

They Kill Elephants

Don't They

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On the Chobe riverfront, the place looks as though it's been bombed by high explosives. The shores are a muddy quagmire, trees are broken off, underbrush is nonexistent. Elephants crowd flank to flank in the river spraying water on themselves, or meander among the remaining trees, splintering the air with the sound of breaking branches as they stuff the greenery into their mouths. They have enormous appetites, each adult elephant consuming between 300 and 600 pounds of vegetation a day, plus 40 gallons of water.

Watching wild elephants like these makes it hard not to conclude that their lives form a rich and complex tapestry. They raise their young in extended matrilineal families, great-grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers and sisters looking over calves with a care and affection they don't hesitate to lavish on themselves. They talk, they call, they rub flanks, they touch each other with their trunks, intertwining them in what can only be described as the proboscidean equivalent of a human hug. In the distance you can see herds of males, one of them walking up to a tree and pushing it over with his head, then stepping back to cast a sly glance at his fellows, indicating, "Beat that." And one of them will accept the challenge, pushing over a slightly larger tree.

Remove our technology and it's hard to see how elephants are all that different from us, right down to the way they linger over their dead, their

wilted body language signifying grief by anyone's definition of the word.

All of which makes it profoundly difficult to figure out what to do with so many of them as they've begun to trash the woodlands of Africa's wildlife reserves like Botswana's Chobe National Park, Zimbabwe's Hwange and South Africa's Kruger. Today, wildlife experts are at loggerheads over how to deal with a species that has become a runaway train. The former warden of Hwange National Park suggests that Botswana alone should begin to kill 25,000 elephants a year, allowing trophy hunters to do some of the shooting.

Although the number is arguable, numerous wildlife veterinarians agree that culling elephants may be the only option for saving African forests and the many other species of wildlife that depend on them. Other ecologists view what's happening as a natural process and insist that the elephants be left alone. The conflict isn't new, but it has taken on more stark proportions as Africa's human population has exploded during the past two decades. In addition, wildlife biologists now have more accurate measuring tools to assess ecological damage, or lack thereof, enabling them to bolster their case for or against killing elephants. In the end, it's a conflict over how to control nature, one that revives an old colonial song over who should decide the fate of Africa's natural resources.

But right about now most everyone

in North America and Europe is asking, aren't elephants an endangered species? Well, yes and no.

In July 1989, Richard Leakey, the director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, torched a pile of ivory worth \$3 million in a telegenic moment that highlighted the so-called plight of African elephants and galvanized world opinion in favor of a worldwide ivory ban, just in time for the upcoming, biannual CITES meeting. (CITES -- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora -- is a U.N.-sponsored agreement between governments that aims to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants doesn't threaten their survival.) However, the southern African nations of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe protested that their national parks were well policed, their elephant herds weren't threatened by poaching, and a split listing was justified for African elephants. A split listing would mean that ivory from East African elephants would be taken off the world market and ivory from southern African elephants would be legally traded, with its proceeds going to fund wildlife conservation.

Their pleas fell on deaf ears. The East African nations -- who indeed were losing elephants to poachers -- persuaded the CITES delegates to vote for a total ivory ban, helped by intense pressure from the U.S. delegation and the lobbying of international animal rights organizations. Elephants were listed as endangered -- placed on CITES' Appendix I -- embargoing trade in their products and implanting the notion in the public mind that all African elephants were hovering on the brink of extinction.

That notion was false then, and it's more so now. Since the 1989 CITES protocol, elephant populations have rebounded. In East Africa, they've increased because the ivory ban has

worked as planned, removing the fiscal incentive to poach. In southern Africa, where about 60 percent of Africa's elephants live, the species has continued to do what it's always done, and that is reproduce abundantly.

Female elephants can breed at 10 years old and give birth every four years until they're into their 50s. According to the latest figures, about 300,000 elephants inhabited southern Africa in 2002, with another 200,000 in the rest of the continent. Given the annual increase of elephants, their 2004 population now stands at about 560,000 individuals, and more than a few wildlife biologists have begun to worry that the pachyderms are eating themselves, and other wildlife, out of house and home.

To air the problem, the Netherlands' Prince Bernhard Nature Fund convened an international workshop in November 2003. As the organizing committee put it, "[The] recovery in elephant numbers within both National and privately owned game parks poses a threat to the survival of many other species." The committee went on to say that when elephants exceed the carrying capacity of a game park -- in other words, when there are more elephants than the food will support -- not only do they begin to starve but all the species that rely on woodlands for food and shelter are also affected. These species include a wide spectrum of the continent's fauna -- squirrels and bush babies, falcons and eagles, bushbucks and red duikers, butterflies and geckos -- as well as forests of baobabs and hardwoods like ebony.

