

William, Elizabeth and their Liberian Dynasties

Once upon a time.

One of my rediscovered pleasures in life is being able to read more of my notifications. From Google and Facebook; Reddit and Medium; LinkedIn and WhatsApp...BBC, CNN...all kinds of interesting things going on.

At first, the post about the birth of a pigmy hippo at the zoo in Athens, didn't pique my interest enough to do more than just register it. It was a YouTube video of the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt. But then BBC sent me a notification. Then Reuters.

Chay! What happened now? So I read one of the stories, the BBC report.



Pygmy hippos are solitary creatures (Credit: Reuters)

A male pigmy hippo was born in captivity. The pigmy hippo, *Choeropsis liberiensis*, is an endangered species found in West Africa, with highest concentration in Liberia. (Well of course... *liberiensis* means us now!). Seriously though, why were all the news wires making a big deal about this particular animal birth?

I read further.

This birth was momentous...the first live birth of a pigmy hippo in more than a decade at this particular zoo. A lack of male pigmy hippos in captivity has proved challenging for repopulation efforts. Therefore, zookeepers and conservationists are even more ecstatic about this most recent – and yet unnamed – baby's arrival because of its sex.

I see now. The gender reveal. And see the little bug-a-bug. Looks like a sleek puppy. Seven kilograms.

So here I am...I just-just-just finished writing an article that featured some of Liberia's bio-diversity (watch out for the April launch of International Focus magazine in Monrovia - don't miss it!). The pigmy hippo is unique to us.

Choeropsis Liberiensis. His Latin name tells everyone where he came from. But how did this particular pigmy hippo mother find her way all the way to Athens? That migration? (Haha! I tickle myself sometimes!). This gave me an incentive to go

search after a long lost pigmy hippo. The one that my father took to Kenya as a gift to President Kenyatta. Hmm...I wonder...! I opened Google and entered Pigmy hippo Kenya. Scroll down a few articles and there was the entry from the Nation newspaper, on my birthday in 2011.



Kenyatta pygmy hippo dies after 41 years

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Photo/CORRESPONDENT

Elizabeth, a pygmy hippo donated to Mzee Jomo Kenyatta by President Tubman of Liberia at the Nairobi Safari Walk in Nairobi National Park. The animal died last Wednesday.

A hippopotamus that was a gift to Mzee Jomo Kenyatta from Liberian President William Tubman has died.

Just like that, I found her! A memory from my childhood when one afternoon way back in 1970 when Daddy had just come back from Nairobi, Kenya. He showed me a newspaper clipping from his trip. He had just accompanied a pigmy hippo to Kenya as a gift from Liberia. The journalists jokingly named the hippo Mary Cooper, praising my father for this wonderful gift. I didn't know then that there was a backstory.

It seems that President Tubman, while a guest at the Nairobi Show, an annual agricultural fair that I myself have enjoyed, had gifted his counterpart, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, with a male pigmy hippo. Several months later, that original male was lonely and so President Kenyatta asked for a mate for the fellow. Hence the dispatch of the Under-Secretary of Agriculture, Julius Cooper with this female pigmy hippo.

But wait. Daddy had told me the journalists had named her “Mary Cooper”. We laughed at the idea that we had a “sister” named Mary Cooper living in Kenya. And years later, I even took my family to the Nairobi Animal Orphanage to look for Mary. No wonder I never found her...her name had been changed to Elizabeth.

“The female hippo, later christened Elizabeth, arrived from Monrovia aboard a Pan American Airways jetliner on September 18, 1970. At the airport, she was put into a heated compound and fed cabbages and bananas.”

Aye yah!!

The article continued to tell about other donations of pigmy hippos that President Tubman had made: to the zoo in Zurich and to US President Dwight D. Eisenhower in January 1960. Which Eisenhower promptly sent down to Sarasota Florida. Seems he wasn't too happy with that particular gift from the Gola Forest.



But, but, but... Eisenhower was not the only American president to have received a pigmy hippo! In 1927, following his visit to Liberia where he famously decided to set up the world's largest rubber plantation, Harvey S. Firestone gifted a male pigmy hippo to then US President Calvin Coolidge. President Coolidge really liked his gift and named him William Johnson Hippopotamus. They called him Billy. And Billy has his own story.

