

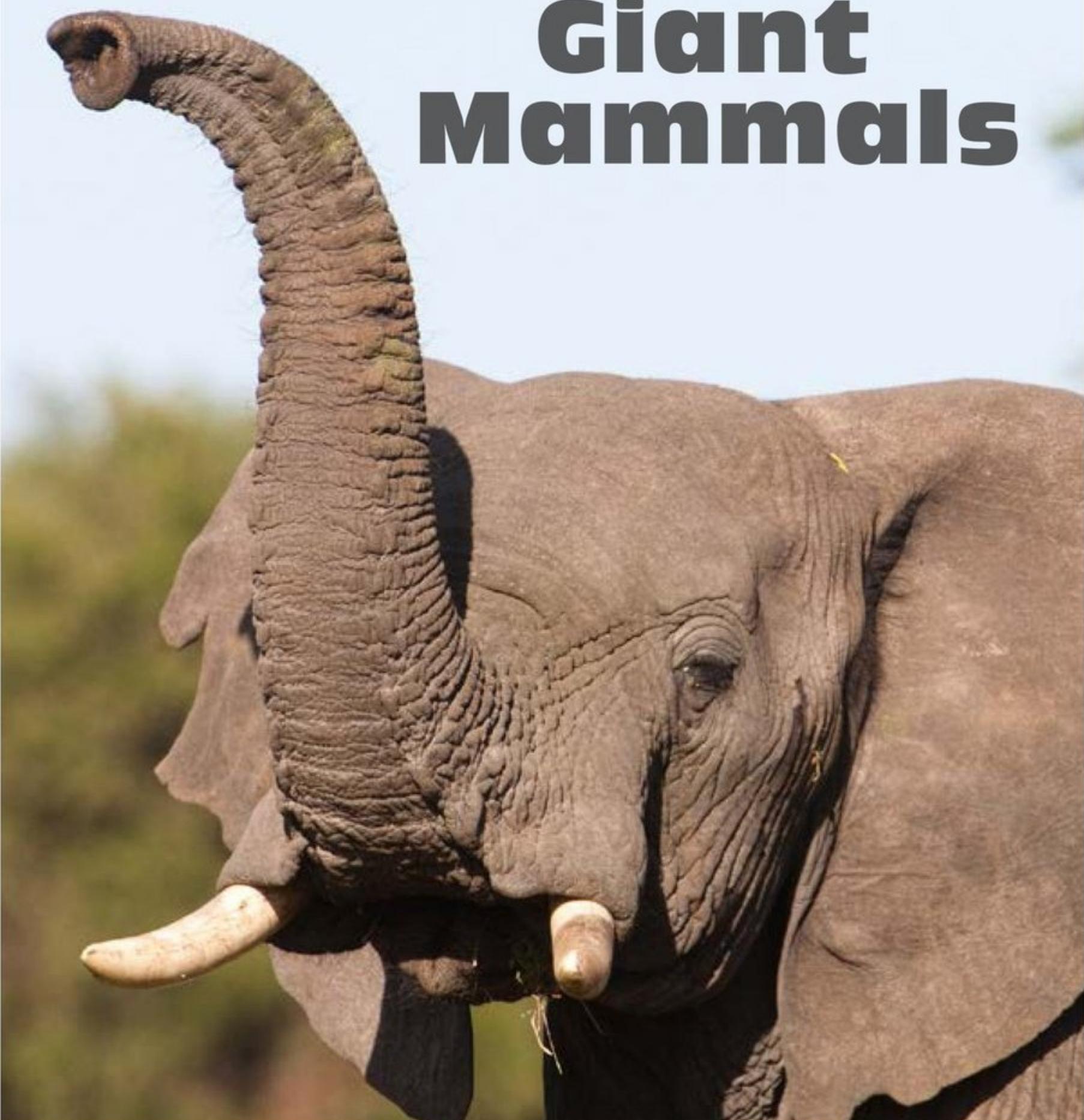
LEVELED BOOK • R

Elephants: Giant Mammals



Written by Pete Ramirez

Elephants: **Giant** **Mammals**



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Focus Question

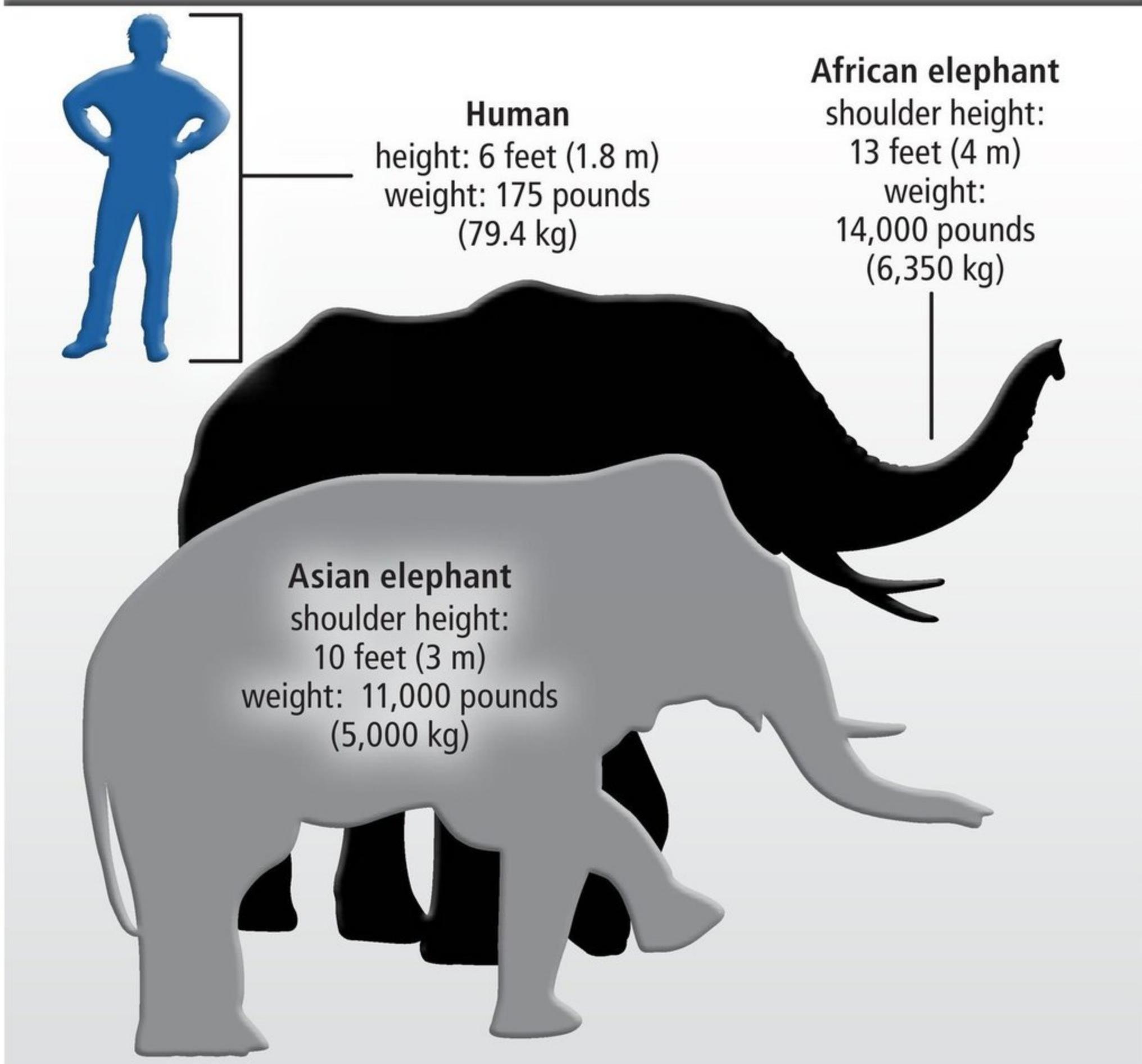
How do the unique features of elephants help them survive?



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How Big Are They?



Big and Brainy

Without a doubt, elephants are the most gigantic land animals living on Earth today. To find a more **immense** walking creature, you would have to go back to the age of dinosaurs! Elephants aren't just huge. They're also highly intelligent, have many ways to communicate with one another, and are clever enough to work together to get things done.



