

Mating Privileges with Elephants-When Age and Size Matters!

By Robin Cook

One of the fundamental rules of natural selection is that only the fittest individuals in a population are able to mate and pass on their genes. Indirectly, this ensures a genetically strong population going forward. Where sexual dimorphism exists in a species, large males usually enjoy mating privileges over smaller males. This pattern was observed by elephant researcher Joyce Poole, who spent eight years studying mate guarding and reproduction in the Amboseli elephant population.



Poole found that elephant bulls under the age of 25 years were unable to compete for cows in oestrus with older and larger bulls. Furthermore, bulls between the ages of 25-35 years were only able to mate with cows during the early and late periods of the cows' oestrogen cycles. Poole found that it was in fact the bulls that were older than 35 years who were able

to guard cows that were in mid-oestrus and stood the best chance of mating success. Poole also found that the number of females guarded by bulls increased with the bulls' ages, providing further evidence that these older bulls were at the peak of their sexual activity.

It therefore goes to show that in the elephant society, it is the older bulls that are vigorous and healthy who are able to receive the greatest mating privileges when the cows are in oestrus.