According to [Wikipedia](#), Billy spent most of his life in the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. In addition to his fame as an exotic presidential pet—which afforded him a trip to the 1939 New York World's Fair—Billy is also notable as the

common ancestor to most pygmy hippos in American zoos. Look at that! By the time of his death in 1955, Billy had sired 23 calves, 13 of whom survived at least a year.

It seems he too was lonely, so in 1929, the National Zoo in Washington D.C. acquired a female calf to be his mate. Her name was Hannah and initially she had mothering issues...rolling on her babies and crushing them...or just neglecting them. Eventually she gave birth to several healthy calves. The Smithsonian-Firestone Expedition in 1940 acquired another female for Billy. With his two 'wives', Billy had 23 calves that lived past infancy: 22 of these were females. It was noticed that the pigmy hippos in captivity tended to give birth to females. When President Tubman heard about all these females, he sent that male pigmy hippo named Totota to his homologue in January 1960.

William Johnson Hippopotamus left a tremendous legacy. The majority of pygmy hippos in America's zoos are his direct descendants, and, as zoos improve their conservation programs (and their international ties), his progeny are spreading around the planet. Additionally, thanks to his fecundity, his longevity, and his highly placed political and business connections (and even his simple hippo *joie de vivre*) Billy helped popularize a new conception of zoos.



Ashaki and her calf Queyah at the zoo in Basel.

Zoological parks are no longer a novelty or a diversion but a critical tool to understanding wildlife. They are also a conservation measure of last resort in a dangerous world of ever diminishing wilderness habitat.

Zoo Zurich got its Pygmy hippos as a gift from the former President of Liberia, William Tubman. The first pair died shortly after their arrival in Zurich, but the second pair (Grebbo and Wanna) lived more than 40 years there, producing 19 offsprings during

that time.

I felt myself falling down the rabbit hole with all these Liberian diaspora hippos. They are all over the world...well actually only about 323 of them are living in captivity, while another 2,500-3,000 are thought to be living in the wild.

Basel Zoo in Switzerland holds the international studbook and coordinates the entire captive pygmy hippo population that freely breeds in zoos around the world. A studbook helps with species conservation. It lists all of the individuals of a particular species being kept in zoos, and details their family trees and other important information. Between 1970 and 1991 the population of pygmy hippos born in captivity more than doubled. The survival of the species in zoos is more certain than the survival of the species in the wild. In captivity, the pygmy hippo

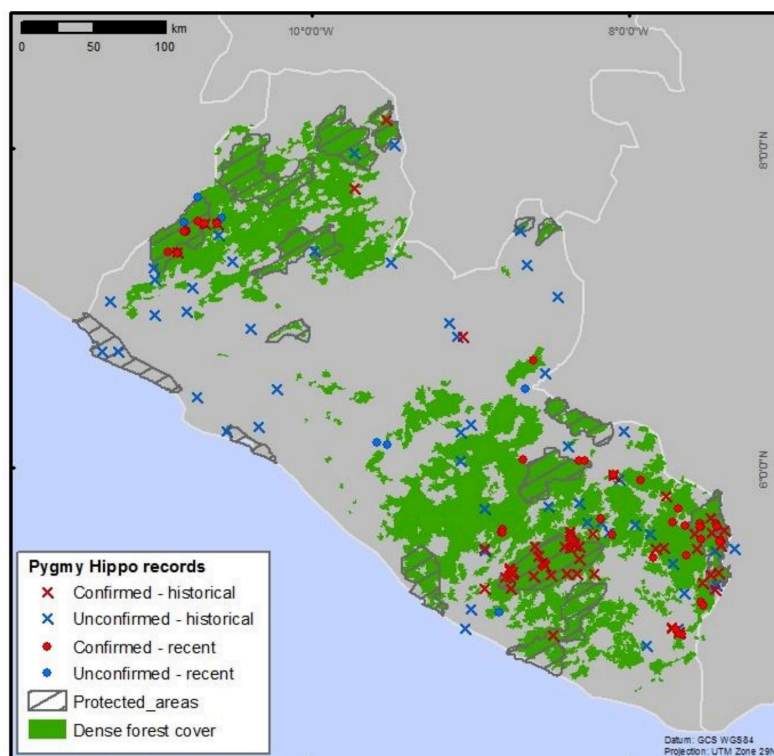
lives from 42 to 55 years, longer than in the wild. Since 1919, only 41 percent of pygmy hippos born in zoos have been male.