The tip of an elephant's trunk is as sensitive as the tip of a person's finger.

Exploring the Elephant

No other animal quite compares to the stately elephant, with its giant body, thick gray or brown skin, and round, sturdy legs. Most unusual of all is its long, snakelike trunk—an **appendage** that is the elephant's all-in-one nose and upper lip.

Elephants use their super-sized trunks for several significant purposes. They breathe through them, use them to pick up food and water, and blast air through them to make a deafening trumpeting sound. Elephants also touch other elephants with their trunks in different ways to communicate. Two elephants will often twist their trunks together to show **affection**. A mother elephant might use her trunk to gently stroke her calf and calm it down—or to punish it with an elephant-sized smack!

What Makes an Elephant a Mammal?



All mammals

- have a backbone
- have hair on their bodies at some time in their lives
- are warm-blooded
- produce milk to feed their babies

African and Asian Elephants

The two main species of elephants are African and Asian. It is simple to tell them apart if you know what continent you are in, but there are other clues as well.

African elephants are greater in size than their Asian relatives, with males measuring 13 feet (4 m) tall and weighing up to 14,000 pounds (6,350 kg). Females are shorter and lighter, at around 9 feet (2.7 m) tall and up to 10,000 pounds (4,540 kg). Male Asian elephants are around 3 feet (0.9144 m) shorter and about 3,000 pounds (1,360 kg) lighter than African males. Females are even smaller and, unlike African females, often have no **tusks** at all.

An African elephant's appearance differs from its Asian counterpart in other ways, too. Its floppy ears are often twice as large as those of an Asian elephant. The back of an African elephant also dips down in the middle, unlike an Asian elephant's. If you inspected the animal even more thoroughly, you would see two "fingers" at the end of its jumbo trunk. These handy flaps grab food and small objects.



African elephant



Asian elephant

Elephants use their tusks to dig, fight, or move things around. African elephants use their tusks to dig for water in times of drought.

In addition to having smaller ears, Asian elephants have large, round bumps on the tops of their huge heads. Spotting these bumps is a clear way to identify the species. The bumps are often the tallest point on an Asian elephant. Their backs are flat or arched, and we can't forget their trunks, which have just one "finger" at the end instead of two.

