

# Africana



Incorporating WWF —  
Kenya's "Panda News"

## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Why resurrect the dead elephant issue?

by  
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IT is curious that after five years of the most uncontrolled killing of elephants for ivory since the turn of the century, the question of culling these animals in East Africa's parks and reserves should be resurrected once again. What is not so surprising is that the impetus for this debate should come almost entirely from outside Africa.

In this issue of the magazine, Peter Beard re-states what he considers should have been done in Tsavo ten years ago; and, on a scientific plane, Leslie Robinette and Prof. Lyttle Blankenship, in the last issue, called for *Sense not Sentiment on Culling the Game*. Their thoughtful and lucid statements clearly expound the views of a certain school of wildlife management — but how to deal with "excessive numbers of elephants" — unfortunately, however, the debate is out of date. The key elephant populations cited have declined massively due to poaching for ivory and there are few areas left in East Africa which can be said to have a "problem" of overcrowded elephants.

For people who may not know about this "problem", we offered an outline in a book about elephants in Manyara in the late sixties: "...Owing to human expansion, the parks and game reserves have become the elephants' only safe refuge. The ranges of elephants are now confined to islands of wilderness lapped by seas of humanity. Not only are they prevented from wandering, but their numbers have been swelled by the invasion of countless refugees fleeing from human persecution. This now causes wholesale woodland destruction as typified by (the loss of) *Acacia tortilis* in Manyara. What should National Parks do about it?"

Our statement ignored the problem of 75 per cent of Africa's elephants which live outside protected areas (as we found out in later surveys); but it was true for many of the protected elephant "islands" of East Africa. Park administrators faced a dilemma of whether or not to initiate shooting programmes.

In the event, active culling has become an integral part of wildlife management in Rhodesia and South Africa; but, apart from a preliminary cropping scheme in Uganda, the elephant populations were left alone in East Africa — a policy often described as "laissez faire", or minimum interference with natural ecosystems. For many wildlife areas, where trained manpower and funds are short, "laissez faire" has been the only practical policy.

The advocates of this policy argued that whenever man intervenes he tends to upset the "balance of nature". Moreover, they believed that the killing of wildlife inside wildlife sanctuaries is entirely wrong in principle and likely to open a whole Pandora's box of economic incentives which would undermine

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the objectives of the National Parks.

This school claimed that if only the elephants were left alone, their populations would eventually obtain a dynamic balance with the habitat. If woodlands were destroyed in the initial stages of elephant over-population and compression, the process was not considered irreversible, but a part of a natural cycle of destruction and regeneration in which elephants have always played a part — a cycle which is only temporarily "unbalanced" by the influx of refugees. They also considered that establishing an expertise, tradition and bureaucracy for wildlife cropping would be irreversible, an inferior alternative to a temporary reduction of woody vegetation.

Perhaps the most articulate exponent of the opposing view was Dr. R. M. Laws, who carried out fundamental research on elephant populations in the 'sixties and argued that since man had created the "problem", it was only logical that man should solve it.

He and others who followed him endorsed a policy of elephant culling to counteract the excessive immigration or to regulate the build-up caused by breeding. The aim of this was to restore a balance between the elephant and its habitat, where natural regulatory checks could once more operate, or to keep a permanent check on an expanding population.

This school held that the changes induced by elephants might prove to be irreversible and even lead to the extinction of the elephants themselves, or other woodland-dependent species, in the very area set aside for their survival. This again would be irreconcilable with conservation objectives.

A valid sentimental argument was also introduced, that shooting elephants was preferable to the spectacle of thousands of them dying slow lingering deaths from starvation.

Of this school are the Texas A & M University scientists, Robinette and Blankenship, who are still calling for professional people to take a stand on the continuing destruction of habitat in many East African national parks by excessive numbers of game animals, particularly elephants. They claim that the removal of man as a natural predator within these wildlife sanctuaries, together with the immigration factor, has created elephant densities far in excess of what the habitat can accommodate. Kabalega and Ruwenzori parks in Uganda; Serengeti, Arusha, Manyara, and Ruaha in Tanzania; and Tsavo and Amboseli in Kenya, were all cited as examples of parks where elephant damage has been recognised. They call for the removal of surplus animals before any more precious time and habitat are lost.

However, the culling which these authors advocate has in effect been carried out by poachers. In Kabalega, for instance, where there were at least 8,500 elephant south of the Nile in 1967, we counted only 1,232 in 1976 (Parker and Douglas-Hamilton, 1976 a cull for exceeding the modest recommendations of Laws and Ian Parker. This scale of decline for Kabalega has been independently monitored by two Uganda-based scientists, Keith Eltringham and Robert Malpas. (Africana, November, 1976.)

