



THE TRUMPET



Previous Volunteer, Jacob Templer & Sally

RESEARCH GUIDING MANAGEMENT

There is so much to celebrate with AERU's 10th Anniversary Newsletter! We want to give a brief overview of how and why we got started, some achievements along the way as well as checking in with staff and volunteers from the past that has helped to shape AERU into the remarkable institution it is today.

AERU was started in 2009 as the research wing of the Knysna Elephant Park after the need was identified to study captive elephant behaviour. It became clear that although captivity is not desirable, it will become more and more inevitable in the future as free-roaming space and facilities for orphaned elephants become less each day. In order to excel in elephant welfare in a captive environment, you also need to know what excellent elephant welfare looks like. For that, you need scientific-based assessments and that is where AERU comes in.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Research in Action highlights some of the important research that has been done by researchers and students at AERU. These findings have had a big impact on improving the welfare of the elephants and helped us to understand these amazing animals a bit better.

- Significant reduction in stereotypies after playing classical music to the elephants (fast & slow).
- Significant increase in calm, standing behaviour when music was played (especially "calm" and "sad").

We now play music to the elephants every Thursday.

ELMI VAN BEELEN, VOLUNTEER
2013 – 2018

10 Years of AERU and what they mean to me!

In 2013 I started as a volunteer at AERU for the first time. A dream came true to be so close to the elephants every day in a country that I already fell in love with in 2007.

Those 6 weeks were the BEST, and that was the same for my husband when he joined me for the last 2 weeks during our first stay. It was for both of us the start of an annual stay until 2018, varying from 1 month to 3 months.

During my stay at the park/AERU I am definitely the happiest person on earth, I am close to the grey giants who have stolen my heart and close to my South African family, one by one they have a place in my heart all in different ways. AERU has given my life an extra meaning. And it would mean the world to me if I can visit them again SOON!

Elmi



CLAIRE PADFIELD, RESEARCH OFFICER
2013 – 2019

First contact with an elephant. Little Shungu. His head was at the height of the camera around my neck, and he tried to eat it. I loved him instantly.

Sheets of rain sweeping across the grass. Bone-shaking thunder. The smell rising from the earth and the first heavy, warm drops on my skin.

Trying to stay awake in the dead of night, halfway through my 12-hour observation, listening to Nandi's slow, hypnotising snores.

Volunteers in fits of contagious laughter at a felt snowman

with two faces. Sally presenting her tongue to me in expectation of fresh orange. The unnerving sight of her mouth filling my whole view as if to swallow ME. I gently prodded her enormous, slimy pink tongue. I couldn't help it. The tongue squirmed.

The wrinkled, angry face of a baby dove blown from her nest. In the hours that followed, while Knysna was being savaged by fire, I stayed grounded by coaxing this bird to eat. She looked like a pudding. Malva. She would try to roost on my head.

Clyde and Shaka's first taste of wildness. The joy of watching them sample every unfamiliar bush like children with chocolate. Clyde's confusion when nobody came to take him home in the evening. I witnessed the slow dawn of his realisation that he already had everything he needed.

A sad, fearful white-and-brown cat with blue eyes. Bug. He crept into my room, then dashed back out. As I learned how to live with a cat, he learned how to trust a person. He chose my left shoulder as his happy place.

The tight goodbye hugs of every student I co-supervised and every volunteer, every team member, every friend whose path I had shared for a while.

Keisha's goodbye. By the big pine, while I was in the middle of an emotional hug. A tap on my shoulder – a guide pointing behind me. I turned: Keisha was above me. A concerned trunk gently poking and patting me. I put my hand on her in return, and promised her I would be okay. She gazed at me a moment longer before turning away. Where there is emotion, there is Keisha.

Asking a trembling, half-broken infant zebra to trust me. Coaxing her slowly, slowly to lie down. While she slept, I tried to absorb the depth of the commitment I had made by gaining her trust. It was a promise she reminded me of every time she suckled my fingers at night or nudged me for tickles. A promise that would take the energy and generosity of many people besides me, and for Mala, the journey of a lifetime.

AERU has not been an event, but an age of my life. I hope my work and the time I spent at KEP have created positive ripples in the world, but I know for sure that there are ripples in me. Every creature whose path I crossed, every person, every sunrise, has remade me in the shape of Africa.