From the 1960s until the mid-1990s, burgeoning elephant populations, and the impacts they had on woodlands, were controlled by culling -- brutal but effective operations conducted by trained national park rangers. Elephants were shot with high-powered rifles -- entire family groups taken out within a few minutes, so

no survivors remained to deal with the shock and grief of seeing their families destroyed -- the meat sold to local communities, the hides tanned into leather and sold, and the ivory traded when it was still legal to do so. In the 1990s, international public pressure, and the threat of tourist boycotts mounted by animal rights organizations, brought culling to a close.

Today, a growing number of wildlife specialists in southern Africa would like to resume culling. One of the most outspoken is Ron Thomson, a provincial game warden in Zimbabwe and a national park director in South Africa's tribal homelands from 1975 to 1988, who personally culled more than 5,000 elephants and who is a firm believer in the human management and restoration of nature.

A hale 65, with a full head of white hair and intense blue eyes, Thomson lives near Pretoria and writes books that attempt to prove that elephants are destroying the richness of Africa's national parks. One of his most graphic examples is Botswana. He suggests that the nation (whose herds presently contain about 140,000 animals) begin to kill 25,000 elephants a year until its herd is reduced to 10,000 animals. At that point, ecological studies would be conducted to see whether the habitat can support this number of elephants. "I sincerely believe," he says, "that such a takeoff is necessary if Botswana is to save the species diversity of its national parks."

Of course, once upon a time, elephants would have utilized a forest and then moved on, letting it recover. Today they are prevented from dispersing by 8-foot-high electrified barriers built around wildlife reserves, designed to reduce conflicts between wildlife and rural farmers. Where parks aren't surrounded by wire, elephant dispersal is cut short by villages, livestock and roads, for female elephants and

their calves won't tolerate settled countryside. Thomson also notes that elephant dispersal is a slow phenomenon even through wild country. Like most humans, elephants prefer to stay with what is familiar, and it's only the young males that make the first exploratory journeys -- what might be called walkabouts -- when their habitat becomes overcrowded.

In the absence of such dispersals, Thomson would not only cull elephants with trained teams of rangers but would also open selected areas of the national parks to safari hunters, allowing them to take about 10 percent of the mature male animals. Today, some of the most avid of these hunters come from the United States, Germany, Russia and Japan, and they are willing to pay large fees for the opportunity to collect the tusks of older male elephants. A license for a male with ivory that weighs between 45 and 75 pounds per tusk is approximately \$45,000; an elephant with hundred-pound tusks can cost as much as \$100,000. (Females, who have small, slender tusks, are not hunted for trophies.) Hunting takes place in a variety of venues: private game ranches, tribal lands and some provincial wildlife reserves. This is big business in southern Africa. Annually, hunters in Botswana kill about 200 trophy elephants; regionwide, they leave behind \$80 million to \$100 million.

In Thomson's scheme, money generated from hunting within the national parks would be transferred to surrounding rural communities for such necessities as clean drinking water, schools and medical facilities. After all, he points out, before colonial times and the creation of these parks, elephants and the rest of Africa's fauna belonged to these local people -- and still should. Only in this way -- not by handouts of food and money but by genuine reenfranchisement, with the

communities managing their wildlife sustainably -- will some of Africa's rural poverty be alleviated and the poaching it fuels be stopped. This isn't the well-publicized kind of poaching of the 1980s in which gangs armed with AK-47s slew elephants and rhinos for their ivory and tusks; rather it's the ongoing, low-level poaching by farmers and pastoralists, using low-tech wire snares to capture sorely needed extra protein.

Not surprisingly, many people in the developed world despair at the thought of these intelligent, highly social animals being killed for hunters' trophy rooms even if it's in the cause of feeding Africa's poor. Yet, as Africans themselves point out, they, not North Americans or Europeans, have to live alongside the 10,000-pound animals, and elephants are less endearing when they're eating your crops or stepping on your children. Indeed, countless U.S. suburbanites may be able to sympathize. Studies done by state wildlife agencies show that when deer populations reach about 30 animals per square mile, a majority of homeowners tend to drop their reservations about killing wildlife so as to preserve their gardens, fend off collisions with their automobiles, and reduce the threat of contracting Lyme disease. The difference between Africa and the United States, Thomson reflects, is that the people who live around Africa's national parks are making \$300 a year and nothing will bring in cash better than selling wildlife for trophies. A recent Ford Foundation study backed up his contention. It revealed that trophy hunting remains one of the most reliable income generators for local communities -- one that often exceeds the revenues provided by photo tourism. In Zimbabwe, for instance, the CAMPFIRE program (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) returned \$15.9 million to local

communities between 1989 and 1999 by allowing them to manage their own wildlife for trophy hunting. A similar program in Namibia's Kalahari Desert, named LIFE (Living in a Finite Environment), has been funded by USAID and the World Wildlife Fund. LIFE is presently enabling the Ju/'hoansi San (formerly called Bushmen) to manage wildlife in their own homeland.

