

An Unusual Friendship

(February 2020)

In March of 2000, a just-born hippopotamus calf was washed downstream into the banks of the Blyde River near Hoedspruit, likely the result of devastating floods hitting South Africa and Mozambique at the time. This newborn female was discovered by Shirley Joubert and her husband, Tonie, a now retired game ranger. The Joubert family took in the emaciated and orphaned calf, whom they named Jessica, and an extremely rare and deeply touching bond began.

When they discovered Jessica by the water in front of their home, the Jouberts realized she was only a few hours old. She was very small, and her umbilical cord was still attached. As a game ranger, Tonie understood how to care for Jessica, and over time, she grew into a healthy adult hippo.

Hippos do not typically bond with humans. In fact, they are generally considered dangerous animals. Not only are they huge (the third largest land mammal, weighing over 3000 pounds), they are also aggressive and territorial. Yet, Jessica remains bonded with Shirley and Tonie who have never restricted her. She has always been free to come and go as she pleases. She splits her time between her human family (which even includes dogs) and time up the river with other wild

hippos. In a world of odd mammal bonds, the connection Jessica has to the human world is extremely rare.

Experts believe she was likely washed away from her mother directly after being born and never saw her. Instead, Jessica imprinted on the Jouberts. Whether she sees herself as a human or sees the Jouberts as fellow hippos cannot be known, but it is clear she sees them as her parents. She has managed to develop and maintain an affectionate relationship with ‘her’ humans, while simultaneously leading a relatively normal hippopotamus existence.

Hippos are generally social animals among themselves, and Jessica is similarly social with humans outside the Joubert family. Visitors can meet, interact with, and even feed Jessica. While there, they learn about Jessica as well as the struggles faced by all hippos in that region due to poorly regulated culling or population control through slaughter. The opportunity to learn while interacting with a hippo is truly unique and proving to be a great tool to fight against for-profit culling.

Jessica is, and always will be, a wild animal. Still, her gentle nature towards humans and her genuine affection towards Shirley and Tonie is highly unusual. Jessica’s story paints a far more complex picture of these animals and the role that early exposure can play in the interspecies dynamic.

Teacher Resources – Vocabulary

Potential Words for Further Study: These words not only help with comprehension of the passage, they also appear more frequently in a wide spectrum of reading, especially in academic text. Therefore, further study of the meaning of these words may be beneficial. The words in this list can be incorporated into subsequent lessons.

Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: AB

mammal (n) any of a large class (Mammalia) of warmblooded, usually hairy vertebrates whose offspring are fed with milk secreted by the female mammary glands

regulate (v) to control, direct, or govern according to a rule, principle, or system

Words for Quick Discussion: Consider discussing these words as they are encountered to help students comprehend the passage. A quick discussion in student-friendly language while reading the text is best.

Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: B

culling (n) the reduction of the size of an animal population

devastating (a) extremely effective in a destructive way

emaciate (v) to become or cause to become abnormally thin

Definition Source: Collins English Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english>

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