



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 681, Interview with Scott & Kat Blais

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Scott, and Kat!

Scott Blais: Thank you, Mariann. It's a pleasure to be here and we're happy to join the conversation today.

Kat Blais: Hi!

Mariann: I am thrilled to have you, we are speaking to you from rural Brazil. I hear some birds in the background, which is a nice touch, and we're hoping we can get through this interview without losing the connection. We'll do our best.

Perhaps you can just introduce people to Elephant Sanctuary, Brazil. Where is it, what does it look like, and, of course, who are the residents?

Scott: Sure. So a quick summary. We actually, Kat and I, have founded a nonprofit organization called Global Sanctuary for Elephants.

It's based in the United States, and we exist to help build sanctuaries internationally for captive elephants. Our first project is down here in Brazil, building a sanctuary for captive elephants in South America. We have about 2,700-2,800 acres, and right now we have five current residents...

Kat: Six... *all laugh*

Scott: Six current residents. I'm so sorry, I forgot one. *laughs*

Mariann: They're so easy to overlook, those elephants. *all laugh*

Scott: They are! *all laughing* They're just like little blips. *laughs* When you have so much property, they're like little tiny dots on the horizon, which is

beautiful, but they're easy to miss out there. *chuckles* So we have right now Lady, Maia, Mara, Rana, Bambi, and Guillermina.

Guillermina is the most recent resident. She came here just a few months ago, about six months ago, with her mom from Mendoza, Argentina. And tragically her mom just passed away, just about a month ago, or six weeks ago. And it's part of sanctuary that is tough, but it's also beautiful that her mom got to see her daughter start to explore her life for the first time and, it was just amazing to watch that whole experience.

Mariann: So what are some of the stories of these elephants? Where do they come from?

Scott: Oh goodness. Where to start?

Kat: We have a very geriatric population here, except for Guillermina. Most of the elephants started out as circus elephants, and then because of legislation bans they were all moved to other facilities, some zoos, some lived on chains on private properties. So they have a lot of different backgrounds, but most started out with a life of abuse. Sometimes that continued into the facility they lived in afterward.

Scott: And the vast majority of these elephants were all captured from the wild, imported as infants, and often sent into isolation.

I think most of the audience is familiar with the abuse that captive animals endure and these elephants that are supposed to be living with their family for their entire lives are just sequestered to a life of isolation.

And what we try to do is give them a life that is theirs, and we can go into the autonomy and giving them their voice. And it's just amazing what happens when you give them space to be themselves. It's a journey of discovery and also of rediscovery of what life really means.

Mariann: Yeah. It really must be extraordinary and I do want to get into the development they've had.

But first I really wanted to ask you, because I think people are probably surprised when they hear Brazil because, even those of us who don't know that much about animals...and I always say I've devoted my life to animals, but I don't know that much about them, but even I know that elephants don't come from Brazil.

So why is Brazil a great place for an elephant sanctuary? I mean, obviously, the elephants were there, but is it also a good habitat for them?

Scott: It really couldn't be much more perfect. It's actually, in some ways, more perfect than their climate, even in their home ranges. Where we are specifically, it is just idyllic for elephants. It very rarely gets below, maybe a couple of nights a year, down in the mid-fifties. So very rarely below 65 degrees and very rarely, above 90-95 degrees, just this perfect window for them where they get to live outside day and night with full autonomy.

Kat: One of the reasons we looked specifically for a property like this, with a temperature like this, and rainfall was because we had worked at the sanctuary in Tennessee for elephants, which Scott co-founded when he was 21.

But what we saw there, even with 2,700 acres of property and the autonomy that they gained back, was that every winter when the elephants would have to return to the barn, even though they weren't spending all day in the barn, they would come back around five and leave in the morning, is that we would see a lot of the behaviors they had lost while they were outside.

So, they would start to stereotype again. They would lose patience with each other, they would lose patience with caregivers. We would just see this digression every winter. So part of the goal for this sanctuary was to find somewhere that they could be outside 24 hours a day.

