

# ELEPHANT PATH NJAIA NJOKU

## Study Guide

This study guide offers an opportunity to dig deeper into the narrative and issues raised by *Elephant Path* / Njaia Njoku, to reflect on the causes that lie beneath the poaching of the Forest Elephants and the dangerous turmoil of a militia state in one of the poorest nations in the world where the elephants are collateral damage. This discussion includes background information about the film maker, the main characters of the film, the Central African Republic, Forest Elephants and the current poaching crisis.



## Film Synopsis:

An indelible tale of friendship and commitment set against the luminous beauty of the Central African Rainforest. Together, elephant behavioral biologist, Andrea Turkalo of the Wildlife Conservation Society, indigenous tracker, Sessely Bernard, and Bantu eco-guard, Zephirine Mbele, will be tested by the realities of war and the limits of hope for the majestic animals they have committed their lives to study and protect.

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## Todd McGrain's Director's Statement:

I first heard the calls of forest elephants in a small windowless recording studio in the offices of the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University. Sitting beside me was renowned elephant behavioral biologist, Andrea Turkalo, of the Wildlife Conservation Society. The room was filled with the night sounds of the Central African Rainforest. Across a thick fog of insects and frogs floated the plaintive calls of Forest Elephants. There were roars and trumpets, long pulsing rumbles, and screeches (which I later learned belonged to infants calling for their mothers).

Andrea had recently arrived in Ithaca to help her collaborators decode these calls. Andrea's descriptions of the rainforest, the indigenous people she has worked alongside, and the peril the elephants were facing set a path for me that I would follow for the next 4 years. Along the way, I would travel with security contractors, go on patrol with eco-guards, and spend extended time in the forest with the Bayaka people, who were avoiding the civil conflict unfolding across the country. Sessely Bernard, a Bayaka elder, had worked with Andrea for 23 years. It was Sessely and his extended family that truly gave me this remarkable unfolding story. I am honored to have been invited into this world.

There are common elements in every contemporary extinction story: unchecked market forces, corruption, greed, overexploitation, and habitat loss. A more optimistic commonality between these tragic histories is the presence of a dedicated and inspiring group of thoughtful and forward-looking people sounding the alarm of impending loss. It is my hope that the efforts of these people will be fortified by this film. Elephant Path / Njaia Njoku is their story.

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### Film Characters

American biologist—Andrea Turkalo, of the Wildlife Conservation Society, has been studying the Forest Elephants of Dzanga Bai for the past 23 years and brings a field biologist’s perspective to the lives of elephants.

Bayaka Tracker—Sessely Bernard is the primary voice of the film. The Bayaka are the often-marginalized indigenous people of the CAR rainforest.

Bantu Eco-guard—As an eco-guard, Zephirine Mbele is on the front lines of the anti-poaching efforts and stands directly between the elephants and the rebel soldiers intent on profiting from the illegal ivory trade.



### Forest Elephants

Forest elephants are the least well known of the three species of elephants which include Asian Elephant and African Savannah elephants. Found in Central and West Africa, Forest Elephants now number fewer than 100,000, down from about one million when Europeans first ventured into Central Africa. Forest Elephants are difficult to census due to their dense habitat, and poaching activity is harder to detect for the same reason.

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## Location

The Central African Republic is a land-locked country bordering Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo and Cameroon. It is the poorest country in Africa and one of the least developed. A coup d'état in 2012 has left the country in an entrenched and violent civil conflict.



## Dzanga Bai, Bayanga Region, Central African Republic

A “Bai” is a clearing in the rainforest. Dzanga Bai is unique for its large population of Forest Elephants. Between 60 and 100 elephants visit the clearing each day. Much of what we know about the social structure of Forest Elephants comes from observations made by Andrea Turkalo of interactions at the Dzanga forest clearing.

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## Quotes to Generate Discussion:

### **Andrea quoting Sessely:**

“These aren’t elephants. These are people. They are like us.”

### **Sessely:**

“We take care of each other. She (Andrea) has never turned her back on me.”

### **Andrea:**

“Dzanga is like a fantasy. It’s almost like the Garden of Eden for big mammals.”

