

Garden Route Elephant Park



The Garden Route Elephant Park was born from the struggle of the elephants in the surrounding Knysna Forest. Large numbers of free roaming elephants used to be seen in their natural habitat. But over a period of 118 years, the elephant population in Knysna crashed from between 400-500 individuals to 1 lone elephant cow in 1994. A recent discovery may prove that against all odds these elephants have brought themselves back from the brink of extinction and there may be up to 6 elephants in the forest.

Knysna and the surrounding areas are rich in natural beauty and history, with the world's southernmost elephants forming an integral part of this fascinating history. Ian and Lisette Withers are the proud and dedicated owners of this elephant park. In his childhood, Ian spent many holidays exploring the forest. In the evenings, gathered around the fire, Ian's grandfather would tell of his adventures with "Big Feet" (the elephant). In adulthood, Ian saw that tourism provided an opportunity to achieve his dreams and create a safe place for the elephants and to be able to help them.

In October 1994 the first 2 elephants, Harry and Sally, joined the park. They had both escaped a Kruger culling programme. Lisette became a surrogate mother to them both and they continue to thrive at the park today. Today, the park encompasses 100 hectares of natural fynbos and afro-montane forest, as well as some reclaimed farmland that is being allowed to return to its natural state. Harry and Sally have been joined by 10 other African Elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) and the herd now comprises six males and six females, ranging in age from about 24 months to 23 years old. The care that these elephants get is of the highest in South Africa. The facilities at this park are world class and the style of management ensures that the matriarchal herd only interacts with the guests on their own terms. The matriarchal herd is free to explore the park as they please. If they wish to receive food from the guests they know to gather at certain points at the park. This system is referred to as the "free-range controlled environment" system, which the park is pleased to have developed. Visitors to the park are privileged to have a close-up and personal encounter with these gentle giants, and leave having gained a healthy respect for these wonderful animals, and a better understanding of the African elephant and their plight across the continent.

Project dates	Volunteers can join this project at any time of the year. We recommend that volunteers arrive on a Monday.
Closing dates	n/a
Country	South Africa
State/ Province	Western Cape
Closest Town / City	Knysna
Details	The Elephant Park requires only that volunteers are dedicated, hard working, mature and motivated. You should be in good health and physically fit, as you will often be out following the elephants. Specific wildlife experience is not necessary. Veterinary students, biology students and animal lovers will benefit from this project.
Application subject to	Vacancies and availability of volunteer positions.
CV/ resume needed?	Yes
Police clearance certificate	Yes
Minimum Age	18
Project Highlights	Working with elephants is a humbling experience. As a volunteer you will contribute to all aspects of elephant research, education, husbandry and conservation: from the creation of sustainable community projects linked to elephant tourism to hands on maintenance of the park. As part of the elephant park's enterprise program, the park has adopted an underprivileged local rural school. The school children are assisted by volunteers in a number of ways.

Your Role



Preparing food for the elephants. This may include preparing fruit and vegetables for our elephant herd or possibly even preparing milk for the baby elephants if appropriate i.e., if there are babies at the park. Orphaned baby elephants may arrive at the park any time of the year.

- Helping the guides and handlers with the elephants in the field.
- Assisting with veterinary care that may be needed.
- Helping with environmental education projects.
- General maintenance of the park. This includes, mucking out pens, general cleaning, painting etc.
- Marketing and advertising the elephant park.
- Helping with park functions, i.e. weddings.
- Assisting with elephant research.

Why do research at the Elephant Park?

It was recently identified that there is a serious lack of research done on captive elephants in South Africa, particularly with respect to their welfare and husbandry in their own unique environments.

The first research unit dedicated to captive elephants is **AERU, The African Elephant Research Unit.**

The objectives of AERU are:

- To conduct and facilitate research studies of the elephants based at the elephant park and other captive elephant operations in South Africa.
- To promote ethical and non-harmful research of captive elephants in South Africa.
- To guide management of captive elephant operations through science.
- To provide information relevant to wild elephants to improve their protection and conservation.
- "Conservation through education" .



What research does AERU and the volunteers do?

The Director of AERU (Dr. Debbie Young) will ask you as a volunteer to assist with her many research projects. Below are some examples of the information you will be asked to collect and observe.

- Monitoring of behaviour – Following and observing elephants in the field, recording behaviour such as grazing, drinking, playing, dusting and walking.
- Recording social interactions between elephants – how they relate to, and communicate with, each other using their trunks and bodies.
- Night-time observations of elephant behaviour – what is a good night’s sleep for an elephant?
- Observing and recording interactions between elephants and tourists.
- Botanical surveys of the park – relating plant diversity to grazing patterns and elephant distribution.
- Studies of feeding behaviour and plants eaten by the elephants.
- Collection of dung, urine and other samples for physiological analysis.
- Recording and assessing elephant response to training and new behaviours.
- Data input and analysis.
- Compilation of educational presentations.