Claire

JACOB TEMPLER, AERU VOLUNTEER

MAY - JUNE 2018

My time with AERU was marked with special moments each and every day, but it was my last day that stands out amongst them all.

The day would consist of banter and laughs with the two guides I grew closest too, Wilfred and Ndyebo. The ease with which these two men communicated and guided the elephants was absolutely incredible to behold; and remains one of the most stunning displays of the relationship between humans and animals I have ever witnessed.

My final day consisted of following the elephants from the swamp in the far back of the park to the lower forest valley. Ndyebo and Wilfred privileged me with their reservoir of knowledge and stories. Whilst these stories were going on, I noticed Shungu searching around for wild mushrooms. For the rest of the day I found myself walking all around in search of mushrooms and wildflowers for my favorite boy, Shungu never far behind once he realized the aim of my mission. Handfuls of mushrooms passed from my hands into the tips of his trunk. The happiness and tranquility of spending time with Shungu unbothered with no one around but our fellow guides was the pinnacle of my experience with AERU. As the sun began to set on the day, we made our way back into the night camp. This would be the last time I would see Shungu and the guides until my return one day, holding back the tears was no easy task. With a heavy heart I made my way to the bunkhouse, resolute in my will to come back one day and visit my elephant friend.

It is only because of AERU that I was able to have the greatest experience of my life. Ten years on, the first research unit dedicated to the welfare of captive elephants in South Africa remains fervently committed. I will forever stay involved and in contact with AERU, their dedication and hard work is a symbol of hope to the conservation world.

Jacob

LIZZIE DAWSON, AERU VOLUNTEER, INTERN & NOW TEAM MEMBER

APRIL - JUNE 2016 | JANUARY - JULY 2017 | OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2019 | JANUARY 2020 - ONWARDS



I think, if I had to pick, it would probably be when Thato gave me her trunk to hold while she was sleeping after I'd been back for a few days as an intern in 2017. When Thato gave me her trunk, lay her weight on me, and closed her eyes, I truly felt like I had come home.

AERU continuing on for 10 years is such a testament to the hard working team members who have strived tirelessly to make the unit, and the park as a result, a better place. There are so many strong women who have worked at AERU that inspire me everyday to continue trying to achieve my goal of working in conservation- Dr Debbie, Clare Padfield, Christina Tholander (my original volunteer in crime back in 2016) are all people I look up to and hope to emulate in my career path, and the chances they have given me have never been taken for granted.

I am so grateful that since my first visit in 2016, and then following my internship in 2017, I have managed to get back to the park every year since, including twice this year, where I have luckily, and beautifully, been brought back into the fold as an AERU team member, something I'll never stop blinking my eyes in wonder at.

Thank you AERU for embracing me as I am, for allowing me to use my natural talents in the work place, for teaching me so much, for letting me meet the wonderful guides who have become my family, and, of course, for letting me walk with the herd. The herd who I cannot even explain the amount of love I feel for.

I mean, if it weren't for AERU, I would never have met my girl Thandi, and where would I be then!? Congratulations AERU, I mean it, wholly and deeply from the bottom of my heart, and thank you for allowing me to be part of it all.

Lizzie

RESEARCH IN ACTION

- Significant drop in night time stereotypes after opening up the night-time boma and providing an outdoor night camp

CECILIA RIQUELME, AERU VOLUNTEER
2012



For me it all started as a joke. Every time I felt frustrated at work I would say to my co-workers: I'd rather go to Africa to take care of baby elephants instead!

One night as I was driving back home I thought to myself: what if..... So I literally googled: take care of elephants, or something like that. After a while browsing the web I found the KEP web page.

My experience at the KEP really opened a whole new World for me. I believe I was the first Mexican to stay at the Park. I remember the first thing that they asked me about my Country was: what does "Chicharito" mean? It's the nickname of a Soccer player. So funny!

Congratulations to you all!!

Cecilia

ABIGAIL PAMMENT, VOLUNTEER CO-ORDINATOR
2012 - 2013

As a volunteer co-ordinator there are so many wonderful memories I could tell you about my experience at AERU, it's so hard to pick out just a few of the highlights!

