

ELEPHANT PATH NJAIA NJOKU



a lost bird film

Directed by Todd McGrain

Official Selection

****World Premiere - San Francisco DocFest 2018****

****African Premiere - Congo International Film Festival 2018****

Release Date: June 10, 2018 at Roxie Theater in San Francisco

Running Time: 52 minutes

Language: English, Sangho (with English subtitles)

www.elephantpathfilm.org | Facebook: [@elephantpathfilm](https://www.facebook.com/elephantpathfilm)

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LOG LINE

Against a backdrop of luminous natural beauty, pierced by callous human violence, an American biologist, a Bayaka tracker, and a Bantu eco-guard form an unlikely alliance. As their lives converge on the paths of the last wild herd of forest elephants in the Central African Republic, each will be tested by the realities of war and the limits of hope for the majestic animals they have committed their lives to study and protect.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

With unprecedented footage, *Elephant Path / Njaia Njoku* captures the beauty and behavior of the rare and elusive Forest Elephants. Our guides, Sessely Bernard, a tracker and elder of the Bayaka people, and Andrea Turkalo, an American field biologist join eco-guard, Zephirine Mbele, on an observation platform in a clearing called Dzanga Bai in the rainforest of the Central African Republic.

Word reaches Dzanga that the Seleka, an alliance of rebel militia groups, has overthrown the government and is about to enter the clearing. Andrea flees to the United States. Relying on his forest skills, Sessely leads his extended family deep into the rainforest, while Zephirine retreats to the nearby Bantu village.

The night is shattered by the crash by gunfire. Sessely listens in horror as elephants are slaughtered by a rogue group of Seleka Rebels. As the occupation continues, Sessely and Zephirine avoid contact with the occupying rebel forces while Andrea watches events unfold from her office at the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University.

After a year of Seleka occupation and torment for both the citizens and the elephants, the Seleka rebels are forced to the north of CAR by a rising resistance. Zephirine continues his anti-poaching patrols. Andrea and Sessely once again sit side by side on the observation post. The three friends return to their work with the hope that the violence of the past year has passed and that a fragile peace will return.

LONG SYNOPSIS

With unprecedented footage, *Elephant Path / Njaia Njoku* captures the beauty and behavior of the rare and elusive Forest Elephants. Our guides on this journey are Sessely Bernard, a tracker and elder of the Bayaka people, and Andrea Turkalo, an American field biologist.

In a remote clearing in the rainforest of the Central African Republic (CAR) called Dzanga Bai, the elephants gather to bathe in the mud and drink the mineral-rich water.

Andrea's presence at the clearing and her close relationship with Sessely have been important factors in keeping poaching to a minimum at Dzanga Bai. Each day Andrea and Sessely sit side by side on the wooden observation platform talking quietly and recording the behavior the elephants. Moses has a scar. Anatol has rips in his ears. Brice likes to charge. There is Romana, Ezra, Izzy and Madonna. For decades Andrea and Sessely have watched the elephants bathe and play and grow. They've seen newborns coaxed along, youths tussle, and young bulls learn to be males. Sharing the platform with Andrea and Sessely is Zephirine Mbele, an eco-guard on the front lines of the anti-poaching efforts.

Tragically, the hard work and commitment of Sessely, Andrea and Zephirine is not enough to keep the elephants safe. Even the dense forest cannot hide the elephants from the growing threat of poachers. Political unrest, poverty, and greed fuel a poaching pandemic that threatens their very existence. Fifty thousand elephants live in the Central African Rainforest. In 2017, 14,000 were illegally slaughtered for their ivory.

As bad as the poaching crisis is, the stakes increase dramatically when word reaches Andrea that the Seleka, an alliance of rebel militia groups, has overthrown the government and is about to enter the Dzanga-Ndoki National Park. With their lives at risk, Andrea, Sessely and Zephirine are forced to leave their posts.

Andrea flees to the United States. Relying on his forest skills Sessely leads his extended family deep in the rainforest, while Zephirine retreats to the relative safety of the nearby Bantu village.