Scott: They are captive elephants, so they're all elephants that came from the wild, and were sent into slavery for zoos and circuses.

And what started happening here in South America is very progressive legislation that was moving quite rapidly. And as Kat mentioned, a lot of these animals were taken from the circus because of progressive legislation, but without an alternative. At the time, they were put into small zoo facilities with, many times, less care than they had in the circus.

So now that we are existing, a lot of zoos are interested in sending elephants to us, and there's even more progressive movement in Argentina with two of the most prominent zoos that are transforming towards eco-parks. It's not the perfect solution, but they are actually moving the vast majority of their exotic animals to sanctuaries internationally. Most of the sanctuaries are sanctuaries that are accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.

It's a huge expense, huge logistical issues of sending animals all over the world. And they're going to focus solely on indigenous animals, working with rehab and release, and just changing the model.

So it's a lot of progressive actions here in South America. And part of the reason why we chose Brazil is because, at the time, 35 of the 50 elephants in captivity were here in Brazil.

Mariann: Wow. That is a really extraordinary story about Argentina.

It's not all of the countries in South America that have banned the use of elephants in circuses, right? But it's a growing movement?

Kat: I think, at this point, 11 states out of all of Brazil have banned performing animals in circuses but they have a national ban that isn't up for vote yet, but they are working on.

Scott: And I think seven countries in South America have banned performing animals.

Mariann: I didn't realize it had gotten that far. That's a really, really exciting development.

Getting back to the sanctuary, because I want to get into all of that stuff, but I also want to talk a little bit more about the elephant's lives at the sanctuary. I know you don't have, and don't intend to have, any kind of visitor program. If people are listening to this and planning their next trip to rural Brazil, they might need to cancel that. *laughs* Can you explain what the problems are with visitor programs for elephants?

Kat: For us, the model of sanctuary that we use isn't this altruistic theory of what sanctuary should look like. It is what the elephants we've worked with over the past decades have actually shown us they need. We ended up building this sanctuary with the worst-case scenario in mind for elephants.

So it's the elephants that don't heal right away, that do have this deep-seated fear of humans, that are uncomfortable with strangers being around. So you want this to be their home. You want this to be their safe place. If they do not feel safe like they haven't for most of their lives, they aren't vulnerable enough to actually heal through the emotional traumas that they've gone through over the past few decades.

What they've gone through runs deep and it is really hard for them to learn to trust and to open themselves up. But it's a beautiful process and that really only happens if you provide them with a safe space that is truly theirs.

Scott: A lot of the basis for what we do here was because of what we learned from the first experience we had with developing a spacious sanctuary, which was the development of The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, as Kat said, which was co-founded in 1995.

When we started that process, no one had given elephants space before. No one had given them ample room. The first time all of our colleagues, even within the sanctuary world, were like, "Is this gonna work?" You know, "You're crazy. They're gonna become rogue. They'll be wild."

But we saw a rapid evolution, initial rapid evolution, and then a long-term level of recovery that really defined not only what they needed, but defined the depth of trauma that they endure. You know, we know about the abuse, we know about the traumas, the hardships they face, and what it takes to make them perform, and the isolation and the solitary confinement.

But what we didn't realize was just the depth of impact that has on who they are in their core. And so this evolution that we saw is really what defined what sanctuary needs to be for them. And also that, as Kat said, it is their space first. And if you start trying to accommodate people at the same time, you can't do both simultaneously.

You're either catering to the public or you're catering to the elephants. And as far we're concerned, they have already paid their dues. It's time to focus on their lives.

Mariann: Even people who really care about elephants, from what I read in some of your notes that you sent, have a lot of misconceptions. And, just what I've seen, it's kind of a weird thing I don't really remember this...I'm old so I don't really remember this as a child, but people have this intense connection to elephants now. Like a lot of people feel that they really know them. It's a wonderful thing but can give rise to a lot of misconceptions.