The amazing team I worked with made me feel so at home when I had moved out on my own and are friends I will cherish for life. I loved working on fantastic projects like PhD research, elephant and zebra relocations, helping re-design the museum.

Another great thing about working at AERU was meeting nearly 200 volunteers from all over the world who all loved elephants and South Africa as much as I did! Every volunteer would have had highlights from their trip, and it was great to share in some of these memories, help make some of them happen and also make some great friends. To know they went home having had the trip of a lifetime, really made all the hard work and long hours worth while!

My personal highlights would include getting to know the elephants, especially Keisha who was a favourite of mine (we are allowed a favourite right?!). I would always enjoy interacting with her, watching her gently take one tiny pellet from my hand with the tips of her trunk, and I loved it when the guides would let me go and give her trunk a hug at bedtime, sometimes dozing off with her trunk in my arms.

Another highlight was also little Baby Fiela, Thandi's daughter who was sadly rejected at birth. We took over the role of elephant mum for little Fiela until she was old enough to return to the herd. It was amazing watching her learn new skills, grow a personality, consume litres of milk every day and all while horrendously sleep deprived. The best part was introducing Fiela back into the herd and seeing Keisha take Fiela under her "trunk" to learn the ways of the world. We would only go out to give Fiela her 2L of milk every few hours and she would come running up to us as fast as her little legs would carry her while trumpeting away and ears flapping, always wondering off as soon as she had had her fill.

It was such a tragedy when Fiela got sick and passed away, but it helped me realise a passion for animal medicine and veterinary care. When I returned to the UK I was at a career crossroads seeing as there weren't many elephant jobs in England, so I got a job in a Veterinary practice and after a few years of training am a Registered Veterinary Nurse. I can only thank Fiela and the amazing people and experiences at AERU that I am where I am today!



xx
Abigail





LEA, AERU VOLUNTEER

OCTOBER 2018

Dear AERU Team,

Happy 10th Birthday! I am so happy that this means, ten years full of elephant love, research, observation and people who have their hearts in the right place. You are doing an amazing job! Thank you for all you have done for understanding the gentle giants a little bit better and of course thank you for what you have done for me.

I was volunteering from October to December 2018 and it has been the best decision I ever made. Spending so much time with you all and the elephants was an experience I don't want to miss anymore. I had so many special moments during my visit, but there are two which I will never forget.

Of course one of these moments included elephants. It was the last field shift of the day in my 5th week, when Shungu suddenly came over and touched me with his trunk. This was so special

to me because as you might remember I was falling in love with this little boy since day one. That he came over and said hi to me was melting my heart.

And my second incredible moment was with baby Mala, the little rescued zebra. I remember when you told us that something horrible happened and a little injured baby needs our help. In Mala's second night as a rescued zebra I was having a night shift. She was so scared and was freezing a lot. I was sitting on the floor when she came to me, laid her head down on my legs and was getting calmer and finally fell asleep. That was so amazing, I mean, a baby zebra slept on my lap!

I will always think of this beautiful time with you and hope you will celebrate many more birthdays!

Lea

MAREN PANZIRER, AERU VOLUNTEER

2017

I went to volunteer with AERU because I wanted to travel somewhere new and have a completely unique experience while making a difference. I didn't know what I was getting into and I was flying from New York to South Africa alone. My month at KEP and with the AERU team was incredible, to say the least.

I never thought I'd get to live alongside the elephants, let alone watch and interact with them every day. Between the AERU staff, the guides, and my fellow volunteers, I made lifelong friends I still keep in touch with, two years after visiting KEP.

To celebrate AERU turning 10, I was asked if I could write about a special moment I experienced during my time with them. I don't think I can, to be honest, because every moment of my month with AERU felt so incredibly special it's hard to choose one that stands out. My favorite times, though, were on the weekends when the other volunteers and I would go out to see the ellies and would spend hours chatting with the guides and feeding the elephants. Simply being around these beautiful creatures was so special and something I'll never forget.

Thank you AERU for giving me an experience I'll never forget, and for introducing me to some amazing friends I'm lucky to have in my life! Happy birthday!

Maren

SONJA WITTE, AERU VOLUNTEER

2017

I especially fell in love with Shungu. It was exciting to watch him interact in the group.