Such rural empowerment programs that include hunting -- at least in tribal lands bordering national park wildlife reserves -- raise few eyebrows among hands-on African conservationists who believe they must balance the needs of wildlife against those of impoverished people. They are also widely supported by the beneficiaries themselves. One fisherman, Mutembo Nyathi, expressed the views of several other Zimbabweans with whom I spoke when he told me that because elephants seasonally raid his village, he had never "attached much value to wildlife." The CAMPFIRE program took out the troublesome animals but, unlike the days when park rangers did the shooting, the money generated by the local safari concessionaire had built a school closer to his village, so his children didn't have to walk so far through countryside occupied by leopards, and had also provided clean drinking water via a well. Before, his family members had gotten water straight from the Zambezi River and, like many other people in his village, suffered a variety of gastrointestinal illnesses.

Yet programs such as CAMPFIRE are opposed by animal rights organizations. One of the most vocal has been the Humane Society of the United States. Its president and CEO, Wayne Pacelle, has said that African nations, as sovereign states, have the right to determine if wildlife will be hunted within their boundaries. Having the United States abet this hunting with financial aid (\$6.5

million as of 1999) is another matter. "Our general principle," he told me, "is that we don't support using Americans' hard-earned tax dollars for killing threatened species for trophies."

Ron Thomson retorts that the species frequently hunted -- lions, cape buffalo and elephants -- are hardly threatened, their populations numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In the meantime, in a seeming double standard, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has begun to claim victory in the recovery of grizzly bears and is suggesting that they be removed from the endangered species list -- opening them to hunting -- when only about 1,000 of them exist in the northern Rockies.

Why shouldn't Africa do business in a similar way? asks Thomson. By protecting animals in sacrosanct national parks and not allowing rural people to profit from them, the continent is heading toward a wildlife catastrophe. "We need to let wildlife uplift people. Elephants are not sacred. You tell me why we should favor 40-year-old elephants over 5,000-year-old baobab trees. We should be managing biomes -- floral and faunal entities -- not single species."

But for every person of Thomson's mind -- for instance, Ian Whyte, senior scientist in South Africa's Kruger National Park, and Chris Foggini of Zimbabwe's Wildlife Veterinary Unit, who agree that culling may be the only realistic option left for preserving the biodiversity of the parks -- there are others who think that culling is anathema. One is professor Rudi van Aarde, 53, the head of the Conservation Ecology Research Unit at the University of Pretoria, a man with thick gray hair, hooded blue eyes, and a laptop full of PowerPoints. During the past 12 years he's devoted himself full time to the study of elephants and presently has

74 collared with global positioning system locators, roaming over 3.5 million square miles of southern Africa. From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, they represent what he calls a “metapopulation” -- a collection of elephant populations across the range of the species. “What drives this population,” he tells me, “is the interaction between its different units.”

Moving between his laptop’s geographic information systems maps and bar graphs, he notes places where elephants have a high birthrate and are densely populated. In other locales, elephants have low birthrates, or very high death rates, and are scarce. In still other areas, elephants have been absent for decades and then, suddenly, will start to recolonize the empty niche. What is crucial to remember, he goes on to say, is that north, east and west of the largest elephant subpopulations in southern Africa -- Botswana and Zimbabwe -- lie places in Angola, Mozambique and Zambia where human populations are very low, in fact fewer than three people per square mile, making them ripe for recolonization by elephants. Elephants could make the trek without too much difficulty since the distance between any of the existing large conservation areas -- say, between those in Botswana and those in Zambia -- is only about 180 miles.

“We don’t have people living all around Africa,” he emphasizes. “It’s a figment of the imagination.”

The other factor to keep in mind is that the problem of too many elephants is largely manmade. “National parks have drilled dozens of watering holes, enabling elephants to survive and live where historically they couldn’t,” he says.

In turn, the wells have dramatically increased viewing opportunities for eco-tourists and have now -- a half-century into the experiment

-- institutionalized mega-wildlife populations that the tourist industry advertises and is loath to see diminished. Here, van Aarde and Thomson are on exactly the same page. Both believe Africa’s parks could do with fewer elephants, but they disagree on the means to achieve that end.