Do you find that this is the case? And that it would get in the way of helping to heal elephants if people's ideas, maybe misconceptions, about them were allowed to take hold? Everybody wants to be the elephant's friend...That was really a long question, but I hope you can sort it out. *everyone laughs*

Kat: We often hear, “I want to go to the sanctuary. I want to touch an elephant. I want to be close to an elephant.” And for us, that goes back to exactly what's in that sentence—I want. It's not about what they would necessarily want. I don't think people...I don't think it's ill-intentioned, I just don't think that people stop and think about what that interaction means to the elephants.

It's the same thing with a lot of people who go to a zoo. They don't stop and think, “Well, this two minutes that makes me really happy to see an elephant a half hour away from my house means that they were pulled away from their mother, taken from the wild, lived this life of isolation that is very unnatural for them.”

They just don't really stop and think, and we see the same thing with wanting to be close to an elephant, wanting to go to a sanctuary, wanting to feed an elephant. And the reality is, those elephants aren't there because they want that interaction. There's a reason there's always food involved with these interactions.

You're essentially baiting elephants to spend time with you and in some facilities, they're still dominated. You still see caretakers with bull hooks standing next to them or holding the back of their ears. This is all a way to force them to interact with you. This isn't free will. It's not their choice.

They're not standing with you to take a selfie because it's what they want or what they enjoy, and that process takes away from them being able to just be an elephant for the day. You know, some of these animals, you have busloads of people that come for feedings three or four times a day, which means they're not off grazing, they're not off socializing, they're not off doing those things that are natural. Instead, they are spending their days catering to humans.

So it's just a different form of entertainment that people don't realize they are participants in, for the most part.

Mariann: Yeah. And do you agree that elephants have come to hold a special place in people's vision of the wild and animals? It just seems to me they've become intensely beloved.

And that's probably feeding this, as you said, not poorly intentioned, but not best for the elephants kind of approach.

Scott: Yeah, without a doubt. I mean, there's a huge attraction for people to elephants, and really what's not to be attracted by? I mean, they're amazing on

all levels. And I think people are amazed by their size, and we are amazed by their social complexity, and what we see in other documentaries of animals in the wild. One of the first things people say is, “Oh, but they mourn their dead like we do!”

Yes. And as profound this is, it is just the tip of the iceberg of how profound they really are. Their complexities just continue to amaze us. You know, I'm 35 years of working with elephants on a near daily basis, and we're still learning things each day. We're still seeing different elements of who they are, and what they are as these species.

One of the most amazing things is watching those transformations that occur in the animals that have been taken from the wild and moved into captivity. And once you give them the space that is theirs and give them the peace to find and explore life, it's just amazing how they continue to evolve.

And I think if more people could see that element, which is what we try to share, I think you end up with an even deeper appreciation for who they are and why we don't belong as part of their daily lives. Yes, we need to, as part of the sanctuary recovery, but as humans being able to visit, humans being able to feed, that's not the formula that works for them.

It should be their life, their space, their time.

Mariann: Yeah, I'm sure it's a hard sell for a lot of people.

Can you go a little deeper into that and tell us about some of the changes you have seen in your elephant residents, since coming to the sanctuary? How do they evolve?

Scott: We try to delve into some of this with our social media because it is the most fascinating part.

And we have new caregivers that just started last week and one of them, after five or six days said, “I am just amazed how much you continue to share each day.”

“There's so much more,” I'm like, “We are just getting started, this is five days in.”

Let's talk about something that just happened because I think it really summarizes a lot of what they are capable of when you give them this space.

And it's based on this tragic moment of Pocha passing away, which I just talked about. Here are two elephants, Pocha and Guillermina, who were...Guillermina is the daughter, she was born in captivity. She was born into 400 square meters of a concrete hole. She never knew dirt. She never knew trees, she never knew grass. She didn't know any sort of social environment except for what she had with her mom.

And her mom did everything she could for her daughter for 23 years knowing she has nothing else to offer except for her love. Once they came to the sanctuary, they started going through this transition of exploring life on different terms, and it was a transition, but one of the most beautiful things was watching Pocha stand back, watching mom stand back, and watching her watch her daughter explore new friendships.

