



A DANGEROUS LIFE

written and illustrated by **Sheila Hamanaka**

SYNOPSIS

A Dangerous Life chronicles a teen's exploration of her inner feelings and struggles with her family's wealth from the ivory trade as well as her relationship with her work-driven mother. The main character, Amelia, receives a house tour and history lesson from her great grandfather detailing the wealth his grandfather amassed via the ivory trade and his own safaris to Africa as a young man to hunt elephants. He is anxious for Amelia to visit the land of his past adventures, so he gifts an African safari vacation to her, her mother, and her aunt, Clarice.

The relationship tensions between Amelia and her mom are evident from the first scene, as her mom struggles to pull herself away from her work to spend dedicated, quality time with her daughter. While on the safari, the relationship issues reach a climax when her mom makes a decision that disappoints Amelia and leads her to react in anger. The teen and her mother must endure a scary episode to realize how much they truly care about each other and mend their relationship.

While on the safari, Amelia learns the truth of the ivory trade and its impact on elephants. She begins to understand the true nature of the elephant and how they are similar to humans in their close family bonds. She faces internal conflict as she begins to question her family's wealth and her ancestors' ethics in building an ivory-based fortune.

Amelia's journey teaches us to respect wildlife, specifically elephants—as they are intelligent, social beings, are critical to the ecosystem, and should not be slaughtered to supply luxury goods to humans. The safari experience also helps Amelia and her mother mend their relationship and agree to grow closer and appreciate each other. After reading this book, you will walk away with a greater appreciation for elephants, the world around us, and the importance of family relationships.

VOCABULARY

Keystone Species: a species on which other species in an ecosystem largely depend, such that if it were removed the ecosystem would change drastically

Ecosystem: a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment

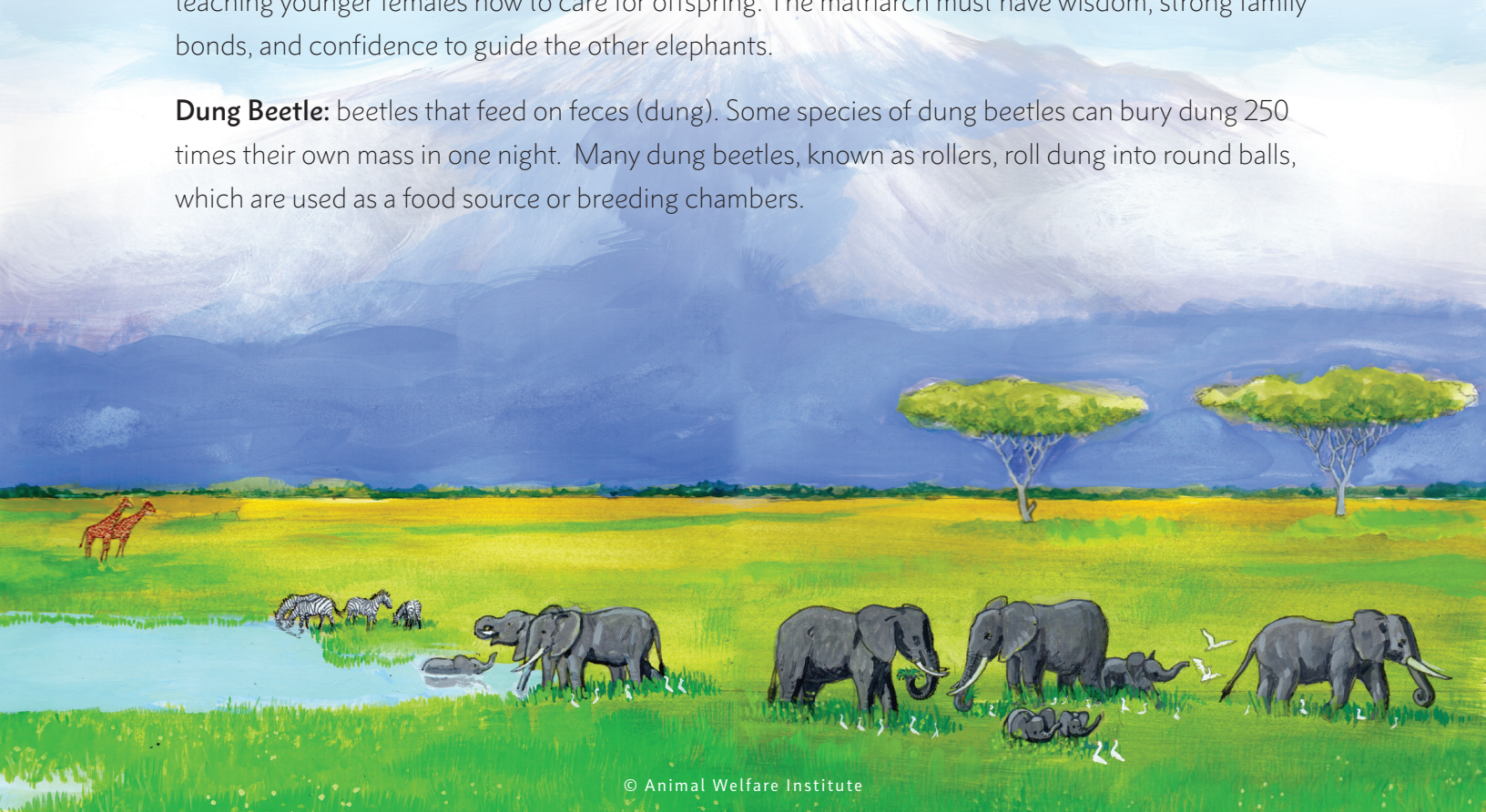
Ecology: the branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms