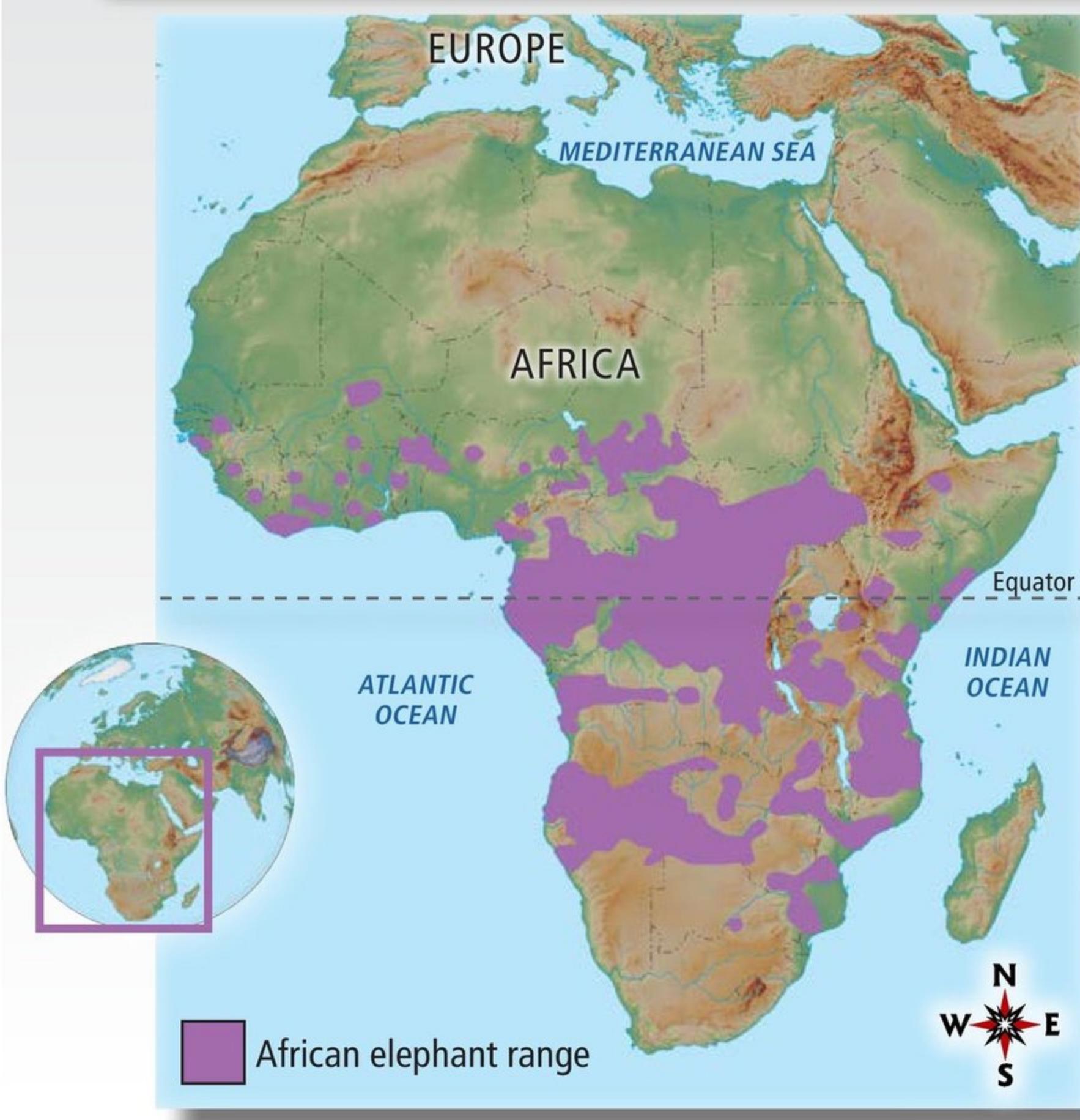
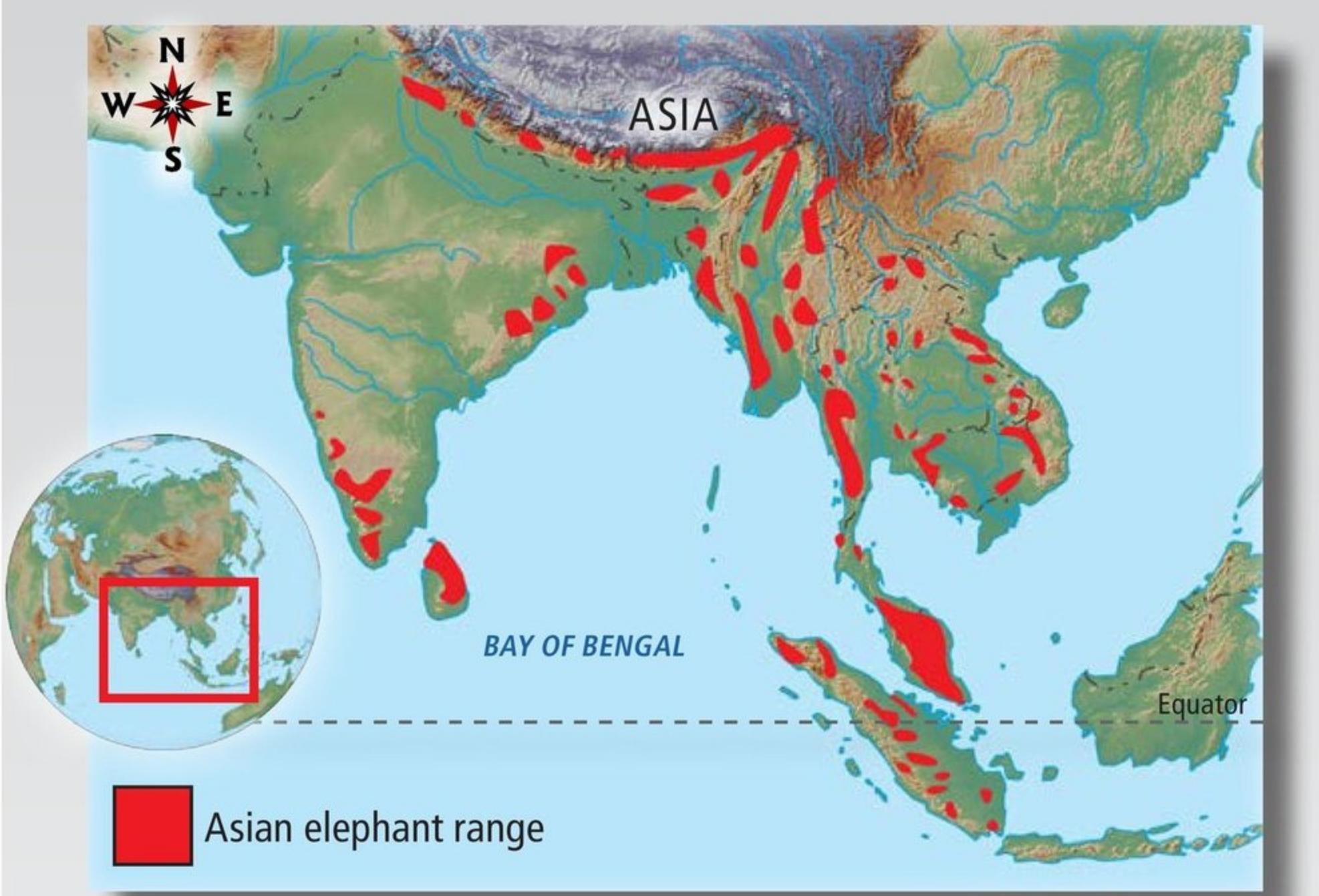
Elephant Hangouts

