I the most was the fact that the dams were constructed completely by hand without mechanical equipment. It looked impossible to us as they had to move large river boulders and haul an immense amount of rock and concrete to construct the dam.



We then drove a few hours away to see the newer sand dam that Joe and I had helped fund. It was only a year old and Kyalo told us it took the crew only two weeks to build. Amazing - only two weeks! The difference between the two dams was obvious in the amount of sand that had collected behind the older dam. Water from recent rains was still evident at this second dam. Even before checking the camera trap footage, we knew that rhinos had just recently visited to drink as we could see their footprints. It was very satisfying to see the benefit of our donation. We just wished we could have caught sight of the rhinos!

Walking around, over and on the other side of the dam, Joe and I got a huge surprise when we saw that the workers had put our

Berry Family Trust name on a cement plaque on the front of the dam. We didn't know it was there, and laughed to realize that probably no one we knew, including our families, would ever see it, but it was a very nice gesture which we greatly appreciated.

On the way back to headquarters we had two exciting sightings: a true Big Tusker among a large herd of elephants spread out over the grasslands, and a young leopard surveying the savannah around her from a branch of a very large tree. Kyalo knew this big beautiful feline as he had watched her grow from a cub. He reported that she had recently left her mother and siblings for life on her own - well, at least until she becomes a mother herself.



The leopard that Kyalo had known since she was a small cub.

We spent another evening at Richard's home with Alia and Nick for dinner. This night we were visited by the same food-seeking genet who had shared our meal at the guest cottage. She loved the juicy chicken Joe and Richard kept sharing with her. Richard teased Joe that he might be taking a risk letting her eat straight from his fingers, while he did the same thing under the table. We spent our last evening listening to stories of their adventures in Kenya.

What fascinated me the most were stories of their day-to-day lives living so far out in the bush. They were protected only by electric fences placed high enough to keep out large elephants but those also allowed other wild animals besides the genet access to visit the compound. Richard's home overlooked a pool and watering hole that attracted many animals. This led to discussions of finding dangerous species such as a leopard roaming the open-air homes, and how on alert they all needed to be, especially with young Theo and their households' dogs. When living in the bush, dogs were safely kenneled at night and Theo was watched 24-7 by parents, grandparents and staff.



One of the true Big Tuskers that Tsavo is famous for

Richard's riveting stories could have gone on all night, but we had to get packed to leave early in the morning. We were off to visit our third and last African national park, Murchison Falls in Uganda. We were sorry to be leaving Kenya and the wonderful people we had met in Tsavo. On to the next adventure!

Our chef spoiled us again by cooking our breakfasts to order before our 6:30 am departure time. Then we were off once more on that crazy Mombasa-to-Nairobi highway. I had purposely been careful not to drink my normal over-indulgence of coffee to limit the number of stops at the roadside bathrooms. Now I know where the term "pit stop" comes from, and had learned to carry toilet paper just in case. Four and a half hours after leaving Richard's, we were back at the Nairobi Airport.

### Next Episode:

## Undercover Operatives and Investigations

Sitting by the poolside bar, Mike introduced us to an amiable Brit named - to protect his anonymity I will call him "Andy" - a criminal investigator and an undercover operative with an amazing and secretive official past.

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with IEF in **Kenya!**

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