### **Sessely’s son Bunga:**

“This entire forest belongs to us, as it belongs to the elephants. We all come from the forest.”

### **Sessely:**

“White people have come here and I work with them all. When their work is done they go back to their countries. The only one who has stayed is Andrea.”

### **Zephirine:**

“It is poverty that pushes people to become poachers. And the rich countries encourage them to destroy the elephants.”

### **Zephirine:**

“When an elephant comes to a river, he tests the bottom with every careful step. So, the proverb says, “You will always be safe if you follow the path of an elephant.”

### **Sessely:**

“I have walked on elephant paths since I was a boy. I am old and sometimes tired. Still, I will continue to walk these paths every day.”

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## Discussion Questions:

How does the film depict the relationship between the elephants and the people who live adjacent to them?

What are some ways in which the lives of humans and the lives of elephants parallel one another?

What does Sessely's trip to the Sessely River tell you about his relationship to his home?

In Andrea we see an American field biologist working in one of the poorest nations on earth. What do you feel about the relationship between her work and the local population?

What responsibility do international wildlife organizations have in raising the wellbeing of the people in the countries in which they work?

Does Andrea's relationship with Sessely seem to be one of equals?  
What is your reaction to the trusted belief in magic in both Sessely's story of the man who could transform into an elephant and magic's use as evidence in the trial?

How do you feel about the underlying causes of poaching as described by Zephirine?

What was your response to the trial? Did the process seem just?  
Did the verdict and sentence seem fair?

Do you think there should be severe punishment for poachers or is it more a systemic issue that requires change on the basic level of the government and wealth inequity?

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## Discussion Questions:

When the characters learn that the rebel Seleka militia are nearing Bayanga, Andrea chooses to leave CAR. We travel with Sessely and his clan into the forest and later learn that Zephirine, the eco-guard, was put in a undefendable position. What do these three responses to this threat tell you about the dynamics of their relationships?

Would the situation when the Seleka arrived have been better if Zephirine and the other Eco-Guards had been better equipped to defend the town and the Elephants?

What would be the broader ramifications of militarizing wildlife protection?

What is your reaction to the speech the Seleka general gave to the village elders?

What was your response to the slaughtering of the elephants by the Seleka rebels?

How will the slaughter of the elephants effect the lives and livelihood of the Bayaka people?

How did you feel about the return of Andrea to Bayanga?

Do you think Andrea's absence during the time of the Seleka will have long-term ramifications on her relationship with Sessely and Zephirine?

Zephirine talks of elephants treading with caution and intention—what does this mean to you?

After viewing the film, do you feel that there is hope for the Forest Elephants?

What is the relationship between civil unrest and elephant poaching?

How is this film different from other wildlife documentaries you've seen before?

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## Learn More:

The Elephant Listening Project

Forest Elephants: <https://elephantlisteningproject.org/forest-elephants/>

Research: <https://elephantlisteningproject.org/research/>

Conservation: <https://elephantlisteningproject.org/conservation-2/>

## Further Reading:

Some Elephants in Africa Are Just a Step From Extinction, Elizabeth Preston

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/science/elephants-africa-endangered.html>

The bold plan to save Africa's largest forest, Peter Yeung

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210107>

-congo-basin-a-bold-plan-to-save-africas-largest-rainforest

Gabon becomes first African country to get paid for protecting its forests, Jim Tan

<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/07/>

gabon-becomes-first-african-country-to-get-paid-for-protecting-its-forests/

Salonga National Park (Democratic Republic of the Congo) removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2313>

Loss of forest elephant may make Earth 'less inhabitable for humans', Emily Clark

<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/>

loss-of-forest-elephant-may-make-earth-less-inhabitable-for-humans/

'Stubborn optimism' for elephants fuels Indigenous conservation effort, Mike Gaworecki

<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/07/>

podcast-stubborn-optimism-for-elephants-fuels-indigenous-conservation-effort/

Listening to elephants to protect Central Africa's tropical forests, Mike Gaworecki

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/>

audio-listening-to-elephants-to-protect-central-africas-tropical-forests/