Elephants are adaptable enough to live in many different types of **habitats**, as long as they can find enough food and water. In Africa, elephants live in hot, dry grasslands, rainforests, and even deserts. They can live at sea level or high in the mountains. Asian elephants live in wet rainforests and swamps as well as in other more arid forests with long dry seasons.

Because of elephants' hulking size, even ferocious lions and tigers won't attack a healthy adult elephant. Humans, however, hunt them for their **ivory** tusks and shoot them for destroying crops.

As human population increases, elephants' natural habitats are disappearing. Humans build more roads, plant more crops, and cut down more trees. Less and less land is available for wild animals—especially ones that need large amounts of food and space. Elephants once roamed almost all of Africa and South Asia, but today their habitats are shrinking significantly in size.

Where Elephants Live



No Meat, Thanks

Elephants are **herbivores** and therefore only eat plants, but other than that, they aren't picky. They'll chow down on grass, leaves, branches, tree bark, seeds, and fruits. The most important thing is that there is a lot of food to eat. An adult elephant can eat more than 300 pounds (136 kg) of food every day and slurp about 20 to 60 gallons (75.7–227.1 L) of water, using its handy trunk like an enormous straw. Then, the elephant sprays the water from the end of its trunk into its mouth.



Much of the food elephants eat passes right through them. Only about 44 percent of the food they eat is digested.