Pocha passed away after five months. We believe, based on what we saw with her necropsy is she had been suffering for a long time. She had long-term chronic infections that likely had been going on for several years. She had to be in a lot of pain. She had to be in a lot of discomfort, but she fought through.

We believe she fought through to be strong for her daughter until she didn't need to anymore. And then once her daughter started developing relationships, that's when we believed Pocha allowed herself to stop that fight.

What happened within a couple of hours of Pocha passing was really remarkable because Guillermina started calling her new friends. And four of her new friends came from the very back of the property, came over to meet up with her, and you could hear them calling back and forth, and then one by one Guillermina went up to where her mom had passed away with each one individually. And then a different one would go with her, and then a different one would go with her.

And a couple of days later, they were all there close to where her mom had passed. And these are all elephants that have not had this experience in the wild. They weren't taught what it means to mourn. They weren't taught what it means to have this type of empathy and understand what it means to be around another individual that passes.

They don't have any sort of schooling or education about this, and here these elephants somehow have this instinctual understanding and they have this space to be able to evolve into this natural state of being. So just one simple experience and how they transformed from what they would have done.

What if they were by themselves? What if they didn't have this space and what if they didn't have this camaraderie to understand what it is to be a family network in this time of need for somebody else?

So just having that opportunity to explore a bit of the dark side of life, but also very joyous in how they were there to rally for each other and be there for Guillermina in a time that she needed. The only thing that could help her in that space, which was another elephant, no human could have offered what she needed.

Mariann: Yeah. That's a really beautiful story and it's very moving.

I know that one of the things that's different about your sanctuary than sanctuaries up here, as far as I know, is that you actually could get more elephants, if you wanted them. Can you talk about some of the obstacles that are in the way of expanding and being able to serve more of them?

Scott: Yeah, I mean, the reality is money. *laughs*

Mariann: It usually is!

Scott: Because money buys time and these elephants don't have time. But the sooner funding comes, the faster we can build fences. The faster we can build fences, the sooner permits can be admitted. And the sooner permits can be admitted, the sooner elephants can come.

And that's basically where we're at. We have enough facilities right now, enough constructed, for the elephants that are here plus four more that are currently waiting for us in Argentina. The only thing that's waiting for them is just the importation permits. And with the male Asian elephant, he needs some training, as well, in order to have the sanitary requirements, uh, sanitary questions required for importation.

But before we can receive more elephants past that, we have to build more fencing. And it's expensive to build an elephant fence, but that's what gives them that freedom. That's what gives them the 24/7 autonomy to explore life day and night in an environment that is truly theirs, with wildlife and other elephants. We actually see the most growth and exponential growth once they do start to explore at night, there's just something different that happens.

But without a proper facility, without proper fencing, you can't have that. If they need to be monitored for safety, you have to bring them back to a small space. So we want to build a fence that gives them the autonomy that they need.

Kat: And when we were in the US, there would be fights to get animals out of the facilities they were in and to sanctuaries for decades.

There's an elephant, Lucy, in Canada who, I don't know, maybe it's been 20 years, at this point, that they've been trying to get out. There's Billy, who's in the LA Zoo that they're trying to get to sanctuary. I mean, these fights go on for years and years, and many of the elephants don't ever get to go to sanctuary.

Instead, we're in this situation here in South America where there are facilities that realize they can't take care of their elephants. There are facilities that are willingly giving up their elephants so that they can have a better life and have appropriate medical care and the only thing that stands in the way is being able to make sure that we have enough space encompassed so that the elephants socially can thrive, and that the environment can maintain itself.

And as Scott mentioned, fencing is expensive, but it is the one thing that holds back more residents after the next four.

Mariann: That makes a lot of sense because when I read that, I was thinking, “Well, they have such a huge facility, do they really need more land?” But you don't need more land, you need more fences, is that right?

Scott: Yeah, exactly. And one of the remarkable things is actually the land is fully paid for. So we've been here since 2015 and we have no debt on the land, which is a beautiful place to be. You know, we're just needing to build more fences. So again, it's a lot of money, but it's a simple formula.