Cautiously, Sessely walks the forest at night, listening for the elephants. Tragically, the darkness is shattered by the crash of gunfire. Sessely hides and listens in horror as twenty-six elephants are slaughtered by a rogue group of Seleka Rebels.

Sessely and Zephirine avoid contact with the occupying rebel forces while Andrea watches with trepidation from her office at the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University.

After a year of occupation, the Seleka rebels are force to the north of CAR by a rising resistance force. With the rebels gone, Zephirine continues his anti-poaching patrols. Andrea returns to Dzanga with new hope and assurances that the rebels are no longer a threat. She and Sessely once again sit side by side in the observation post. The three friends take up their work with the hope that the terrible violence of the past year has passed and that a fragile peace will return to their lives and the lives of the Forest Elephants of Dzanga Bai.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



I first heard the calls of forest elephants in a small windowless recording studio in the offices of the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University. Sitting beside me was renowned elephant behavioral biologist Andrea Turkalo. The room was filled with the night sounds of the Central African Rainforest. Across a thick fog of insects and frogs floated the plaintive calls of Forest Elephants. There were roars and trumpets, long pulsing rumbles, and screeches (which I later learned belonged to infants calling for their mothers).

Andrea had recently arrived in Ithaca to help her collaborators decode these calls. Andrea's descriptions of the rainforest, the indigenous people she has worked along side, and the peril the elephants were facing set a path for me that I would follow for the next 4 years. Along the way I would travel with security contractors, go on patrol with eco-guards, and spend extended time in the forest with the Bayaka people, who were avoiding the civil conflict unfolding across the country. Sessely Bernard, a Bayaka elder, had worked with Andrea for 23 years. It was Sessely and his extended family that truly gave me this remarkable unfolding story. I am honored to have been invited into this world.

There are common elements in every contemporary extinction story: unchecked market forces, corruption, greed, overexploitation, and habitat loss. A more optimistic commonality between these tragic histories is the presence of a dedicated and inspiring group of thoughtful and forward looking people sounding the alarm of impending loss. It is my hope that the efforts of these people will be fortified by this film. Elephant Path / Njaia Njoku is their story.

Todd McGrain (Director/Producer)

FEATURING



Sessely Bernard

Bayaka tracker Sessely is the primary voice of the film. The Bayaka are the often-marginalized, indigenous people of the Central African rainforest.



Andrea Turkalo

Andrea, who has been studying the Forest Elephants of Dzanga Bai for the past 23 years, brings a field biologist's perspective to the lives of the elephants.



Zephirine Sosso Mbele

As an eco-guard, Zephirine is on the front lines of the anti-poaching efforts and stands directly between the elephants and the rebel soldiers intent on profiting from the illegal ivory trade.

THE FILMMAKERS

Directed By TODD MCGRAIN

Produced By TODD MCGRAIN
SCOTT ANGER

Executive Producer ANDREW STERN

Cinematography By SCOTT ANGER

Edited By SARA KHAKI
TODD MCGRAIN

Original Score By ALEXANDER BALANESCU

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Todd McGrain (Director/Producer/Editor)

Todd McGrain turned his attention to documentary film after a 25-year career as a sculptor. His accomplishments as a sculptor include the prestigious Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship and the Audubon Award for Art Inspiring Conservation. His sculptures are part of several major museum collections in the United States and abroad. In 2010, McGrain's work to create permanent public memorials to birds driven to extinction in modern times became the subject of a documentary film, *The Lost Bird Project*, produced by Middlemarch Films. This rewarding experience led McGrain to his current focus on the plight of the Forest Elephants of Central Africa. Though *Elephant Path / Njaia Njoku* is McGrain's first feature length documentary, his understanding of the value of storytelling to raise awareness of our current extinction crisis has been formed over decades of dedication and commitment.

Scott Anger (Producer/Cinematographer)

Scott Anger is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and independent journalist. In 2014, he won an Emmy Award for the film, *Hunger in the Valley of Plenty*, which explores food insecurity in central California. Anger's credits include a number of films for the acclaimed documentary program *FRONTLINE* (PBS) about ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia. Two of the films have been awarded the Alfred I. duPont Award for Excellence in Journalism from Columbia University, television's highest journalism award. Anger was the co-producer and cinematographer for *The Lost Bird Project*, a film directed by Deborah Dickson and produced by Middlemarch Films, about sculptor Todd McGrain.