In general, it was interesting to see which different connections exist between the individual herd members and how special friendships develop within the group, but also how they teased each other - just like in a large family.

Sanja



NIKKI PERESINO,
ASSISTANT VOLUNTEER CO-ORDINATOR
2018 - PRESENT

Having an amazing job at AERU that I have come to love as Assistant Volunteer Coordinator. My girls have been very privileged to get to know these gentle giants as I have.

Nikki



DIANA BALBA, AERU VOLUNTEER

2019

I am grateful that programs like AERU exist, helping to protect these wonderful creatures and at the same time learning so much about their behaviour and how they continuously evolve and adapt. The main goal of AERU is to keep them safe and as happy as possible, while it evaluates the impact that captivity and the interaction with other humans have on the elephants.

Doing this volunteer work pushed my boundaries in many ways and helped me grow personally. Also being part of a community that is building something genuinely beautiful and significant is simply magical.

Happy 10-year anniversary, AERU! I am indebted to you for offering me the chance to be part of this amazing journey. It was a cathartic experience and I will be forever grateful.

Diana



ALEX RHODES, AERU VOLUNTEER

JULY 2016

The four weeks I spent with the AERU team were amazing! Not only being able to help the ellies and be up close with them, but all the people there, from the guides and AERU team to the volunteers, made it a perfect experience. My volunteer family made the time even more special, and we became very close, experiencing so many activities together from a safari to skydiving. I was lucky enough to be with AERU for four weeks along with three other volunteers for the entire time. We spent time with Sally's herd in the field, enjoyed sawdust day together, and were even able to see Harry's herd move from Knysna to the Plettenberg Bay Game Reserve. It was really special to watch them from the top of big containers, seeing how they transitioned into their new home. I am so grateful to the time I spent there and all the activities we were able to take part in, and will treasure all the memories I have from my time there, especially the early morning observations with the sun rising across the fields as the elephants woke up. AERU is an amazing programme and opportunity that brings together like minded people, all ready to help and work with the AERU team and friendly ellies! I am so thankful to the programme and AERU team for all the memories I now have, being able to do work that you feel makes a difference with a great group of people, in an amazing setting was really special.



Alex

ELAINE YARBROUGH, AERU VOLUNTEER

2016

The experience at Knysna was life changing. Three short weeks to learn about the elephants and important global research, to observe and experience these smart, funny, agile creatures; to appreciate the skills and commitment of the handlers, and meet Dr. Debbie, one of the key researchers in the well-being of captive elephants in the world. As a result, I am able to speak up for the elephants and their conservation.

Instead of one memory, mental postcards come to me as I recall my time there:

- wrestling the branches to and from the truck in the early morning,
- traipsing through the grasses, up and down the hill in the valley to observe the ellie's habits,
- watching the young males tussle with their trunks
- learning the importance of the matriarch for herd cohesion and teaching the young,
- the ellies' splashing and playing in the water
- delighting at the differences of the ellies—once I learned to distinguish them!
- feeling the spiritual connection to the animals as I sat on the outside observation deck at twilight

Elaine

ERIK BURINGTON, AERU VOLUNTEER

2016



I loved every second I was there! The friends I made, the beautiful country, and of course the elephants! I looked forward to every time in the field in the morning when the young male Shungu would walk up and extend his trunk and wrap it around my hand and basically say "Good morning" to me. AERU holds a special place in my heart because not only did I live out my childhood dream of visiting Africa, I got to be there for a month and live among the most amazing creatures on earth!

Erik

ALEX SANCHEZ ARISPE, STUDENT

2013

My greatest memory with AERU was to meet Fiela, the baby elephant. I met a lot of fantastic people in Knysna Elephants Park, as Melisa, Nadia or Jenn among others, but to meet Fiela was a dream for me. In my field research I spent a lot of time with this little ellie, she always followed me and she was taking my hand and using it like a pacifier. It was a terrible notice when she died but I prefer to remember my wonderful time with her. AERU, for me was the first opportunity to work and study the elephants, a special animal for me. They brought me the possibility to fulfil a dream, and after that I've been able to continue working with this fantastic animal.