There's a lot of complexities to building a sanctuary and managing a sanctuary, but the foundation of it's relatively simple, to create a space that is theirs and an environment that is idyllic.

Mariann: You had mentioned at the beginning of the conversation that Elephant Sanctuary Brazil is just part of your parent organization, Global Sanctuary for Elephants.

Can you talk a little bit about the goals? I know that you are hoping that this is just a starting point. Is that right?

Scott: There are a lot of elephants in captivity. There are tens of thousands of elephants, I think over 10 or 15,000 elephants in captivity in Asia, there are 400-500 elephants in Europe. And altogether, I think in all the sanctuaries that exist, all the sanctuaries in Asia, the one sanctuary in Europe, United States, and here, less than 150 elephants in all those sanctuaries combined, and we have thousands and thousands of elephants in captivity.

We need more solutions. Our world is changing, and just as we saw here in South America, progressive legislation is moving forward. We need solutions. There's a zoo that we just heard about trying to place three elephants in Europe. You know the sanctuary that exists is almost full right now. They have two elephants, they're just beginning as well.

We need more solutions. Our goal is to help those things move forward, both those projects move forward. We know what it takes to get them off the ground. We can help expedite the process because there's a huge learning curve. And based on our experience, our objective is to be able to get involved with other organizations to expedite these projects. The sooner they can be constructed, again, the sooner elephants can reach their new life.

Mariann: So what are the biggest crises facing elephants right now? Both captive and wild elephants?

Scott: Human greed.

Mariann: That's pretty much it for everything, isn't it? *both laugh*

Scott: Really, it is. I mean, but that's the reality. As Kat already said, it's the, "I want, I want, I want!"

"I want to be close to them." The only reason why these elephants are in zoos is because people want to be close to them. You know?

The only reason why they're being hunted is because people want ivory. You know, human greed is what's doing it.

And the issue with captivity is that we're giving people what they think they want by having elephants in zoos. But when you create a different environment, when you create a different dialogue, the desires that people have change.

I know we're not open to the public, but we have talked to people that would have come on to volunteer in the sanctuary in the United States, and we would

say to them, “You're coming out to volunteer. This is not a pet-and-play. This is not you're gonna see elephants. You are going to be constructing fences, you're going to be cleaning up garbage, you're going to be painting.” And sometimes at the beginning of the day, people will say, “I was really disappointed to hear that.” Even though it's in all of our literature, people don't read everything they're supposed to read. At the end of the day...and it was normally a spouse that really wanted to come volunteer, and they drug their second half with them, and the second half would be the one that was disappointed. And it was the second half that, at the end of the day would say, “I am only now realizing how powerful it is to have the space for them and how greedy it was for me to be disappointed.”

And that was after a day of never seeing an elephant. You have to change the dialogue, you have to change the message, and people want that. But if you keep giving them the old message, people are gonna stay in that world. You have to give them something else and open up their eyes, as elephants are opening up our eyes to the complexities that exist and to what their needs truly are.

Mariann: What about wild elephants? Is it important that they continue to exist in the wild and are we going to be able to pull that off? Is there going to be a wild for them to live in?

Kat: Hopefully, but that's definitely not something that is guaranteed at this point. I'm trying to think of how not negative to make this, unfortunately.

Mariann: Oh, believe me, we go pretty negative...or at least I do. I'm known as the most negative person on the planet, so don't worry about it.

Kat: Okay. There is this false narrative in zoos that it's about conservation and it's about saving the species, and that is not the reality. There is zero chance of saving the species in captivity. It has to be done in their wild spaces.

Zoos are not releasing elephants back into the wild. They interbreed, it's not a stable population. It is the reason why they are still trying to import elephants from the wild. And at the last CITES conference, which was just last week I think, still fighting to keep it legal to be able to import wild elephants, even though there is a fight against it, because of the dwindling populations.

And there are places that they can exist and do exist naturally, that would rather take the elephants and help with repopulation. But again, human greed doesn't like that sort of thing, but it's very complex. You know, you talk about greed and

ivory poaching, but it's also about populations that have no other way to make money, have no other way to sustain their family. Feel that elephants are the reason that there's no land to graze on for their cattle, which again comes back to making money.

