

Attempting to Understand Play in African Elephants

By Robin Cook

Play is a type of animal behaviour that many scientists avoid studying as the complexities surrounding its function or purpose are still poorly understood and highly controversial. Biologically, play is also associated with trade-offs ranging from important long-term skills learnt for growing up to the short-term dangers of a lack of vigilance for predators when animals are at play.



Elephant researchers Phyllis Lee and Cynthia Moss studied play behaviour in African elephants in the Amboseli region of Kenya and found some interesting results that were published in 2014. Their study focussed on various types of play behaviour such as trunk



wrestling, chasing, mounting and pushing. Lee and Moss found that play intensity varied between play situations, with elephants of a similar age showing more intensity compared to elephants of different ages. They also hypothesised that juvenile bulls were using play to communicate their physical and behavioural information

to potential future associates and mating rivals, whilst juvenile females were using play to sustain social leadership roles and family bonds.

Much is still unknown about play in African elephants and research is ongoing to discover its true function. Play may be important for coping with stressful situations and may provide important physical development for juvenile elephants. Although it is easy to anthropomorphise the value of play, it is still important for scientists to find the evolutionary consequence of play behaviour, as has been done in many other animal behavioural traits.