“These artificial water sources should be closed,” van Aarde says, “and drought allowed to keep elephant numbers at bay, as it has done for thousands of years. We have the natural forces to control elephants, if we’d only let them operate.”

When it comes to losses of biodiversity -- vanishing woodland species and broken trees, the kind of damage epitomized by the Chobe riverfront -- van Aarde is far less exercised than Thomson. On his laptop, he launches a graph depicting elephant populations against a timeline. It shows that at the onset of the ivory trade in northern Botswana in 1896, thousands of kilograms of tusks were exported yearly. Elephant populations subsequently collapsed just as rinderpest -- an acute infectious disease affecting both livestock and wildlife -- swept through Africa. With elephants gone, the trees in Chobe began to flourish. With impala and kudu wiped out by rinderpest, the new trees that these two species would have cropped flourished. The riverfront became lush, providing food for elephants. Decades later, the pachyderms are back in force.

With a wave of his hand, van Aarde dismisses those who believe that elephants are causing a biodiversity crisis. “If we limit ourselves to one site, we can become concerned; but if we look at the region in total, we have places where lots of elephants have taken away the trees, and -- just a short distance away -- we have thick forest. In other words, the forest reappears someplace else. People who want to

cull,” he concludes, “are out of the colonial mode, chaps who like to control.”

Rather than fall prey to this antiquated way of thinking, van Aarde believes, we should wait for elephants to move on their own. Pointing to a map, he says, “The longest straight-line distance between any two sites occupied by elephants in southern Africa is about 68 miles. At six miles per year, which is the distance elephants were shown to travel during their colonization of Kruger National Park, that means it takes less than one elephant generation, 13 years, to make the journey.”

Van Aarde flatly disagrees with those who claim that elephant dispersal is hemmed in by fences and humanity. Around small reserves in South Africa and Zimbabwe, their movements are impeded. But these reserves are what he calls “zoos” -- theme parks where human manipulation of wildlife can be justified. In the lightly populated areas of Mozambique, Zambia, and Angola, the elephants of Namibia, Botswana, and northern Zimbabwe have terrain that awaits them. He sits back with an air of conviction. “This is not something we should be worrying about.”

Yet African park managers continue to do so. And many are now focusing on nonlethal solutions to control elephants -- so as to forestall a tourist boycott that might cut off the stream of dollars and euros that flood Africa each year if culling were reintroduced.

One is translocation -- literally picking up elephants and moving them -- although it’s no easy matter. It involves darting the animals from helicopters with anesthetics, winching them onto flatbed trucks, moving them into transport containers on massive conveyor belts, waking them up with reversal drugs, and finally driving them hundreds of miles to

places that have fewer elephants. At a cost of \$1,500 per elephant, it's a cool \$150 million to move only about half of Botswana's and Zimbabwe's elephant population into new habitat. African states can't even come close to investing this sort of money in translocating elephants, nor is it likely that the NGOs of Europe and North America, or their elephant-loving people, will.

Another solution -- one that has been favored by animal rights organizations -- is to put elephants on birth control. In the late 1990s, South Africa's Kruger National Park tried the experiment, funded by the Humane Society of the United States. The drugs were delivered by darting the elephants from helicopters, and the experiment proved that elephants could be injected for about \$35 per individual and that about 75 percent of the adult female population would have to be treated to achieve zero population growth. The catch is that elephants are as long-lived as humans, having a life span of 60 to 70 years. Until the elephants on birth control die, they will continue to eat the woodlands upon which all those other species -- birds and butterflies, reptiles and antelope -- depend. Contraception is also plagued by an ethical concern nearly as large as the one involved with killing elephants to save the forest. No one has a clue as to what putting thousands of elephants on birth control will do to elephant society, based as it is on many generations of related females raising children in extended family groups.

When I ask van Aarde what he thinks of these schemes, he replies, "When you can rely on natural means, why rely on artificial ones? Given enough time and space, the elephants will take care of themselves."

It's doubtful that it will be that simple. With the tremendous pressures that both rural people and too many

elephants are putting on African parks, it's likely that a multipronged approach will evolve: culling where politically feasible, translocation if the funds become available, contraception in smaller reserves, and natural dispersal during the next few decades. The hardest hurdle of all may be overcoming how the developed world continues to view the big, gray shambling animals, and their equally large personalities, out of context with their environment. It's not a mistake that rural Africans easily make. When one of my fellow journalists asked an African teenager why he thought elephants were bad, the boy answered in three words: "They kill me."