You know, you have huge encroachment issues where the human population keeps increasing and natural spaces for animals keep dwindling. And of course, that causes them to come into human spaces. It's essentially disaster after disaster scenario that we keep contributing to in multiple ways.

There are a lot of great groups that are trying to work on these problems and address them from different avenues. You know, looking at the human population in areas, looking at hunting bans, looking at export bans. But it's a hard battle and there are a lot of losses, unfortunately, when it comes to that battle.

So we would all love to be able to save the elephant population. They are a keystone species. If you lose them, there is gonna be a domino effect on the wild population of many species afterward, and the planet. But it is a hard battle and at this point, I'm not sure that it is one that elephants are winning.

Scott: So much of it goes to land. You know, land encroachment by humans is such a huge aspect. Sure, poaching is killing thousands of elephants a year and then there's the legal hunting of elephants, killing who knows how many. I don't know what the legal numbers are.

But back to the battle for land, battle for grazing space, battle for community space, battle for water, and all animals are losing that. Humans are continuing to encroach on regions that were wild spaces every year. Throughout the world, not just in Asia and Africa. I mean, it's happening here in Brazil with the devastation of the Cerrado, the savanna. The devastation of the Amazon. We just have to start thinking about our impact and start living within our means instead of continuing to look outward and encroaching on what's not ours to encroach on.

Mariann: Getting back to sanctuaries and getting away from the frightening situation of elephants in the wild.

You had mentioned before, and I feel like I didn't go into it deeply enough, there are sanctuaries and then there are sanctuaries, with air quotes. How can people tell the difference between a tourist attraction that claims to be a sanctuary and a

real sanctuary and are there gradations? Are there ones that are better than other ones?

Because a lot of people really want to see elephants and there are a lot of places you can go to see elephants. Should everybody just be avoiding them? And how do they know?

Scott: Essentially you should be avoiding them all. And I say this, you know, we have colleagues that have sanctuaries in Asia that do allow visitation, but the reality is we are still making them available for us and as long as they continue to be available for human desire, they're going to continue to be compromised.

It's continuing to be that expectation of going back to, "I want, " and this is something that has to change for them. And I think that bigger picture that you already talked about, you know, with the land encroachment, we have to reign it in, we have to give them their space.

Kat: There are definitely different grades of sanctuaries around the world, and Asia's an easy example because they live there. So the elephant population is extremely high and it is a common way for people to make money there. But if you really want to go see an elephant in a sanctuary there, and you want to go to Asia, this is your dream, you can at least do research on where it is you're going.

If you see that an elephant allows any physical interaction, bathing, feeding, selfies, or anything like that, that elephant is going to be dominated in order for you to be able to do those things. So avoid anything like that.

There is a new type of sanctuary in Asia where it's just about observation. It is you walk 30 yards, 50 yards, a hundred yards behind a few elephants and their mahouts while they graze in the forest. This is the most positive interaction that you can have at an elephant sanctuary if you are looking for places in Asia.

What you are looking for is a facility that allows as minimal contact as possible because, in those facilities, they don't have to have the same level of control over their elephants for you to be able to do the things you want. And what often comes, like Scott was talking about (with) the volunteers, you often come away with a greater respect and a greater understanding of who they are as a species when you can just sit back and watch them in their natural environment and watch them interact with each other because that interaction is really what defines who an elephant is, in the most significant way.

As far as other sanctuaries, if you're looking at sanctuaries to support, and this goes for not just elephant sanctuaries, but all sanctuaries, there's an organization called Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, and they certify all types of animal sanctuaries: farm sanctuaries, wild animals. And there are pages and pages and pages of requirements that you have to meet in order to become part of that group. For anyone looking for a sanctuary, in general, to see if they are a legitimate sanctuary, they are a great reference and of course they have a website.

