

Elephants

Elephants hold a special place in our affections; more so since the slaughters sponsored by the ivory trade have halved their numbers in Africa in the space of a single decade.

In *The Roots of Heaven*, written way back in the 1950s, Romain Gary perceived elephants as symbols of freedom. Now, riding on the wave of publicity generated by the ivory trade ban imposed by CITES at Lausanne in October 1989, a spate of books have appeared on the subject of the world's largest living land mammals.

The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Elephants (Salamander Books, London, 1991, ISBN 0 86101 556 8, 188 pp., HB £18.95), has been compiled by a panel of distinguished authors and consultants headed by Keith Eltringham, who spent many years working among the elephants of Uganda. In a clear and concise text, aided by excellent colour graphics and photographs, the entire story of elephants is set out, from their origins among the long-vanished mammoths and stegodons to their current and contentious relationships with humankind. The section on the social life of elephants, reflecting the work carried out by Cynthia Moss and others in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, is particularly absorbing. Touching as it does on the close kinship bonds, which bind elephants together through their long lives, and their extraordinary ability to communicate over long distances, it may help to explain why we find these giant creatures so fascinating.

Unlike most of the elephant books published in recent months it also gives generous coverage to the Asian elephant, with an excellent contribution

on its place in Indian history and mythology by Professor D. K. Lahiri-Choudhury.

In fact this book has everything except a clear condemnation of the greed for ivory, which had brought some elephant populations to within a few years of extinction. Indeed, the graphics in the section devoted to the ivory trade I found uncharacteristically confusing, because they tended to suggest, quite wrongly in my view, that the quota system put in place by CITES was driving down the ivory trade at the very time that poaching was at its worst, and failed to show how the price of ivory fell like a stone as soon as the trade was banned.

No such criticism could be levelled at *The African Elephant: Last Days of Eden*, by Boyd Norton (Swan Hill Press, Shrewsbury, 1991, ISBN 1 85310 291 1, 128 pp., HB £16.95), and *The African Elephant: Twilight in Eden* by Roger L. DiSilvestro (John Wiley and Sons Ltd, Chichester, 1991, ISBN 0 471 53207 X, 206 pp., HB £19.95).

Both carry a foreword by Dr Richard Leakey, Director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, who fought and won a desperate battle against the Somali bandits who were butchering his country's elephants during the run-up to the ivory ban. Both books also hint in the similarity of their titles at the impending tragedy, which has hung for so long over the African elephant.

Where Boyd Morton scores is with his vast experience as a magazine writer, which sends him to the front line of the poaching war and rewards the reader with first-hand reportage in which you can smell both the blood and the beauty of wild Africa.

Lavishly illustrated, with coffee-table format and generous

use of colour photographs, both authors plead for a permanent end to the killing of elephants for ivory. By the time this review is published, CITES will have met in Japan and the decision to maintain or to lift the ban on ivory trading will have been made. But regardless of the outcome in Kyoto, these books have a united message for the world with regard to ivory: don't buy it; don't sell it; don't wear it.

Brian Jackman.

Other mammals

Mammals of the Southern African Subregion by J. D. Skinner and R. H. N. Smithers (University of Pretoria, 1990, ISBN 0 86979 8022, 771 pp., HB £58.50 plus postage from Russel Friedmann Books, Millhouse, Firebell Alley, Surbiton KT6 6JB, Tel: 081 399 3100, Fax: 081 390 8292). This is the 2nd edition of a book that first appeared in 1983. African mammals have been well covered by a number of excellent books. This is no exception and probably represents the best available text on the mammals of a specific region of Africa. The extensively revised text covers 338 species and there are new colour plates.

The Southern African subregion is taken to include mainland Africa south of the Cunene/Zambezi rivers and its coastal waters, including those of the Prince Edward Islands. But the book has a wider scope than the title suggests because extensive information on distribution, ecology and population biology is provided for those species that occur both within and outside the region. Each family account starts with a general overview and a taxonomic key to genera. A similar introduction is given for each