



EXPLORE

Field Notes National Geographic explorers, photographers, and writers report from around the world

Tanzania

The Maasai: changed, for better or worse, by cell phones

TIMOTHY BAIRD *Geography researcher*

The Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania live a semi-nomadic, pastoral life, seeking out areas of fresh pasture and building enclosures to protect their livestock. For cultural anthropologists who wonder how off-the-grid people are being changed by a world of screens, Internet, and fast communication, the Maasai are an ideal test case.



Tim Baird is observing the transformation in progress. “Phones are a profound new tool for them,” says Baird, a Virginia Tech geography professor who has studied Maasai cell phone culture under a National Geographic grant. Instant connectivity where none existed before has changed the type of people a Maasai person can reach, he says, and the type of information shared. That includes weather data for farmers, market prices for livestock, and—even though tradition sometimes dictates arranged marriages between young girls and older men—ways for girls to flirt with boys their own age. After all, Baird notes, even some older-model mobile phones can access Facebook.

Phones can store money, which has introduced Maasai to mobile banking (and its untidy companion, fraud). Business transactions are faster and more efficient when they don’t have to be conducted face-to-face. When Baird convened groups of Maasai to discuss phone culture, men consistently mentioned two things they photograph: women and cows.

Baird has heard the criticism that 21st-century technology is diluting the historically



Even simple cell phone models call for accessories, which in East African Maasai villages are often handmade.

rustic culture. But that critique rarely comes from Maasai themselves, who, according to Baird’s findings, generally see a mobile phone as a tool that’s empowering rather than intrusive. “They’re not jumping on Epicurus to see how to make a soufflé; they’re using phones in ways that are relevant to their lives,” he says. “Phones help them solve their problems.” —Daniel Stone

Myanmar (Burma)

Journeys with beloved elephants

MOLLY FERRILL *Young Explorer*

Ferrill reports: My first insight into the Burmese people’s respect for elephants came from Ma Lwin, a shopkeeper in a farming village in the western Bago Mountains. It was





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late afternoon when I arrived, covered in sand after a long motorcycle ride across a barren landscape. Inside Ma Lwin's bamboo hut, she offered me hot tea and scolded me for traveling through dangerous elephant territory.

Back when the mountains were covered in forest, she told me, elephants and people had lived in harmony. But now that their habitat was being cut and burned down for rubber plantations, the elephants were forced to roam long distances searching for food, sometimes knocking down villagers' fragile bamboo huts and threatening farmers in the fields. Even so, the farmers told me they loved the elephants, calling them *boe daw gyi*, or respected elders.

That was the beginning of months spent journeying through forests and villages to document the connection between people and elephants in Myanmar. During my time there, children in timber camps played alongside elephants used for logging; a caravan escorted a sacred white elephant to the capital to be welcomed by the vice president—and one

day park rangers led me to an elephant giving birth. As I watched, the calf took its first breath.

Development often gives us the excuse to discard old traditions and destroy the environment. In many countries this has allowed elephant populations to dwindle. But observing so many people's high regard for elephants in Myanmar gives me hope that, in this time of transition, they won't be left behind.

Africa to North America

Fresh eland? Finger-licking good

BILL SCHINDLER AND CAT BIGNEY
Survival experts

On the open savanna of central Tanzania, Bill Schindler and Cat Bigney find a freshly killed eland. Famished and dehydrated, the two dig into the carcass, licking blood from their fingers. The predator that made the kill—probably a lion—could return at any moment. So Schindler and Bigney rip off a leg and climb up a tree.

Schindler is a professor of anthropology, and Bigney is a primitive-skills instructor. Together they're running in *The Great Human Race*, a National Geographic Channel survival series that airs Mondays from February to April. The two are traveling 35,000 miles in the footsteps of early humans, using only the tools people had at each evolutionary stage. In Tanzania that means living like *Homo habilis*, who survived 2.4 million years ago in part by scavenging other animals' kills. By the last episode the pair will have complex hunting tools at their disposal.

"All of this is our shared history as humans," says Schindler. "No matter who you are, you had an ancestor who successfully made or used stone tools and who successfully mastered fire." Filming the voyage from East Africa to North America spanned eight months. The same distance took early humans an estimated 1.9 million years. —*Nina Strochlic*



National Geographic, the anti-trafficking group Freeland, and camera maker Sigma funded Molly Ferrill's studies of elephants, including this mother and baby.