Mariann: Absolutely. And we've gone through so many bad ways of getting people to understand animals and getting people to see animals from like the worst, the beginning of zoos and then pseudo-sanctuaries, things that look like sanctuaries but really aren't.

And in your world, you've come to the conclusion that the best way to deal with these animals is for people not to interact with them. But how do we educate people? Do you consider that part of your mission? How do you make that connection so people continue to love animals, continue to love elephants, but maybe have a more realistic view of what that actually means in the real world?

Scott: I think a big part of our purpose and our obligation is to try to share their stories, share our experiences, the good and the bad. You know, I think that there's also this altruistic view of, "Hey, they come to the sanctuary and everything's roses and butterflies and wonderful." But it's not, it's a journey.

It's a journey of recovery from trauma and there's good days and bad days, and I think we try to share that entire message to help people be a part of that process of rediscovery of life. And I think people, it changes them.

We've seen it for...and this goes back to my time back in the sanctuary in Tennessee. People would see a documentary or read a story that we had posted and they would turn and they would write a note back and say, "I look at everybody differently. I look at my wife differently, I look at my daughter differently because of the relationship that these two elephants have developed out of seemingly nothing or out of this tragedy they endured and they come and they just turn a new leaf."

So our purpose, and one of the ways that we try to do it, is to try to share the messaging through social media, the videos and the stories and the text, to try to open up a bigger part of the lives of these elephants, the hidden lives of the elephants, that they are continuing to unfold in front of us each day.

And again, it's not only our obligation, it's an honor to be able to share that with everybody else.

Kat: And I think part of it is, it's easy to just show photos of elephants and cute elephants and them doing silly things and get followers, but there's no substance to it.

It feeds into, again, them being cute and people wanting what they want, but when you talk about what they've been through and some of the dark times they have, even at sanctuary, and people start seeing them for individuals, it goes to a different level of emotional depth that is key to who an elephant is. And when they start to see them more as individuals and (not) just, "Oh look a cute elephant," they develop a different level of appreciation.

That is one of the things that our supporters will often say to us, and we have really, really devoted supporters, because they know the elephants and they feel they know the elephants. And it isn't in a superficial way, it is at a depth that really means something. And they're very appreciative because, again, it does change the way that they respect them as a species and that they do want more for them, and oftentimes do realize that some of the ways they've interacted with them in the past really had nothing to do with what was best for the elephant, but instead what they wanted. And it's a big shift that we see and part of what we feel we owe the elephants.

Mariann: Yeah, I feel like it's a big shift in the whole process of people understanding animals and you're really at the forefront of it.

It's a huge responsibility, and really a gift. I can imagine your lives are very difficult, but there must be enormous rewards.

So the question I was going to ask you is, how can people find out more about your work and hopefully help you build those fences?

Scott: Sure. If I can actually back up for a second and say one thing when you said about being a gift here, it is a gift, and one of the biggest gifts is when we don't get to see elephants. It's knowing that they're in the habitat and just knowing that that is their space. There is nothing that compares. So, yes.

Well, people say, "But it's easy for you to say that, you get to see elephants all time. I wanna see them too." Yeah but, for us, just hearing them rumble in the pasture in the middle of the night and not being able to see them and just knowing what they're doing to explore life, that is the greatest gift of all.

Mariann: How do you care for them, if they're really so far out there and how do you make sure they don't need medical care and make sure they're fed properly? Like how do you do all of that with having so little contact and them having so much space?

Kat: Well, we do interact with them every day. We give them two supplemental meals, that isn't necessarily anything they really need food-wise because they get most of their food from the habitat which is how it should be.

Elephants are, their bodies are, essentially designed to graze 15 to 20 hours a day. So that is a big part of their life, but we give them supplemental meals to check in on them, to lay eyes on them, to see how they're chewing, to see if they're not wanting their favorite food. All of these little things that aren't really little things that we watch every time we feed them.

Unfortunately, a lot of them come with significant medical issues. You know, two of our elephants arrived probably about 1500 pounds underweight. Lady arrived with feet in, unfortunately, horrific condition that can't be healed. She suffers from osteomyelitis, which is systemic, and she requires foot soaks and foot care every day. So we need to do foot trimming.