Ivory: a hard, creamy-white substance composing the main part of the tusks of an elephant, walrus, or narwhal, often used to make ornamental carvings and (particularly in the past) piano keys, billiard balls, and other items

African Elephant: the elephant native to Africa, which is larger than the Indian elephant and has larger ears and a two-lipped trunk. There are two kinds of African elephant: the savannah (or bush) elephant and the forest elephant. These are classified as two genetically distinct species by some and as two subspecies of a single African elephant species by others.

Matriarch: an older female elephant, generally the ancestor of other herd members, who is the primary “manager” of the herd—directing where the herd goes, protecting it from danger, and teaching younger females how to care for offspring. The matriarch must have wisdom, strong family bonds, and confidence to guide the other elephants.

Dung Beetle: beetles that feed on feces (dung). Some species of dung beetles can bury dung 250 times their own mass in one night. Many dung beetles, known as rollers, roll dung into round balls, which are used as a food source or breeding chambers.



PRE-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is a safari and why do you think people enjoy them?
2. Are there things in life that you enjoy that have a high environmental cost attached? What are some examples?
3. Why is it important to conserve resources and wildlife?



POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Why is the matriarch so important to a herd of elephants?
2. What did Jabari mean when he said, "Everything is connected. To save any of us, you must save all." Give three examples.
3. Why are elephants so essential for the survival of other species in the grasslands?
4. What are other examples of keystone species, where an entire ecosystem depends on the survival of a species?
5. Why do you think the author included the dung beetle in the story? Is there a deeper meaning?
6. How is the ivory trade related to human suffering?

7. Jabari asks Kai and Amelia, “Who really pulls the trigger? Poverty? Greed? Or ignorant people who just want beautiful things and don’t know the real cost of their ‘investment’? What do you think the answer is? Explain.
8. In Kai’s dream, he had a conversation with Akeelah. What message do you feel the author was trying to relay in this frame?
9. Are their similarities in human family bonds and elephant family bonds? Explain.
10. Do you feel it is necessary to have elephant orphanages?
11. When you think about how elephants treat visiting orphans of the species, do you feel humans underestimate the intelligence and emotions of animals?
12. Why do you think the author had Amelia see Old Rafiki through her binoculars at the conclusion of the book?
13. What did Jabari mean when he said that elephants “don’t own anything. But they are the richest creatures on Earth”?
14. How do you think the title *A Dangerous Life* relates to the story?



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Date: _____

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POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Why is the matriarch so important to a herd of elephants?

The matriarch is the wisest elephant in the herd. She keeps the herd out of danger and knows the best places to find food and water.

2. What did Jabari mean when he said, “Everything is connected. To save any of us, you must save all.” Give three examples.

All species are interconnected. Students will have their own interpretation of this statement.