Alex

RESEARCH IN ACTION

- Strong and consistent relationships can indeed form between unrelated elephants and that the structure mimics that of a natural herd consisting of related females and their young.
- Bonds were formed between existing herd members and 3 newly introduced females within one year and are comparable to a kin relationship. These bonds can be very enriching for the elephants, but the reverse is also important as it was found that housing incompatible elephants together is detrimental to their welfare.



LINDSEY STRAUB, AERU VOLUNTEER

2017 & 2019

Being in the presence of those gentle giants is absolutely the most peaceful and at home I have ever felt in my entire life. In 2017, Amari, Shanti & Madiwa have just been brought to KEP and to see them try to integrate with the rest of the herd was very interesting. But to come back and see how well the herd has accepted them was extremely gratifying (especially to see them lie down in the boma to sleep one night, Keisha closely by their side)!

The special bond I built with Keisha the first time I was there is something I carry in my heart and treasure every day. Keisha could sense that I was having a hard time personally when I arrived and to have her give me the attention she did was one of the most special times in my life. The second time I was there, I was so happy when Mashudu made sure he was near me while I was in the field for my entire stay at the park! It's so precious to see these amazing animals remember me!

I cannot think of AERU without thinking of the staff. Living and working with the staff day in and day out and getting to know them and their vast knowledge is something to be treasured. They are all dear friends and I have so much respect for them. And like the staff, I can't think of AERU without thinking of the two groups of volunteers that I got to meet and spend time with. Both groups were very unique and very fun! You gain an immediate family when you arrive at AERU and I'm so grateful I was given such great families BOTH times! AERU and KEP will always hold a special place in my heart and being there feels like home.

The work done at AERU, I believe, is invaluable and to be able to witness the herd, their interactions, and their handlers in person is something you cannot experience anywhere else in this world. It is truly a special and humbling experience that I will continue to be grateful for every day of my life. Happy 10th Anniversary, AERU! I hope the herd, staff, and the guides all celebrate and I hope to write even more on your 20th Anniversary!

Cheers to you!

Lindsey

MARTINA SCHÄFER, AERU VOLUNTEER

2017 & 2019

In 2018 after I've spent six weeks as a volunteer with my favorite ellies, I came back five months later as a tourist because I missed them so much. At that time Mashudu was 11 and started to show early mature behavior by chasing the girls. He repeatedly tried to mount Keisha, when one evening she ran away towards Sally hiding behind her and seeking help. Mash now turned his attention to Thato and chased her through the shelter in the night camp.

First she also started to sprint in Sally's direction as if she also wanted to hide behind Sally. However, Thato stopped abruptly, turned around and ears out, trunk out, tail out – she was suddenly twice her size. Trumpeting she ran towards Mashudu and attacked him on her part. With her short and narrow tusks she has struck his trunk. This little girl held her ground. And Mashudu did not bother her any longer.

Martina



PRIMROSE MANNING, STUDENT 2015 & RESEARCH OFFICER 2020

Arriving at Knysna Elephant Park in May 2015 I already had an idea of what I would find with regards to the elephants' social behaviour, and they didn't disappoint! They indeed had best friends and those friendships persisted for years. Their social network was strong and stable, and resembled that of a wild herd. I was blown away by their ability to bond so closely to one another despite the fact that they have no familial relation; they are truly remarkable and so much like us. Surprisingly, this kind of research had really not been done before, and it has big implications for captive elephant welfare globally.

On a more personal level, I found myself falling in love with the elephants from the very start, and over the coming weeks I got to know their individual personalities and quirks. Keisha's gentle nature and tragic story touched me the most, and I've since had a special place for her in my heart. I also grew fond of the fantastic guides that cared for them every day, and observed the close bonds shared between guide and elephant. I loved the people I worked alongside, and quickly felt comfortable in the way of life and the country; KEP became a home away from home.

Elephants have always been my biggest passion, and elephant research my endgame. I now get to spend my life studying the behaviour of these beautiful creatures. Whilst it is never ideal for wild animals to be in captivity, the elephants at KEP have escaped tragedy and misfortune. They are ambassadors for what captive wild animals can have if they are in the right hands, and if their needs are put above all else. I am privileged to be a part of their lives, and the lives of everybody here at KEP.

Happy Birthday AERU and thank you for taking me into the fold! I look forward to 2020 and doing lots of research with my amazing team!

