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Motion and Emotion: The Storytelling Power of the Video Image

Featuring **NIKON AMBASSADOR AMI VITALE**

The mission of the Kenyan organization Reteti Elephant Sanctuary Community United for Elephants is to take in orphaned, abandoned, injured or ill elephant calves and care for them until they are able to be released back into the wild herds adjoining the sanctuary.

Although Ami Vitale's career as a photojournalist has been built largely on still images, she chose to tell Reteti Elephant Sanctuary's story with video recorded over a two-year period. "I'd go every few months so the elephants, who are very intelligent, would know me," she says. "They come in very traumatized, and I needed them to accept me, but when I was taking still photographs, the sound of the camera shutter reminded the ones whose mothers had been poached of the sound of guns, and in the beginning the matriarch of the herd—Shaba—would try to charge at me."

It took quite a while for Shaba to finally accept Ami and not mind her proximity to the baby elephants. "I had to pick my moments, and it also affected the video as well, as Shaba knew I was around." The baby elephants were generally "quite lovable and accepting," Ami says. "I was around when many of them were brought in, and there was one who remembered me when I came back three months later. She just came charging out of the forest to greet me and literally almost knocked me over."

Single-Handed

Ami realized the potential of the moving image ten years ago when she made a video for Nikon. "It was a short promotion for the D300S camera, but it was enough for me to see that there was real power here—power to communicate and to move people.

It was a life-changing moment. "I realized I could do this—I didn't need a huge budget or a crew. I could really provoke change with these tools. That's the power of the era we live in—the tools we have are incredible. There's no better time to be a storyteller, and that's why I'm embracing everything—let's give it a try, let's see what creates empathy." For Ami, the moving image has become a powerful tool to communicate the urgency of wildlife and environmental concerns.

“ ...we depend on the elephants and they depend on us—they lead us to water, they clear the land—in a way, they control the environment, so what Reteti Elephant Sanctuary is doing is about survival. It's all connected—if you lose one keystone species, ultimately it's going to affect all people. ”

From the Start

The Reteti Elephant Sanctuary video vividly conveys the connection that exists among the organization's staff and the baby elephants they are devoted to helping. "I knew what I had to show—how important interaction is, how emotional the experience is for everyone. The story was never going to be, Oh, gee, cute elephants."

The story was also not going to be solely about the elephants. "It was always also about this amazing community—Reteti Elephant Sanctuary is the first community-owned and community-run elephant sanctuary, so I needed to show who these people are and how important they are. For me they hold the key to saving all wildlife—it's all about indigenous communities. They are our best weapon against every issue, whether climate change or poaching. They're the answer, so I knew this story was also about them."

Putting it All Together

Ami shot the video with a D850 and a Z 7, mostly with an AF-S NIKKOR 24mm f/1.4G ED on the D850 and a NIKKOR Z 24-70mm f/4 S and, with the Mount Adapter FTZ, an AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED on the Z 7. Going from one camera to the other was seamless, and she quickly came to appreciate the lighter, smaller Z 7—especially its in-camera Vibration Reduction that made high-quality hand-held images and footage possible.

For video, the shooting is only part start of the story. It's in the editing that all the ideas, plans and hopes come together...or don't. For the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary video Ami turned to an editor in her hometown of Missoula, Montana. "Her company is called Sprout Films, and we've worked together on little projects, just five-minute films," Ami says. "I knew she was the one to do this. We have a single vision and similarity in thinking—I wrote the script for the shot footage we needed to have in, and gave her some ideas. She worked on it for a while, I looked at it, and it was like, 'Wait, this clip goes right here,' and that's how we work. She's just such a pro with timing and music and moments—she's a delight to work with."

The finished video is a self-contained story, but it's also an introduction to the work of Reteti Elephant Sanctuary and the larger issue of the interconnection of all things. "One of the points was that we depend on the elephants and they depend on us—they lead us to water, they clear the land—in a way, they control the environment, so what Reteti Elephant Sanctuary is doing is about survival. It's all connected—if you lose one keystone species, ultimately it's going to affect all people."

"That's something I'm keenly aware of in every story I tell—but I'm not just a storyteller, I'm really an advocate."

You can learn more about the work and the goals of Reteti Elephant Sanctuary at retetielephants.org.
Ami Vitale's website is at amivitale.com.



Featuring

AMI VITALE



NIKON AMBASSADOR
UNITED STATES

Photojournalist, filmmaker and *National Geographic* magazine contract photographer Ami Vitale has traveled to more than 90 countries to document civil unrest and violence as well as surreal beauty and the enduring power of the human spirit. Her images are exhibited around the world in museums and galleries and are part of numerous private collections.

Visit her website www.amivitale.com and go to her [ambassador page](#).

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