Rana arrived with a significant infection that hadn't been treated in two years. So we were having to work with that every day. So there is significant interaction when it comes to medical care and checking in on them. Basic training, so that we can do things like blood work. So, once a year we can check their blood values and make sure everything's okay that way, but the rest of the day is time off on their own. So generally twice a day will do these things with the elephants and then they walk off into the habitat and do their own things.

When it's time for the meals, they're like most, I would say animals, but I'm pretty sure humans are the exact same way. Your body knows when it's about a half hour before you usually eat. And they are the same way, you know, Maia five minutes before mealtime will leave essentially wherever she is to come find a human to get her snacks.

So a lot of them will come to where they're normally fed, which isn't the same place all the time, but they know we deliver food on a four-wheeler, so they know food is coming. Some, once they hear the four-wheeler, will just come to the four-wheeler and then they leave when they're done.

Scott: About 80% of their diet is wild vegetation.

So they're grazing all day long. They don't really need the supplementation that we offer them in the diets, but it's the watermelons and the bananas and the sweet stuff they love. It's also...

Mariann: Everybody likes a treat.

Scott: Yeah. And there's a little bit of social interaction between and, as Kat said, they all arrive here with just a slew of issues, some seen, some unseen.

One of the biggest challenges that we have is the lack of diagnostic tools to see what's going on medically. You know, you don't have MRIs, you don't have ultrasound that works very well for the vast majority of the body. X-ray is very limited as well, so you have to watch the nuances, have to watch the subtle changes, and what's going on with them.

As Kat said, are they not eating their favorite food and are they just looking different? You know, Guillermina just had a different look on her face this morning and I just said, "Hey, let's just watch it, see how she evolves this afternoon and see if it's an indication of something, or it's just a moment in time."

But there's a lot of observation that's involved and so there's a lot that we do, but we try to do it on their terms, again. It's when it works for them. If somebody does need feeding 24/7, then we just feed around the clock. Depends on the individual.

And that was the case with Mara for a while. She was very anorexic, lost a lot of weight, and had some significant digestive issues. Fortunately, she rebounded from that, but at that point, I was feeding her every two hours. You know, so it just depends on what their needs are, but as much as we can, it is their space while accommodating the necessity of needing to manage these elephants that come here with, you know, 40-50 years of neglect.

Mariann: Yeah. All right. That sounds like an extremely, extremely difficult job, and I'm glad you're doing it.

So let's get to it. Let's get to this question finally. How can people find out more about your work and offer some support if they wish?

Scott: The greatest thing to do is go to the website globalelephants.org, and that is gonna give you the links that can go everywhere.

It's gonna have all the social media links and it's a good jumping-off point. There's the blog post, there are bios of the elephants, a little bit of history about us, pages to explain what our new development is, what's next, and what's on the horizon, elephants to come. There's just a ton of information there. It's the best starting off point. And then from there, you can go to your social media of preference through the link and follow us on social media where we're trying to share the journey.

And, you know, the reality is the people that donate are the reason why this is possible. You know, none of this exists without the people that are supporting the organization and we want them to be a part of that journey. They're part of the family that makes all this, that gives these elephants a new life. And we want them to enjoy the journey and understand the nuances of what it is that they're making possible.

Mariann: Well, I certainly encourage people to do that, and thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House and sharing all this information.

It's really been a journey for me.

Kat: Thank you for having us. We definitely appreciate it. And as we said, I think there are just a lot of people who don't stop to think about what the life of the captive elephant is like and what role they play in how they ended up there. So the more people that understand that the better for elephants in general, not just in captivity, but the wild ones.

Scott: And as dark as the communication was sometimes in this, there's a lot of good things happening and there's a lot of beautiful things to celebrate and we're just touching the tip of the iceberg here.

But we really appreciate the opportunity.

Mariann: Yeah, well I was the one who led you into darkness, so... *all laugh*

Thank you so much.

Scott: Thank you, Mariann. It was our pleasure.