Prim

MIREN HERNANDEZ, AERU VOLUNTEER 2012 & 2014

My first time was as a volunteer for a month in September 2012 and then I came back the 1st of January 2014 and stayed for 5 months.

I started the dung paper project "Poop" with my colleague and good friend Arnold. I learned how to make dung paper in Tsavo Kenya and then we set up the project at AERU.

It was a lifetime experience!! The elephants, the wilderness, the people that I met... everything was magic. I'm very grateful for that time of my life, it helped me to believe again, to learn and admire Nature and to fall in love forever with the majestic elephants. I hope to come back one day soon. Big hugs for everybody and every ellie!!!!

Miren

KIRSTEN ANDERSON, AERU VOLUNTEER 2019

One of my favourite moments from my time with AERU was during night observations. I was assigned to watch from 1:00am - 3:00am in the Orchard with the girls: Sally, Nandi, Thandi, and Thato.

It was a beautiful night full of stars, and the elephants were finished eating and ready for some sleep. Nandi and Thandi were in the enclosure, and Thandi laid down. The ever-protecting mother, Nandi stood over her daughter with one knee resting on Thandi's side.

It was a beautiful moment between a loving mother and her daughter, and I am honoured that I was there to witness it.

Kirsten

LINEY MÄHL, AERU VOLUNTEER 2018

My special moment of my time with AERU was when I got to meet all the beautiful elephants for the first time in my life and see all the different personalities they have. It was a really big experience for me to be with the AERU team. I think it was really interesting to be in the field and observe all the different behaviors that the elephants have.

I think it is really cool and good that AERU exist and I am really happy and grateful that AERU has existed for 10 years and that they have done all the good work for the elephants. It is important to observe the elephant's behaviours because you need to see how the welfare of captive elephants are.

Lincy



ALISON JEFFREY, STUDENT
2016

The community AERU has created and fostered was apparent from my very first day and is unlike anything else I've experienced. Over the nine weeks I spent at AERU, I bonded with all those wonderful people – we laughed and cried, spent countless hours watching the elephants and cuddling the cats, soaked up the rare days of sun and got poured on in the winter rains together. I truly felt at home during my whole stay. When it came time to leave, I found myself crying again, having to say goodbye to the people and elephants and place and time I had come to love. The community I found in AERU is only one piece of what makes it so special, but it is one of the most significant.

Alison

BARBARA GARRETT, AERU VOLUNTEER
2013

The elephants at the Knysna Elephant Park, many of whom came from truly horrible situations, are deeply loved, have the best possible care, and, most importantly, are safe from harm. The people who work at Knysna are committed and dedicated to their elephants. Most of the guides have worked there for years, having travelled great distances from their homes and families to live and work there.

I became friends with the guides, the other volunteers, and the AERU staff. Everything about the place was transparent and all of my questions were answered. It was the single most exciting and interesting thing I've ever done, an experience that affected me on every level. Not a day goes by that I don't think about "my babies" and my time there. I will definitely go back, and when I do, I fully expect my special elephants – Mashudu, Thato, and Keisha – to remember me.

Barbara

ANNIKA VENNEMAN, AERU VOLUNTEER
2011

I still have so many precious moments in my mind when I think about the month I spent on the field. Even cleaning the boma...I think we had more than 10 trucks of sawdust arriving one day. The time really had a big impact on me.

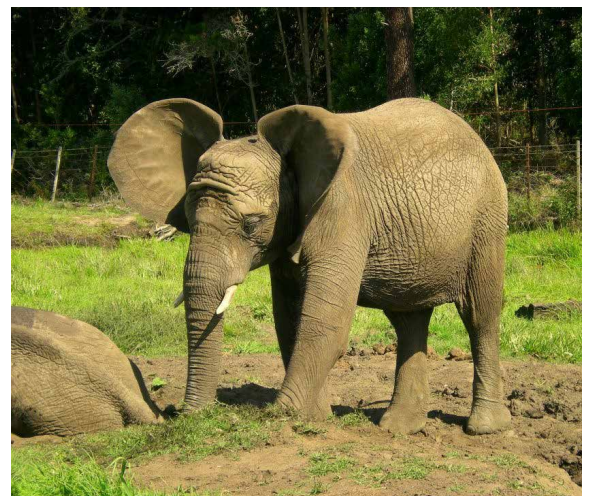
I even got the name of Thandi tattooed on my skin when I was back in Germany because I never wanted to forget how happy I was and how much I felt alive being at KEP.

