

LAND-HUNGRY FAMILIES

JAMES FOX

IT IS elephants above all, wise, beautiful and long-living, that symbolise the grandeur of the African landscape. They survived the fiercest predators on earth, including man, for 20,000 years, and are now refugees, hemmed in between encroaching human settlements, confined for their protection to a series of National Parks which may not be adequate to support them.

Having decided to regulate elephant populations, man now directly controls the delicate balance between the elephant and his environment. The elephant now has diminished responsibility for his voracious eating habits—he can no longer spread them out into a natural cycle. He eats when he can, destroying woodland at an alarming rate, not always able to move on to let the trees replenish themselves. According to Iain Douglas-Hamilton², elephants do not regulate their populations—which means that they may starve. Arguments about how best to protect them have suffered from a surprising lack of study of elephant ecology and here, Dr. Douglas-Hamilton has broken new and fascinating ground.

There have been few books on elephant behaviour and, until Dr Douglas-Hamilton developed the obsession that kept him at Lake Manyara in Tanzania for four and a half years, no large-scale, systematic study of their social system and way of living. With its pictures by his wife, Oria, who also wrote some of the

** "Among the Elephants," by Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton (Collins & Harvill £3.95 pp 285).*

chapters, it reads more like an adventure story than a text book, and is written with the passion of a Karen Blixen, with much of the excitement of "Out of Africa," if not with the literary style. That, for a zoologist working out of mountains of technical notes prepared for a doctoral thesis, is quite an achievement.

In 1965, with a grant from the Royal Society, he set up camp at one of the most beautiful spots in East Africa, between Lake Manyara and the escarpment leading up to the Marang Forest—to the south-east of the Ngonrongoro Crater. Here the elephants could

choose between forest and swamp, nutritious pastures beneath the canopies of shady *Acacia Tortilis*, still richer grass along the alkaline shore, palm trees in the glades and a whole fresh range of delicacies on the slopes of the escarpment.

The Manyara National Park has the highest density of elephant population in Africa, 12 to 14 per square mile, 420 in all. With painstaking care and some intricate home-made equipment, including radios strapped to the elephants themselves, he got to know almost all of them by sight, and minutely recorded their family histories. He wanted to know primarily how to preserve them within the boundaries of the National Parks. Behind the ecology lay the ethology:

Elephants give an example of a society in which individuals behave with exceptional tolerance

to their own kind, and even in times of distress and danger hold fast to their family ties. As such they deserve respect in the same way that human life deserves respect.

That society is matriarchal. It is the cows who lead and defend the family units. It was one of these great matriarchs, of a fearless group called the Torone sisters who nearly killed the author, attacking his jeep, ripping up the bonnet, radiator and tyres, until the African assistant shot her through the head. The males are pushed out by the matriarchs and live on the fringes for years, coming back only for mating or when they are too big to be pushed around.

The cows are excellent mothers, although unpredictable. Dr Douglas-Hamilton records an incident in which a cow trampled her calf to death and hurled it over the escarpment, in a rare fit of rage. The bonds between youth and age are slender, however, and young elephants have to fight to get past adults to the water. There are fascinating, although inconclusive passages

ONE OF the illustrations in this excellent biography shows Pirandello, aged 63, posing with two friends. All three wear Fascist black shirts. In the background you can just see a popular painting of the Virgin Mary.

The picture is characteristic of a bizarre life, full of extraordinary contrasts. Had he died

about elephants' deep interest in death and bones.

But the tourist industry has changed the elephants, and except for the Torones and a few others, has made them almost tame, and certainly oblivious to cars. This regrettably suggests that wildlife is not as wild as it was, and that elephants are easier prey to human predators who still take the heaviest toll. The ivory trade in East Africa is experiencing its biggest revival since the beginning of the century. Whether by the gun or starvation the elephant is seriously threatened.

Dr Douglas-Hamilton's researches have persuaded him, however, that the elephants simply need more land to re-establish their natural balance with the environment—not culling with rifles as some scientists believe. As a start he has, with friends, begun to reclaim farm land that barred the elephants' way through a corridor to the spacious Marang forest, to give the Manyara elephant the space he occupied a century ago.

An excerpt from "Among the Elephants" appears on page 33 today; and photographs from the book are on pages 36-39 of the Colour Magazine.

Rules of

be praised for his writing rather than his fame.

For someone who was so much of his age it is astonishing how completely Pirandello could be