In Tsavo, it is well known that at least 6,000 elephants, and possibly far more, died from starvation between 1970 and 1971; what is less well-known is that Dr. Stephen Cobb's thorough census indicated

that 35,000 elephants remained in the Tsavo ecosystem immediately after the drought induced crash and up to 1975.

A second more drastic crash then occurred. According to our own IUCN survey count, and the Kenya Ministry's own figures, the present Tsavo elephant population is around 20,000, and possibly far fewer. Since there was no major elephant starvation after 1975, we believe that the cause was mostly poaching for ivory, a conclusion supported by the parks staff on the spot during the period.

If the future for elephants in Tsavo is now bleak, as the US scientists suggest, it is certainly not because there are too many, nor because the habitat is incapable of supporting those that remain — but rather because there is a real risk that poachers could wipe out the remnant population if the anti-poaching forces should relax in vigilance.

Suggestions that the habitat has been permanently damaged appear to be ungrounded. According to the only

# The future for Tsavo-dense bush?

scientist who has studied the soils, Willem van Wijngaarden, there is no evidence that the soils have been physically or chemically altered or eroded during the period when drought and elephants removed the cover of vegetation.

Likewise, although the elephants have pushed over big trees, young ones continue to germinate, and will probably shoot up rapidly now that the elephant pressure has been reduced. Given normal rains over the next fifteen years, it is not unlikely that the habitat will return to dense commiphora bush.

In the meantime, much of the Park has become pasture suitable for grazing species, and pressure to open it for livestock is a threat which may be anticipated.

It seems that the rate at which woodland can regenerate from severe cutback was consistently under-estimated in the sixties, when the cull-or-not-to-cull debate was at its height. For instance, a number of sisal estates in Tsavo area, abandoned in the late fifties, are now covered in dense 20 ft. high acacia. Similarly, in Kabalega with its higher rainfall, an elephant "exclusion plot" established in 1967 became well forested with tall acacia sieberiana nine years later (see picture inside).

The mortality caused by poaching is also reflected in the appearance of large numbers of elephant carcasses. In 1969 when Laws was working in Tsavo, these were so infrequent that they were not even considered worth recording. But, by 1976, the government authorities recorded more dead than live elephants within a

systematic pattern of aerial transects. Large dead-to-live ratios have also been observed in Serengeti, Tarangire, Mkomazi, Mara, Amboseli, Galana, Tana River, Lamu, Meru, Samburu, Kabalega and Ruwenzori, in a series of counts by different research teams.

The heaviest poaching seems to have occurred wherever there was good road access into and around elephant areas. In fact, up until last year, only a few elephant populations in the undeveloped, remoter regions of southern Tanzania, had escaped heavy predations by ivory poachers.

In Kenya, by comparing census data of different periods and extrapolating trends, the IUCN Elephant Survey estimated that in 1977, between 55,000 and 75,000 elephants remained in the country — which is less than half the figure estimated at a Government seminar in 1973 Africana, 1976. This estimate, tabulated by Dr. Kes Hillman was confirmed by the Kenya Rangeland Ecological Monitoring Unit (KREMU) in an independent survey which, in 1977, put forward a figure of 60,000 elephants for Kenya's rangelands, plus several thousand in the heavily forested areas of the Mountain Parks.

In a few places, such as Ruaha and Luangwa, where elephants are still found at high densities, either culling or "laissez faire" may be legitimate management practices. An FAO team for instance, which surveyed the Luangwa Valley in 1972 recommended that reduction culling should only be carried out in one half of the park, the other half being left as a "natural experiment".

Personally I have come to the conclusion that there is no simple answer to the problem of overcrowded elephants in Africa. Each park must be regarded as a separate entity, and managed solely on local considerations — its climate, size, observed fluctuations of plant and animal numbers, and its general vulnerability to gross ecological change — as well as the basic objectives of the park philosophy.

What has been difficult has been to convince the leading ecologists of the 'sixties, now living abroad, that there has been a radical ecological change, namely a spectacular rise in human predation. Furthermore, as Laws pointed out in the last issue, attitudes in East Africa towards the elephant problem have tended to be parochial, but perhaps among scientists as much as any other group.

The problems of elephants across the continent of Africa today may be restated:

- They are being killed in defence of crops, for their meat (especially in West Africa) and for their ivory;
- They are losing habitat to forestry, agriculture, and ranching;
- And, in possibly as little as five per cent of their range, they are pushing trees down faster than they can regenerate.

While the problem of what to do in these areas is important, it is not one which should blind ecologists, conservationists or parks management to the major short-term threat to the elephant — which is still poaching for ivory, triggered by the rapid rise in price in 1973.

The major long-term threat is loss of habitat. And for the National Parks, the major challenge in the future will be to defend their territorial integrity against rival human and economic pressures. What is needed from ecologists is an ecumenical approach to meet this challenge — not muddy recriminations about how long-dead elephants should have been killed earlier.

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