



An African elephant listens carefully.
Elephants can tell which humans
might be dangerous to them.
Photo courtesy of Karen McComb

Elephants know the voices of their enemies

Adapted from *The Vancouver Sun*
by Nancy Carson

Can you recognize different languages?
Do you say,
“Oh, that sounds like Spanish,”
or “That sounds like French.”
Can you do it
when you do not understand the words?
Elephants can!

Enemies of elephants

Elephants are the largest land animals
on Earth. And they are very intelligent.
Only two animals scare elephants.
One animal is very small and
the other is much larger.

Bees and people scare elephants.
Honeybees have been in Africa
for millions of years,
much longer than people.
Lions will also sometimes
attack elephants.

A warning system

Elephants have a special warning system.
They behave one way
if bees are nearby.
And they behave other ways
if humans or lions are near.

Danger from humans

Many animals will run
anytime they hear humans.
But, a smart animal does not do that.
Not all people scare elephants.
Elephants only become **alert**
and move away when they hear
some kinds of human voices.

A new study about elephants

Researchers Karen McComb and
Graeme Shannon tested the elephants.
They took a large loud-speaker and
covered it with sticks.
Then they placed the speaker
about 50 metres from a place
where 47 elephant groups
walked by at different times.

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Loudspeaker in the field close to the elephant family,
ready to play the voices.
Photo courtesy of Graeme Shannon

Elephants seem to know

The researchers guessed that elephants can listen to human speech and tell which people are dangerous. They knew that elephants can use sight and smell to tell the difference.

Elephants never forget

While humans are studying elephants, the clever animals are also studying us. They are using their famous powers of memory, said Karen McComb. At the University of Sussex in England, McComb studies how animals behave and think. "Memory is key. They build up that knowledge somehow."

The listening experiment

McComb and Shannon recorded different voices. All the voices said the same thing. "Look, look over there, a group of elephants is coming." They recorded the voices of Maasai men and Kamba men. They also recorded a Maasai woman and a Maasai boy.

The Maasai and the Kamba

The Maasai sometimes kill or hurt elephants. These people are cattle herders. Cattle need water and places to **graze**. Elephants need the same thing. The Kamba are farmers. They rarely harm elephants unless the elephants eat their crops.

How elephants reacted

The elephants heard the Maasai voices on the loud-speaker. The animals lifted their trunks and sniffed the air. They moved into a huddle. They did not do this often when they heard a male Kamba voice.

Women and children's voices

The animals often ignored the sounds of Maasai women and children. Or they bunched together loosely. Elephant families with a 42 year-old **matriarch** never moved away when they heard boys' voices. Families with younger matriarchs moved away about 40% of the time. The elephants were most scared when they heard male voices.

Tricking the elephants

In another experiment McComb and Shannon changed the female and male voices. They made female voices sound male and male voices sound female. These changes will fool most humans, but the clever elephants were not fooled!

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Vocabulary

1. **alert:** quick to notice anything unusual or dangerous
2. **graze:** to feed on land covered by grass
3. **matriarch** (MAY - tree- ark): a woman or female animal who is the head of a family or tribe