

ZIMBABWE'S HWANGE ELEPHANTS

THREATENED BY THEIR OWN SUCCESS

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Ecomentaries specialises in conservation storytelling and raising awareness on the plight of threatened species all around the world. Recent work includes covering the trades of shark finning in Mozambique, lion hunting in Zimbabwe, seal culling in Namibia, and manta ray fishing in Indonesia.

It looks as rosy a conservation picture as an African sunset: some 30,000 elephant wandering a vast landscape the size of Northern Ireland; an undeveloped and rich wilderness boasting everything from cheetah to 400 bird species.

But major problems lurk amid the ilala palms and undergrowth. As each summer passes, Hwange draws closer to crisis point and park officials now face an impossible predicament – there are far more pachyderms than the landscape can support. What happens next?

Hwange National Park, tucked away in the Northeast corner of Zimbabwe, is one of Africa's largest and most prolific conservation areas. At over 14,600 square km the Park is enormous. Roads are tracks, lodges are hidden and safari vehicles are few and far between. Hwange is a rare and delightful example of what wildlife destinations were like before they became homogenized, commercial operations.

The Park features some of Southern Africa's most diverse landscapes, including miombo, teak forests, false mopane woodlands, and huge grassy savannahs. In amongst this vast scene roam herbivores, such as wildebeest, buffalo, impala, kudu, eland, sable and waterbuck, closely pursued by lions, leopard, cheetah, hyena and wild dog. And then there's the bird life - Hwange boasts over 400 species.

PHOTO BY: GEMMA CATLIN

A family of Elephants in line drinking water

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However, the Park's most famous residents are, unquestionably, its enormous herds of elephant. Enormous and getting bigger. Too big. How did it all happen?

The issues can be traced back to 1929 and the arrival of enthusiastic 22-year old Ted Davison - the Park's first warden. Each summer, Ted - a keen conservationist - watched with concern as Hwange's modest elephant populations migrated and returned in diminishing numbers. As human settlements developed, migration routes narrowed and conflicts between man and wildlife escalated.

Davison decided to end the animals' annual battle by offering them a year round 'suitable' and safe environment. In return he hoped tourism would thrive and generated revenues would secure the Park's future. It was a simple concept; tourists would create revenue; revenue would stimulate economic growth; economic growth would encourage community development; and community development would lead to education and the preservation of the Park. And so, with the best intentions, Davison dug wells and installed windmills.

But the year-round water supplies gave the elephants little reason to leave and their numbers quickly multiplied. Before long, Hwange was heralded as a significant wildlife destination and Davison was proclaimed a hero. No one could have foreseen what would happen to Hwange's 'moderate' elephant population.

With no natural predators - other than man - populations escalated at around 5% p.a. and doubled in less than a decade. Today, it is estimated that Hwange houses between 30-50,000 pachyderms: that's over double the Park's recommended carrying capacity. Too many elephants may seem like a nice problem to have, but - when the land can neither provide for nor protect them - it's a ticking time bomb.

The elephants' ineffective digestive systems mean they spend approximately 16 hours a day eating up to 600lbs of grass, leaves and shrubs. Based on these figures, we can estimate that Hwange's



Struggling out of a pool of muddy water



A lonely malnourished Elephant

PHOTOS BY: GENNA CATLIN

residents munch their way through over 10,000 tons of food every day. Yet from September to October, there simply isn't that much to go around.

Zimbabwe's summers can be brutal. Day after relentless day temperatures top 40 degrees. Every last scrap of food is quickly devoured and thousands of malnourished and thirsty elephants rove the desolate landscape. As they push and shove around arid pans their distressed bellows can be heard from afar. Skin stretches over impossibly thin torsos. Sunken skulls wrinkle with dehydration. The smell of death clings to the heavy air. And year after year,

as populations continue to rise, the elephants' struggle intensifies.

There are few people that have spent more time with elephants than Mark Butcher. The ex Provincial Wildlife Officer spent years watching National Park's struggle to pump the critical water supplies. His communal land's lodge, *Bomani*, employs a team of attendants that work night and day to ensure that pans covering over 30 square miles of Park never run dry. He has also founded *Imvelo Elephant Trust*, whose aim it is to find and implement a lasting solution to Hwange's giant elephant problem.

‘Butch’ concedes that maintaining the artificial situation is merely a “short-term band-aid.” However since the problem is inherent, and in the absence of alternative suggestions, he considers himself obligated: “I may believe that pumping water is not the answer, but I cannot bring myself to close down and watch hundreds, if not thousands, of animals die. We need to find some fair and realistic long-term solutions, that don’t involve simply turning off all the water - that would be catastrophic for Hwange,” he says.

However, world-renowned elephant expert Professor Rudi van Aarde maintains that it’s the very provision of water that issues the elephants’ death certificate: “If water is placed where the land cannot provide then we are setting an ecological trap. A non-suitable landscape that’s been made ‘suitable’ is still not suitable!” he argues “We’re advocating something is available when it’s not. That’s wrong. That’s not conservation.”

Van Aarde instead promotes ‘rezoning’. “Build ecological networks by interconnecting protected areas, including both ideal and non-ideal elephant habitat. This will enable elephants to move freely across the



A lone malnourished Elephant

land and for the availability of natural recourses to dictate their dispersal. They will thus become a structured population.”

