



Lawrence and
Francoise Anthony

SPEAKING WITH ELEPHANTS

BY JAMES CLARKE AND MARY BROADLEY

One of the strange consequences of lockdown happened at Thula Thula Game Reserve northwest of Empangeni in Zululand. This is where Lawrence and Francoise Anthony, in 1999, took custody of a herd of wild and traumatised elephants - and added to the annals of Africa's wildlife story.

Many will know the late Lawrence Anthony's 2010 best-seller, *The Elephant Whisperer* and the unforgettable sequel in 2018, *An Elephant in my Kitchen*, by his wife, Francoise, who by then was widowed after Lawrence suffered a heart attack.

Francoise, an archetypical Parisienne, now runs Thula Thula and one cannot help but be moved by what is happening there.

My interest in Thula Thula is in the way it has demonstrated that the African elephant can display unmistakable signs of empathy towards humans and how uncannily close their social codes are to ours. Recent happenings at Thula Thula indicate how relatively quickly elephants can come to trust and enjoy being with humans – despite all we have done to them – and how tantalisingly close we can get to understanding each other.

I am currently working on a book on the possibility of intelligent cross-species communication and how the elephant is one of the few mammals that shows a desire to communicate with us but doesn't know how. And nor do we know how. Not yet.

The importance of the couple's experiences in Thula Thula is that, on several occasions, they came near to penetrating the communications barrier and captured the attention and, eventually, the love of a once traumatised wild elephant matriarch who eventually helped them earn the respect of the whole herd.

Francoise says that, since the COVID-19 lockdown, the herd has been hovering between the lodge, tented camp and main house, 'non-stop'.

"They come in front of my house and just wait, for hours. They know something is wrong and are wondering why no more humans are around. They have never done this before."

Thula Thula's remarkable story began in 1999 when Lawrence Anthony agreed, with grave doubts, to accept a herd of 11 confused and dangerously aggressive elephants – survivors of poor custodianship near Kruger Park. He knew nothing of the last-minute botch-up during the capture operation which resulted in two of the elephants being shot – including the matriarch. The dead matriarch's traumatised son (later called Mnumzane – 'Sir') was one of the big young tuskers that were transported with the herd south to Thula Thula, all in a semi-drugged condition. The second oldest cow (later to be named Nana) had quickly taken over as matriarch.

Elephants are like that. When a matriarch dies the next oldest, or most respected female, assumes control.

Lawrence reinforced Thula Thula's perimeter fence and prepared, deep in the reserve, a strongly fenced *boma* surrounded by electrified cables carrying 8 000 volts. There, the elephants would stay until he felt they were habituated to their new habitat and could be freed.

Their night-time arrival at Thula Thula, during a violent thunderstorm, could hardly have been more traumatic: heavy curtains of rain, bolts of lightning and the screaming of engines as heavy trucks struggled to extricate themselves from the Zululand mud, and then a cannon-like shot as a tyre burst. It took hours before the trumpeting elephants were inside the boma.

More traumas were to follow, including a mass break-out from the boma.

Nana never ceased to patrol the boma fence seeking a spot where the current might be off. Lawrence camped nearby, continually calling out to Nana assuring her of his good intentions. But every time he came near the fence Nana would charge, stopping short of the electric barrier. The weeks passed. Day after day Lawrence kept vigil but came nearer and nearer the fence. Each time Nana charged. Towards the end, Lawrence just stood his ground at the fence, calling her name.

One morning, he found Nana waiting for him at the fence. She was very calm. He moved, very slowly, within touching distance, and found himself looking up at her enormous form towering above him.

Then, "Nana's trunk snaked through the fence, carefully avoiding the electric strands, and reached my body. She gently touched me. I was surprised at the wetness of her trunk tip."

She stood and looked at Lawrence for a few moments before turning back to the herd, 20 metres away, where Frankie, her closest companion, greeted her with apparent excitement. Lawrence decided that the following day he would release them. When he arrived at dawn they were crowded at the fence "as if they anticipated something special was about to happen".



Nana and family

When he arrived at dawn they were crowded at the fence "as if they anticipated something special was about to happen"

He let them out.

One day, Mnumzane, the disoriented male orphan of the previous matriarch and now an almost fully-grown bull, charged Lawrence with murderous intent. Nana stepped between them. Mnumzane eventually left the herd, as is the habit of mature males, and became an affectionate friend of Lawrence's. But that's another story – a very moving one.

Indeed, there are so many stories.

If Lawrence went overseas or to another part of the country, the herd would sense his imminent return and travel miles to wait at the house to greet him. He called it 'spooky'. Francoise, in her own book, describes something spookier.

After Lawrence's death, rangers spotted a new-born, very emaciated, calf, its trunk and face deeply cut into by a thick wire snare. It was unable to suckle. When Vusi, Francoise's right-hand man, went to see what could be done he spotted the herd through binoculars, but no calf. It was late afternoon. He sat in his vehicle and was surprised to see the

herd coming towards him. They stopped metres away and Vusi spotted the calf below its mother's belly. The mother was stroking its head, but the baby was unresponsive.

The only solution was to wait till dawn and bring in a veterinarian by helicopter and then, using two vehicles, drive the elephants off and isolate the calf.

Francoise describes how the calf was hurriedly anaesthetised using a drug dart. To fully appreciate how narrow the gap is between elephants and humans when living in cordial circumstances, it is important to visualise the trauma involved in this operation and its remarkable aftermath.

Rangers cut away the wire and applied antiseptic salve and then injected a fast-reaction recovery drug before rapidly withdrawing. From a distance, they watched the agitated herd rush towards the calf as it unsteadily wobbled towards its mother.

Francoise says, "Freed from the snare, his trunk curled up against her belly and

his little mouth searched hungrily for her teat" . . . there was silence among those watching.

The team departed to allow the herd to disappear deep into the bush, which they were expected to do for days – perhaps even weeks. That evening, Francoise invited the rescue team to a sunset champagne celebration a couple of kilometres from the lodge. When she stepped out of her house ready to go, "who should be at the entrance of the lodge to meet me? The entire herd!"

Incredibly, after the racket of the helicopter; after the panic; after the stampeding and the trumpeting of the distressed cow forced to abandon her calf . . . there they were, "every single one of them. They stayed with us for hours . . . who knows what they were thinking?"

Was it gratitude? Did they want to say something? Of course, they did.

One day, I believe, we'll find a way to communicate with another species. And one day we'll crack the code and speak with elephants.



Part of the herd on a visit to the lodge - they respect the flimsy fence