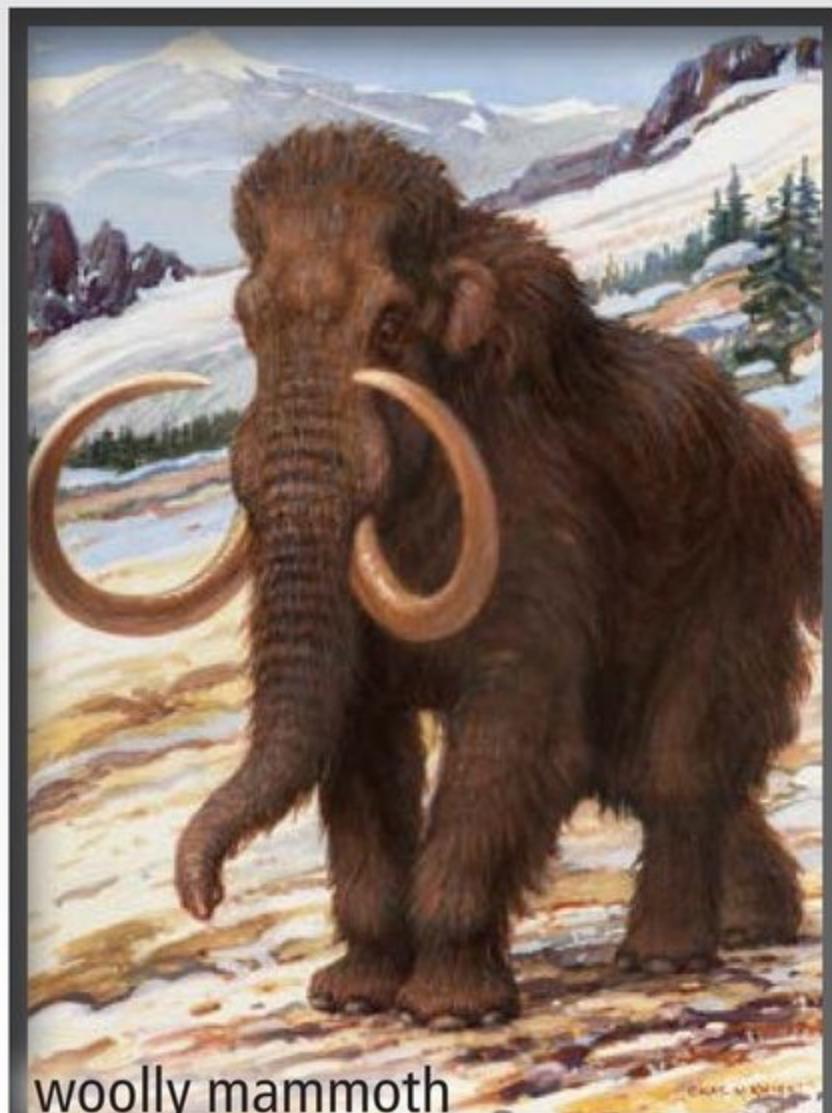
wowser!

- Elephant pregnancies last eighteen to twenty-two months—longer than those of any other animal.



hyrax

- One of the elephant's closest living relatives is the hyrax—a small, cute, furry animal. You would never know they're related!



woolly mammoth

- Elephants are closely related to woolly mammoths, which have been extinct for more than ten thousand years.



This Asian elephant mother uses her trunk to spray water during a dip. On hot days, she might then spray dust over her body to prevent sunburn.

