

Sustaining the jumbo

Southern Africa is now rising to the challenge....

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A love / hate relationship with the jumbo hasn't broken out for the world. Crops are being raided in rural areas, spanning almost all range states. Persistent droughts are closing chinks of light or hope, for man and jumbo. While park management budgets continue to sink low, illegal ivory trade is on the increase. The developed world, the only party with the financial means to support conservation efforts, stands aloof offering less and less funding. CITES, the body that's been able to knock heads together, is once again expected to turn its spot light on the continent and reassess Africa's love affair with the elephant – and sustainable use.

Yet, the very bleakness of today's outlook has forced Africans to set aside their differences, and reassess priorities on the elephant. And that's a good thing. The African elephant, *Loxodonta africana*, has been at the center of conflict for too long – between people who favor sustainable use and people who favor protection. People who favor sustainable use believe that elephants should be managed commercially for both consumptive and non-consumptive uses and to protect the environment. People who favor protection believe that minimal interference, with only non-consumptive uses, such as game viewing, will allow nature to regulate itself.

Africa has responded in the past by accepting and sustaining ideological battles where none should exist. That has diverted attention from what really matters – and what can be achieved. And that's a pity, for Africa has actually played a more constructive role in elephant conservation in the past. The ideological differences reflect struggles and interests often well beyond conservation imperatives but nonetheless important to human-elephant welfare. In the past, for example, there has been significant disagreements on what constitutes the 'elephant problem,' or what is driving the illegal trade in ivory – is it really a struggle for the elephants' survival or a struggle for human survival or both?

But that is changing. It has taken almost ten years, and spanned several official meetings including a series of African Elephant Range States Dialogue meetings in Dakar (1996), Darwendale (1997), Arusha (1998), Nairobi (2000), Santiago (2002) and Bangkok (2004). Through this process, African Elephant Range States recognized four important benchmarks that provide good basis for meaningful dialogue – and progress. First, the history and conservation status of elephant populations varies greatly across the continent. Jumbos are subject to highly variant levels of management and threats in different parts of Africa. That creates uncertainty and danger, not only for the jumbos in those areas, but the future of jumbo populations across the continent.

Second, illegal ivory trade is on the increase. Ivory seizure records from ETIS (the Elephant Trade Information System), one of the two formal monitoring systems for elephants under CITES, shows that illegal ivory trade is on the rise. The increase is most visible in 35 countries, the most problematic being China and Nigeria, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo and Thailand. These four countries have some of the

largest unregulated domestic ivory markets in the world, demonstrate poor law enforcement effort and efficiency and exert the greatest influence on illegal ivory trade, according to TRAFFIC, who manages ETIS. Even though CITES has singled these countries out for special oversight attention, all African Elephant range States that allow domestic ivory trade now have to show compliance with CITES regulations or face the possibility of punitive measures under the Convention.

Third, in some range States current elephant populations may be unsustainable. 'Too much of anything can't be good for you' runs a common proverb. And clearly Africa isn't setting out to challenge folk wisdom. Doing so would threaten the fame of some of Africa's wildlife parks and the fragile relationship with African Parks' neighbors. Nobody knows exactly how many elephants exist in all of Africa. But where elephants are known to exist in very high densities, Africa is generally agreed that some form of management is appropriate.

Finally, some populations are known to exist along border areas of Africa. They move freely with little care for border control. Yet given the security situation in parts of Africa, border populations are often much more prone to illegal killing. That poses great difficulty for management. And that poses greater challenges for creating transboundary-protected areas.

Alive to these challenges, southern African governments and civil society under the auspices of the African Wildlife Consultative Forum and with the support of the World Conservation Union, its Species Survival Commission's African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) and the World Wide Fund for Nature, have stepped up their effort to find a solution that could sustain the jumbo in southern Africa – and win the support of the rest of the continent.

At a meeting held in June 2004, southern Africans agreed to a process for defining their regional elephant management plan. Thus far, a meeting has been held sifting through the ecological, social and economic data to determine what is working and what the future holds for a joint collaborative management framework. That's a good thing if it works and for the first time, efforts are now underway to drum up consensus on common management approaches, including joint research, monitoring and population management, as well as public relations plans that can once and for all deal with the elephant problem in southern Africa.

For example, reports show that despite previous management attempts, elephant populations have continued to grow at very high rates in southern Africa. The southern African region is home to some 246,000 elephants, with Botswana (100,000) and Zimbabwe (81,000) having the largest populations according to the IUCN Species Survival Commission. Botswana alone has the highest elephant population in the world. Other countries in the region are estimated to be home to between 36 and 14,000 animals each. Elephants are estimated to be growing at an average rate of about five percent and some southern African countries face a real risk of compromising their biodiversity objectives if they do not reduce their jumbo populations. Throughout the region, elephants have encroached upon rural areas, leading to increased pressure to constrain elephant populations in relation to human and livestock populations and subsistence agricultural practices.

But some previous sub-regional management efforts have broken Africa into fiercely opposing camps. It's easy to see and understand the source of conflict. Countries in central and eastern Africa have faced different threats to their elephant populations. In addition to elephant damage to habitats, many countries have also been subject to heavy poaching threats and thriving but largely unregulated domestic markets. With shrinking wildlife law enforcement budgets, these countries have been unable to control elephant poaching. Data from ETIS over the period 1994 and 2004 indicate that in fact the presence of large-scale unregulated domestic ivory markets – feeding an illicit international trade – is the main problem. According to these data, increasing illegal ivory trade can be attributed to two factors – the emergence of China's powerful economy and its rapidly growing market demand and the presence of large scale unregulated domestic ivory markets in Africa and Asia.

Habitat destruction and human – elephant conflicts have also proven difficult challenges. Jumbos have increased to levels where they cannot be restricted to protected areas without risking considerable loss of biodiversity and habitats. They are a pest on domestic crops and livestock and compete with other animals for forage. Clearly, they need some form of management.

So what options does southern Africa have? The short answer to that question is: 'wrong question!' James Murombedzi, the Regional Director of IUCN's southern Africa Program, points out "there are several management models available today that have been used in the past by different countries in southern Africa to stabilize elephant populations." The problem for southern Africa is not the lack of options. It's getting African and ultimately global consensus and commitment to using these methods and approaches, including consensus on such sticky issues as whether or not ivory and hides that result from harvesting and management practices should enter the international markets.

The options include moving elephants to areas of low population density, culling elephants to some acceptable population levels, contraceptive treatments to limit reproduction, or creating additional range through changes in land use within and across international borders.

It's easy to see why these methods have proven contentious in the past. Translocation is an expensive indulgence – far beyond the budgets of poor countries that are struggling to meet domestic food requirements. Culling requires political acceptance and high levels of human skills and technology to be successful. Besides being morally objectionable for some, culling also requires a good understanding of population dynamics of jumbos. Contraception has been largely experimental and is not currently seen as a population control method for large elephant populations. Also, the outlays of money required are perhaps economically and morally unjustifiable. Creating additional range has faced stiff challenges from other land use options – and Africa's need for land to resettle many of her landless people.

Clearly, these are difficult issues. That is why the decision by the African Wildlife Consultative Forum, the World Conservation Union and its Species Survival Commission's African Elephant Specialist Group, and supporting institutions to develop a southern Africa elephant conservation strategy has created so much excitement and hope for sustaining the world's love affair with the jumbo.

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