3. Why are elephants so essential for the survival of other species in the grasslands?

Elephants eat small bushes and trees, which allow grasses to grow for grazing animals. Elephant poop fertilizes the earth. When elephants eat, they swallow important seeds—many of which are unable to sprout without passing through the elephant’s digestive tract and being deposited in elephant poop. The elephants also help spread seeds, often distributing them miles away from the parent plant.

4. What are other examples of keystone species, where an entire ecosystem depends on the survival of a species?

Students should research this question independently. Student answers will vary.

5. Why do you think the author included the dung beetle in the story? Is there a deeper meaning?

Dung beetles shape poop into balls, lay eggs in the balls, and bury them. The beetles are essential because they help fertilize the earth. The beetles use the Milky Way or sun to navigate their rolling direction. A beetle that is off course will get on top of the ball and make corrections. The author was showing the importance of the beetles’ job, and how when they get off course, they can self-correct. The author used the dung beetle as a metaphor for humans getting off course in our attitudes about conservation and protecting resources.

6. How is the ivory trade related to human suffering?

Kenyan people were kicked off their land by the British people. Kenyan people that resisted were killed or imprisoned. Some people were forced to make money by poaching elephants and have been killed in the process. The Kenyan people had no choice, were stripped of their land and freedom.

7. Jabari asks Kai and Amelia, “Who really pulls the trigger? Poverty? Greed? Or ignorant people who just want beautiful things and don’t know the real cost of their ‘investment’? What do you think the answer is? Explain.
Student answers will vary.
8. In Kai’s dream, he had a conversation with Akeelah. What message do you feel the author was trying to relay in this frame?
As elephants are being killed, it is killing every living thing. All species are interconnected.
9. Are their similarities in human family bonds and elephant family bonds? Explain.
Student answers will vary, but their explanation should include the tight family bonds shared by elephants, the power of the matriarch and her protective nature, the care of babies, etc.
10. Do you feel it is necessary to have elephant orphanages?
Student answers will vary.
11. When you think about how elephants treat visiting orphans of the species, do you feel humans underestimate the intelligence and emotions of animals?
Student answers will vary.
12. Why do you think the author had Amelia see Old Rafiki through her binoculars at the conclusion of the book?
Student answers will vary but should mention the long life of elephants and the importance of the survival of the species. In addition, students may discuss Amelia’s personal connection with this elephant, as her great-grandfather had tried to kill the elephant many years before. Amelia was relieved to see he was still alive. It is hope for the future of the species.
13. What did Jabari mean when he said that elephants “don’t own anything. But they are the richest creatures on Earth”?
Students will have differing opinions on this question but should mention that elephants never forget the importance of community. The bonds between elephants are strong and unselfish. The matriarch always does what is best for everyone.
14. How do you think the title *A Dangerous Life* relates to the story?
Student answers will vary.

ACTIVITIES

1. Create an educational/inspirational poster aimed at influencing the attitude of people about the ivory trade or saving elephants.
2. Write a letter and create a piece of artwork to send to AWI for the rangers of the Kenya Wildlife Service. After the artwork is graded, please send to AWI for mailing.
3. Research how rangers are keeping track of elephants and the technology they are integrating into their work to monitor elephant herds traveling through protected areas. Write a paper explaining what is being done to help stop poaching and illegal wildlife trade.
4. Research threats to elephant lives other than the ivory trade. Use magazines, clipart, and other picture resources to fill in the elephant outline. Example: palm oil, habitat loss, culling, human-made boundaries, etc.
5. Design a tri-fold marketing brochure explaining the importance of elephants and why all grassland species depend on healthy populations of elephants in the grassland ecology.
6. Present or record a public service announcement that promotes things that people can do to help protect elephants. See page 44 of the book for some ideas.
7. Elephant Bubbles: In each bubble, write a valuable lesson learned from *A Dangerous Life*.
8. Elephant Puzzle: This activity may be used in an interactive notebook. So that the puzzle is not already in its assembled form when students receive the pieces, teachers may choose to cut out the unnumbered puzzle pieces and arrange them in random order on a separate sheet of paper prior to copying. Students will decorate the pieces and write facts, or vocabulary words, etc. as instructed, cut them out, and then glue them onto the elephant outline. Encourage students to be creative in their presentation of the final elephant.

ACTIVITY CARDS

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