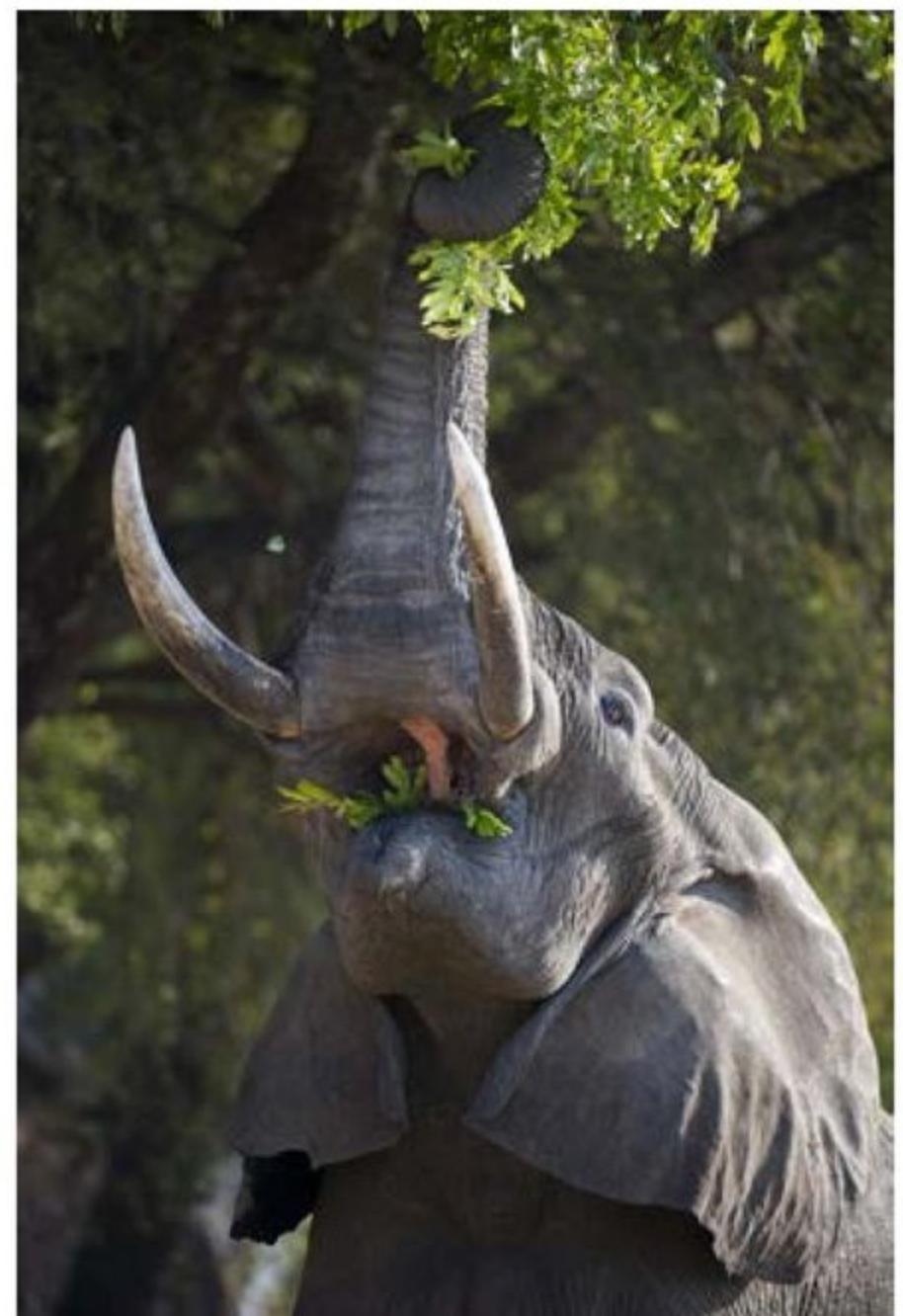
The Elephant Family

Elephants, especially female elephants, are social animals. Adult females live together in family groups, most often led by the oldest among them. The herd might be made up of a grandmother elephant, her grown-up daughters, and the daughters' calves. They take care of each other and eat, bathe, and play together.

From the moment an elephant is born, the whole herd helps the mother care for her 250-pound (110 kg) calf. Adult elephants work together to drive away predators. Other adults will even **nurse** the calf if it's hungry.

Young elephants have an extra-long childhood and nurse from their mothers for up to three years. During this time, and for several years later, elephants learn vital survival skills, including where to find food and water, and how to use their trunks. They aren't **mature** adults until they're ten to fifteen years old. Then, males and females go their separate ways, with males leaving the herd to live alone or with other male elephants. Females stay with the herd and eventually raise their own calves.

