What Elephants Know
Eric Dinerstein
Disney Book Group, Los Angeles, CA
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Elephants, tiger hunts, an orphan, tropical forest destruction, and Nepalese culture blend together in a delightful book called What Elephants Know. While a fiction book for middle school students, biologists will be intrigued with nature and cultural observations. The author, Eric Dinerstein, first visited Nepal as a Peace Corps worker. His knowledge of Nepal grew from frequent trips to study elephants, tigers and rhinos for the World Wildlife Fund and later, RESOLVE.

The story follows the life of Nandu, who as a two-year-old orphan was discovered in the jungle by an elephant named Devi Kali. Nandu is adopted by the head of the Royal Elephant Stable, who is a single man. Nandu reflects to the reader that he has two parents: his adoptive father steeps him in the knowledge of the jungle, and a wise elephant mother teaches him about life. Devi Kali, the wise old female elephant, protects Nandu from tigers and leopards in the jungle. In turn, Nandu cuts grass for Devi Kali, and feeds her treats. During the process, Nandu learns how to be a mahout, an entry-level elephant driver, from both his father and elephant mother.

When Nandu is eight, his father takes him out in the jungle to teach him about the ecology of this system, combining local lore of the jungle with the bird names he learned from a British scientist. He points out a great hornbill eating figs and then motions to the ground. His father says, “Here in the jungle, we read the tracks in the mud and sand to get the news important to us.” Nandu then sees the tracks of the barking deer waiting to eat figs and a leopard waiting to eat a meal of fig eaters.

As a naturalist, you may enjoy the way nature and life in this village are blended to be compatible. Nandu de-

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