So that's why every male birth is such a big deal! That's why President Tubman used to follow up with his gifts and ensure that there were matched pairs! Who knew?

But here's the thing. This endangered species is native to Liberia and is mostly found in Liberia. It is endangered mainly because of a loss of habitat in Liberia. And its habitat is the forest...of which we still have plenty in Liberia.

Urias Goll, Deputy Chief of Party of the EcoHealth Alliance that is managing the Conservation Works project in southeastern Liberia explained:

"Pygmy hippos are extremely elusive. They have been spotted on rare occasions in Liberia, mainly by traditional farmers/hunters who have been preserving the forest for many years through traditional means. A few years ago, the government, wanting to understand the distribution of this important species, launched an eDNA survey with support from its partners. The result revealed that there are over 20 sites of pigmy hippos within in the southeast of the country."



Recorded incidence of Pygmy Hippos in Liberia-confirmed and unconfirmed, historical (older than 10 years) and recent (less than 10 years).

Source: National Action Plan for the Conservation of the Pygmy Hippopotamus in Liberia, 2012.

I remember too, another childhood memory of seeing pigmy hippos in the St. Paul River near Dingola, Todee District. My father had a farm there and we used to love swimming in the river there. One day, the guides told us the hippos were right around the bend of the river. And there they were. But back to my conservation story.

There are maps of the sightings of the pigmy hippos, but these are more than a decade old. Sadly, the area in central Liberia where Todee is, does not seem to have any recent signs of pigmy hippo habitation. Only in the southeast and the

northwest, the two forest priority areas in Liberia.

Veteran environmentalist Konikay Nimeley also weighed in on the role of the pigmy hippos in the wild:

“Pigmy hippos play a crucial role in forest ecosystems by dispersing seeds through their feces, and shaping vegetation through their browsing habits. Their presence is an indicator of the health of the forest.”

So its all well and good that the birth of Pygmy hippos in zoos around the world are a big deal. But the biggest big deal, the real effort should be placed in protecting them in their natural habitat, in Liberia’s forests. ReBalance Earth, an NGO working to protect the West African forest elephant, notes that one elephant has a carbon value of approximately \$2.6M over its lifetime. Now imagine if that methodology would apply to our endangered pigmy hippos...



A pigmy hippo in the Sapo National Park, captured by a camera trap. Credit: Fauna & Flora International

The work begun by the Government of Liberia, the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) and supported by Fauna & Flora International is a start. The former Managing Director of the FDA, Harrison Karnwea, highlighted the fact that the Pygmy Hippo is considered a flagship species for Liberia’s valuable forests, and for the Upper Guinea forests as well. Fauna & Flora International are working to establish corridors for protecting the species, although funding is scarce. The NGO makes good use of camera traps and other techniques like the eDNA study to determine the best ways to protect these animals.

Yet other ways that Liberia, and its inhabitants, are contributing to the fight against global warming. By protecting our pigmy hippos, we protect our forests and capture more carbon from the atmosphere. The largest part of the work of conserving the biodiversity and the trees in Liberia’s forests will not be done by conservationists in

other countries, but by Liberians themselves and in Liberia. That work has begun and it will need the momentum and support from everyone.



Meanwhile, back at the Attica Zoological Park in Athens, as-yet-unnamed Baby Boy Hippo is sticking close to his mother, Lizzie (another Elizabeth, this one named after Queen Elizabeth II). According to Jean Jacques Leseur, the zoo's founder and CEO, "As soon as this boy reaches the age of three, its species coordinator will tell us which park to send it to, so that it can be paired with a suitable mate, thus avoiding even the slightest possibility of inbreeding".

So Baby Boy will be sent off to continue the legacy of growing pigmy hippos in the wild. For the sake of historical balance, maybe the Athens Zoo can consider naming him William, Billy for short.

I feel good knowing that we are preserving the dynasties of William Johnson Hippopotamus, Mary/Elizabeth (Cooper) Kenyatta Hippopotamus in zoos around the world; while still sheltering thousands of their relatives who live back home in Liberia.