Sara Khaki (Editor)

Sara Khaki is an emerging independent documentary filmmaker and editor with a passion for telling untold stories that matter in our lives. She graduated from the University of Maryland Baltimore County with a BFA in Film/Video, and the School of Visual Arts with a MFA in Social Documentary Film. From the strength of her thesis film *Facing The Mirror*, Sara was named the SVA Social Documentary and an Alumni Scholarship award recipient. Sara was born and raised in Tehran, Iran, and she currently resides in New York City.

Alexander Balanescu (Composer)

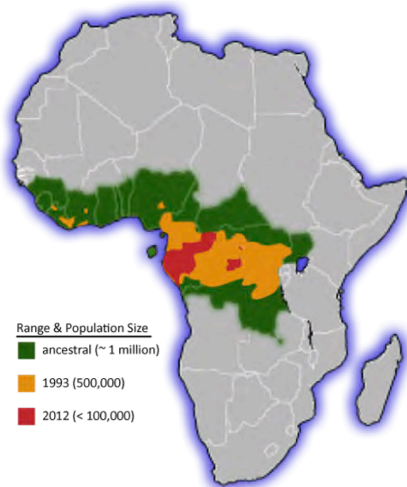
Internationally recognized as a virtuoso violinist and composer, Romanian-born Alexander Balanescu made his debut at the age of nine. He gained a reputation as a truly interdisciplinary artist, composer, improviser as well as a performer. He has collaborated with musicians from such wide ranging fields as John Lurie, Gavin Bryars, Michael Nyman, Jack DeJohnette, John Surman, Andy Sheppard, and Carla Bley. His work has also taken him to the pop world, supporting the Pet Shop Boys and recording the music of David Byrne, Kraftwerk, the Yellow Magic Orchestra and collaborating with the German band "To Rococo rot" on their latest album. More recently, Alexander completed a tour of England with Philip Glass and Foday Musa Suso, and developed a very special way of performing together with Mr. Suso, including improvisation and song.

Andrew Stern (Executive Producer)

Andy Stern is an Associate Professor of Neurology at The University of Rochester but now devotes himself fully to raising awareness about the environment through activities of *The Lost Bird Project*.



Forest Elephant Fact Sheet (*Loxodonta cyclotis*)



Forest elephant populations in West Africa are now highly fragmented and generally very small and threatened. In the 1990s, about 60% of forest elephants lived in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but are now nearly extirpated in those forests.

- Forest elephants are the least well known of the three species of elephants and are the only species with a chance to continue living a normal ‘wild’ existence.
- Found in Central and West Africa, forest elephants now number fewer than 100,000¹, down from about one million when Europeans first ventured into Central Africa.
- The forest elephant is morphologically distinct from the savannah elephant (*L. africana*) – smaller in size, smaller more rounded ears, and straighter, thinner, denser tusks².
- The average group size is 3.0 (mother and dependent offspring)³, but observations at forest clearings indicate larger associations among family groups, similar to the multi-tiered social system of savannah elephants.
- DNA analysis has shown that African savannah and forest elephants are genetically distinct⁴, reinforcing clear ecological differences.

Why Ivory Trade Poses a Special Threat to Forest Elephants

- Much forest elephant habitat lies within countries with a history of civil unrest and poverty, both of which increase the incentive for poaching.
- Logging roads are penetrating the equatorial forests at a rapid rate, making remote areas more accessible and bringing in workers who kill elephants for bushmeat as well as ivory. Despite the current ivory trade ban, it is estimated that 10-15% of the elephant population is poached annually⁵. The price of ivory on the world market has reached \$2100/lb – more than \$400,000 from one adult male.
- The ivory of forest elephants is denser and more desirable to carvers than ivory of the other species.
- Forest elephants are difficult to census due to their dense habitat, and poaching activity is harder to detect for the same reason. As enforcement strengthens elsewhere in Africa, poachers will increasingly target forest elephant populations.

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