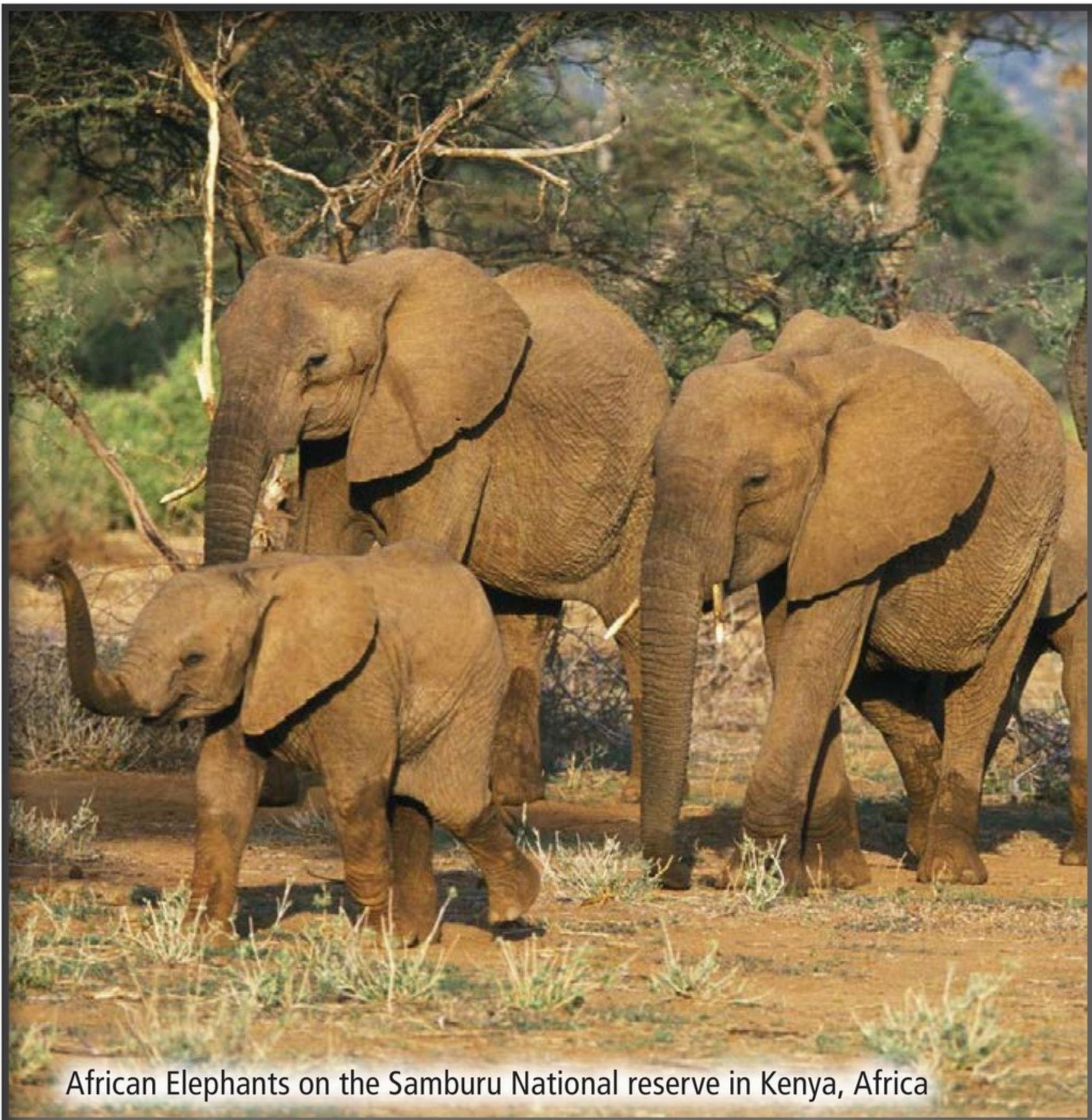
If an adult elephant doesn't encounter serious trouble, it can live for sixty to seventy years. Sometimes an elephant lives so long that it runs out of teeth! It only grows six sets in its lifetime, and once they're gone, the elephant can't chew its food well anymore.



Older elephants often stay in marshes where they find softer plants to chew.

Giant Friends

It's hard not to feel a connection to nature's king-sized elephants. We know they're brainy and caring, and they like to have fun. Their awesome size and distinctive personalities make them impossible to ignore. If we all work to protect elephants, these giants of nature will roam the Earth for a long time to come.



African Elephants on the Samburu National reserve in Kenya, Africa

Glossary

- affection** (*n.*) a caring or loving feeling (p. 5)
- appendage** (*n.*) an external body part that sticks out from the body, such as an arm or a leg (p. 5)
- habitats** (*n.*) the natural environments of a plant or animal (p. 9)
- herbivores** (*n.*) animals that only eat plants (p. 11)
- immense** (*adj.*) very large (p. 4)
- ivory** (*n.*) the white material that makes up the tusks of elephants and other tusked animals (p. 9)
- mature** (*adj.*) being developed in body or mind (p. 14)
- nurse** (*v.*) to feed a baby or young animal with milk from a mother's body (p. 13)
- tusks** (*n.*) big teeth that stick out from the closed mouth of certain mammals, such as elephants and wild boars (p. 7)

Words to Know

affection
appendage
habitats
herbivores
immense

ivory
mature
nurse
tusks

Front and back cover: A herd walking on the African savanna

Title page: An elephant trunk is similar to your nose, but it's much more useful.

Page 3: An elephant calf (baby elephant) drifts off to sleep at the foot of its mother.

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