Volunteers are directly involved in the elephant research and they help to provide information that relates directly to the welfare and management of captive elephants at not only the elephant park, but also throughout the whole of South Africa.

Working hours during your stay at the park vary according to the different activities you will be asked to participate in. However, an elephant working day starts at 06h30 and lasts until 17h30. In order for you to gain as much as possible from the programme and for us to benefit as much as possible from having you at the park, you will be asked to work the same hours as the elephants. As a rule, you will work 5 days per week, but we may ask you to help over weekends and evenings, should the need arise. We encourage you to use your days off to explore all that the region has to offer. Many of the research projects involve long hours of data collecting in the field so this project is not for the faint-hearted. You will also be required to work in all weather conditions. The rewards for the long hours are amazing, especially when the elephants start to recognise you and trust you. You will become part of the herd!

Minimum Duration	2 weeks
Special Skills required	n/a
Language skills required	Good understanding of English.
Accommodation	Included - Volunteers are based at the elephant park, situated 9km west of Plettenberg Bay and 22km east of Knysna. Volunteers live in a bunkhouse in comfortable dorm style rooms, so you may be sharing with two or three volunteers depending on numbers. Separate, gender-defined toilets and showers are a few steps away from your room. The bunkhouse also has a lounge, a wooden deck and braai area overlooking the dam and park. Telephone, fax and internet facilities are available (at present, during office hours only). Bedding will be provided and will be laundered. Other laundry, like clothing, is for your own account. There are washing machines at the park which the volunteers may use.



GOOD HOPE STUDIES



Meals

Not included - There is a fully equipped kitchen area (stove, fridge, kettle, microwave) for you to prepare food. But volunteers are responsible for buying and cooking their own food. You will be responsible for cleaning all dishes and equipment immediately after use. The elephant park is a water scarce area, so we ask you to keep this in mind. The kitchen area must be clean before working hours start in the morning. We ask that all volunteers write their name on their food items as this helps to relieve confusion between volunteers. There is a restaurant at the park, which is open between 08:30 and 17:00 every day.

You will not have the opportunity to visit local amenities every day so please plan ahead.

You will be taken to Plettenberg Bay once a week so that you can shop for supplies.

Local transport

Volunteers are asked to fly into George Airport, or take the bus to Plettenberg Bay, where they will be collected by the volunteer staff. Transfers from these pick up points are included in the cost of the volunteer programme. We ask that volunteers time their arrival so that they arrive between 9 am and 4 pm, Monday to Friday. Preferred day of arrival is Monday. Should you wish to leave the park in the evenings and over weekends, there are a number of reliable taxi services you can use: Gecko Transport: +27 44-533 3705 or Vogue Cabs: +27 444 533 9289. Taxis to Plettenberg Bay, 10 minutes away, vary in price from ± ZAR 80 to ZAR 100 each way. Knysna is 20 minutes away and taxis will cost from around ±ZAR 200. Both towns offer all amenities, such as supermarkets, banks, doctors, pharmacies, shopping centers, restaurants etc.

What to bring

Any khaki-coloured clothing you can bring will come in handy, especially in winter. Volunteers will be supplied with two elephant park t-shirts that you must wear during your working hours and they must be presentable at all times. You will need to supply your own trousers/shorts. These need to be hard wearing and neutral colours (khaki, browns and greens). Jeans are also suitable.

Open toed shoes are not appropriate when out in the field with the elephants. Hiking boots/trainers are most appropriate for while you are working.

A waterproof jacket is always a good idea whatever time of year you are planning to visit the park, as the weather can be very unpredictable.

It is a good idea to bring lots of extra socks, as you will be doing a lot of walking.

Items you will need are:

- An alarm clock
- Towels
- Camera
- Torch
- Waterproof jacket (Trousers may come in handy in wet weather)
- Good pair of walking boots/trainers
- Trousers/shorts of neutral colours
- Small rucksack for out in the field
- Water bottle
- Insect repellent
- Sun-protection and a sun hat/cap
- Warm tops/ fleeces
- Clothing for layering is always good as it often warms up during the day.

Other useful items you may wish to bring are:

- Books, games, cds etc for the evenings
- Binoculars
- Personal First Aid Kit
- Personal Laptop

Is the work dangerous?

n/a

Potential health risk

n/a