Whilst this sounds like a great plan on paper, ‘rezoning’ would affect far more than the elephant. Hundreds, if not thousands of people would have to be re-housed. Not only would this exercise become a political and logistical nightmare, it would also cost millions. In one of the poorest countries in the world, which is still suffering decades of political turmoil, this plan appears futile. Perhaps we need to think again.

Chap Masterson, the director and veterinarian for Zimbabwe’s

Wildlife Veterinary Trust, has ample experience in contracepting wild animal populations. “At one stage, I believed that immunising animals against pregnancy may solve several conservation issues,” says Masterson. “After all, it’s simple, straightforward and humane. And for many years now it’s been hailed a wonderful way to address ‘elephant problems’.”

Chap’s work has also highlighted some elephant-sized stumbling blocks. “The trouble is, contraception can only reduce population growth rates over a period of time. To achieve a zero increase, 70% of Hwange’s elephants would have to receive an initial vaccine,



Crowded malnourished Elephants at waterhole

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a booster, and an annual follow up for at least ten years.”

This raises a number of logistical and financial issues. In recent years, Chap has also observed some incredibly worrying sociological and behavioral issues in contraceived populations. “We don’t yet know the long-term effects of contracepting a large elephant population. In a social species that are so geared towards reproductive success, the impacts could be catastrophic. Dare we take the risk? And is it really that humane after all?”

Dr. David Cumming, ecologist and ex National Park’s Deputy Director, believes immediate consideration must be given to the social and economic costs of allowing elephant populations to continue growing: the impact these populations will have on the delicate eco-systems and the much needed tourist industry. However, he concedes there seems to be no single solution.

It seems ironic that whilst other National Parks are losing elephants to poaching, Hwange has too many. Therefore, why not move Hwange’s elephants to areas that need them?

It’s been done before, whole family groups can be moved together and many countries are crying out for more elephants.

“Translocation, if you can find the space and money, may offer a viable option,” says Dr. Cumming. “But, how many elephants can you realistically translocate in a year?” he asks. “Maybe 500, say even 1000. But where are you going to put them? And aren’t we simply transferring a problem somewhere else?”

It seems that for smaller numbers it may work, and it could well become part of Hwange’s solution. But logistical issues aside, whilst it costs £1,500+ per animal and there’s minimal suitable space, it fails to offer the exclusive resolution.

Historically, many Southern African countries managed their elephant populations through culling. For years it was deemed an effective and manageable approach, and was in many cases endorsed by conservation groups such as WWF.

So could a staggered mass cull solve the problem? Sustainable numbers

could be achieved and suffering is comparably minor: starve to death in a locked room, or receive a single bullet to the head? However, images of ‘blood thirsty’ hunters and stories of dwindling elephant populations have turned culling into a political hot potato.

Not only is culling unpalatable, it would also quickly condemn Zimbabwe’s critical tourist industry. And even if such a thing were sanctioned, the elephant population is now so extreme that the necessary crop would require an impossible level of manpower, resources, experience and, of course, money.

Hwange’s elephant dilemma is surrounded by many more question marks, opinions and debates. Most people agree that something has to give. And soon. However, none of the proposed solutions are yet able to offer the silver bullet. Sadly, the most likely outcome seems to be a laissez-faire approach, which may – or may not - allow ‘nature’ to run its course. In all probability, the park will reach tipping point and one, or a number, of mass die-offs will occur. As painful images



Elephants en route to a water source pass a dead elephant



PHOTOS BY: GEMMA CATLIN

Family of Elephants trekking through dry vegetation

permeate the headlines, thousands of animals will suffer.

Elephants are a keystone species, which means they have disproportionate effects on their environment relative to their biomass. Thanks to their enormous appetites and penchant for pulling down trees, countless ecosystems and hundreds of species thrive. They are essential for the preservation of African landscapes and we, as the source of their demise, have an obligation to offer a fair and humane solution.

So what would happen if operators turned the water off? Well first of all, lots of elephants would die. Their

meat would then be left to rot in the bush - next door to thousands of starving people. Wildlife numbers would plummet and Hwange would no longer be considered an attractive tourist destination. The industry would collapse and communities would lose their major source of income. Animal, land and man would suffer.

At a local School, revenue generated by Imvelo has built a new classroom block, a library, ablutions and teachers' accommodation. The funds have enabled countless boreholes and manual pumps to be installed, ensuring villages have access to clean running water. Here, the community is passionate about wildlife. Animals, such as elephants, are their future. Subsequently, they report poaching activities, educate their children in conservation and work closely with tour

operators to protect the Park.

Only a few hours away, where the water pumps have been closed for many years now, a safari camp lies derelict and the fence dismantled for snares. To these villagers, wildlife is nothing more than a nuisance, a valuable source of protein or a poaching income. The children shelter in the shade, whilst their teacher battles to engage them. Faces are painfully thin and clothes dirty and ripped. Not one can afford a uniform.

The disparity between these two nearby communities proves the difference tourism makes to the preservation of National Parks and the wildlife. The wellbeing and survival of animals, including elephant, is responsible for these communities development, the protection of the land and ultimately the country's recovery. ●



Scavengers feeding on a dead Elephant

To learn more about Imvelo Elephant Trust visit:
www.imveloelephanttrust.com
 in partnership with:
www.ecomentaries.org