Annika

KATHRYN HYNDS, AERU VOLUNTEER
2019

Although there were many special moments, the one that stands out to share is the thrill of my first elephant encounter by the elephant's choice. It was my third week as a volunteer. There had been a little rain recently and we were out in the field. Thato came up to me, reaching her trunk out, so I put my hand up towards her and she briefly grabbed/held my hand! It was so exciting that an elephant initiated contact with me! My hand and sleeve got Thato's mud all over it and I took a picture to remember that exhilarating moment.

Kathryn



CAROL STEVENS, AERU VOLUNTEER
2016

The moment that most stands out is meeting the elephants out in the field for the very first time. I can remember waking up very early tired after a long flight and not sleeping well in a strange bed. I also remember being so excited thinking I can't believe I'm finally here in South Africa and that today we're going to meet Sally's herd. Being in the company of the herd was amazing being able to stand close to them, touch them and watch them interacting with the public, guides and each other. It was an amazing feeling to be there and to be part of a great research project if only for 2 weeks. I have so many happy memories which I hope will always stay with me.

Carol

LAURIE SCHELLE, VOLUNTEER CO-ORDINATOR

2010 – 2013



It was a broken relationship and a non-refundable ticket that brought me to AERU's doorstep in April of 2010, and so it is that I traded a man for a herd of elephants and embarked on a journey that has changed my life in more ways than I will ever know. 2 months turned into 3 1/2 years + 6 years of extended vacations, and a mild interest in elephants became a passion. It was my love for an elephant that compelled me to stay, but as time went on and AERU grew, I was enriched even more with the lifelong friendships I developed with my brilliant, beautiful and inspiring co-workers, the amazing staff, awesome volunteers, and of course the elephants. In my time there, I experienced both profound joy and unimaginable loss, formed a bond with one elephant and became a mother to another; I learned to see in a new way and to respect what was being conveyed without words.

I am so very proud to have played a part in building and nurturing AERU, to have worked hand in hand with the guys in the early days to instill a mandate of positive reinforcement and to watch with love and respect how relationships changed and bonds formed as it became less about teaching elephants, but allowing elephants to teach us. And so it is that 10 years have passed, and the serene and magical sound of an elephant rumble has become the voice of my god; nature.

Thank you to AERU, to the awesome humans (you know who you are), and to Sally, Thandi, Nandi, Harry, Namib, Tosha, Clyde, Shaka, Mashudu, Shungu, Shanti, Madiwa, Amari, Keisha and Thato for trusting me, tolerating me (Nandi), enriching my life and making me a better person,

Happy Anniversary AERU

x Laurie

CHRISTINA THOLANDER, VOLUNTEER CO-ORDINATOR & LAB (DUNG) TECHNICIAN

APRIL 2016 – CURRENT

I arrived at AERU's doorstep in April 2016, embarking on a life changing adventure. Little did I know how life changing it actually would turn out to be. Needless to say how this place changes you, how it touches you and takes up quite a lot of space in your heart... I consider myself extremely lucky, that by the end of my 12-week volunteer stay I was offered a position as Lab technician. It was not a hard offer to accept. Living and breathing everything elephant is the core of my soul and I think my most favourite thing is to share this magical place that AERU is with all of the volunteers, AERU team members and AERU friends. Your support and your never ending interest in what we try and accomplish, humbles me, well, all of us really, every single day. AERU is now turning 10! And what an amazing 10 years. So many volunteers from ALL over the planet, so many friendships have been born amongst elephants and dung piles, branches and field observations. Much have been accomplished and we are embarking on the next 10 years with goals of publishing research papers already as early as next year! With that I want to, on behalf of ALL of AERU, send out a gigantic THANK YOU to everyone who has volunteered, are volunteering and will volunteer with AERU, everyone who has been and currently is a team member or intern and everyone who's a special friend and supporter of AERU.

You are truly what keeps us going and we are forever grateful. It's actually very simple: we would not be able to do what we do if its not for the support we receive from all of you out there.



xx Stina