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Elephants Without Borders

Much public and political debate surrounds the hotly contested issue of the growing numbers of elephants in northern Botswana. A six- year, comprehensive research project examines the problem in depth, proposing a sensible and non-violent solution, one that is linked to other major conservation initiatives in the region

**By Linda Pfothenhauer
Photos by Kelly Landen**

One of the estimated 151,000 elephants in northern Botswana; Elephants Without Borders hopes to ensure this little calf's future.



“The last time I saw Papu was two years ago. He was in what we call elephant heartland – the centre of elephant territory in this part of Africa. I have seen up to 6,000 elephants amassed in that area. This is the last place in Africa where elephants can roam freely over vast, unfenced areas. People call this a problem. I see it as an opportunity.”

Dr. Michael Chase, wildlife ecologist, and Ms. Kelly Landen, wildlife researcher, have been counting, collaring, tracking, and figuring out the migration routes of elephants in northern Botswana, and adjacent countries, for the past six years.

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They run an NGO called Elephants Without Borders (EWB), and based on their ground-breaking research, they propose a radical, yet logical, solution to a long-standing, and worsening, problem – human-elephant conflict in northern Botswana and adjoining countries.

I am in their 4X4, moving through the bumpy, sandy roads of the riverfront area of the world famous Chobe National Park. We are looking for Papu, one of the 19 elephants which Michael has collared over the past several years. He had been seen in this area a few days ago, and after a two years' absence, Michael and Kelly are keen to find him.

“We last saw him in southern Chobe, two years ago. I suspect he’s waiting for the river’s floodwaters to recede, when he’ll continue to southwest Zambia. We’ve never recorded an elephant range that big before,” Michael explains.

Everything about the Elephants Without Borders project is big - goliath animals (earth’s largest land mammals) with huge food and water requirements, vast ranges, sweeping through areas of land that adjoin five southern African countries, and monumentally important conservation issues that have implications for virtually all wildlife species sharing habitat with this flagship species.

Crossing down one of the roads that hug the riverfront – absolutely full of every manner of wild animal - hippo, croc, sable, kudu, impala, and massive numbers of elephants, Michael continues

“I collared a bull elephant somewhere in the Francistown-Nata area. We satellite tracked him all the way to Sheshake in Zambia. He travelled 600 kilometres in one month’s time, crossing the Chobe River, the Zambezi, traversing four countries in one season. The area is full of veterinary fences, but some are in a state of disrepair. He would have had to negotiate the fences and move through densely populated areas to have reached Sheshake. This shows the immense ranges that elephants in this part of Africa have.”

The six-year research project, that included Michael’s successful defense of his PhD thesis, has revealed tremendously important information towards the conservation of Botswana’s elephants – the largest contiguous population of savannah elephant left on earth. Northern Botswana’s elephant population is now estimated to be 151,000; and it is part of a larger contiguous population with Angola, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe numbering a total of 210,000 elephants!

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Using sophisticated satellite telemetry with aerial survey and GIS data, EWB has mapped the 'path of least resistance' for elephants in their core trans-boundary region. It has put together a spatial elephant meta-population model and has mapped and assessed human-elephant conflict areas. It has reversed long-held assumptions about elephant migrations, and has resuscitated the argument for re-establishing and preserving trans-country wildlife corridors.



Dr. Chase and research assistant, Thanda Nkala, fitting a satellite collar

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the research project has shown that elephants move vast distances, according to seasons and availability of food and water. Their ranges span an area of over 200,000 square kilometres of largely uninhabited (but some densely populated) land that includes five separate countries – Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Angola and Zimbabwe.

Botswana's elephants have the largest home ranges recorded in Africa – 28,000 square kilometres, as opposed to 3,000 square kilometres in the rest of Africa. The EWB research also reveals that elephant ranges in Botswana and adjacent countries have increased by 20 percent in the last ten years, and that 65 percent of the elephant home ranges occur outside protected areas.

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The situation in southeastern Angola is particularly interesting. Savimbi's headquarters were situated there, and elephants in that region were historically persecuted. In fact, the wholesale slaughter of elephants in that area largely financed Angola's civil war.

Immediately after the war, there were no elephants left in the nearby Luiana Partial Reserve; but now numbers are growing – from 200 in 2003, to 500 in 2004, to 2800 in 2005.

“In effect, the elephants are going home,” asserts Michael. “Now that the area is peaceful and protected, the elephants are moving back to their original homeland.”

Why is there such a high elephant concentration in particular areas? Major factors include human population increase and encroachment, habitat fragmentation, an increasing number of veterinary fences, fires, agriculture, competition with domestic livestock, and poaching.

Michael says that Botswana's elephants' ability to move through such immense rangelands is due to the country's vast network of parks and reserves, and its very successful conservation management, one of the most successful in the world. “The great irony is that now that the elephants are doing well, people are saying there are too many elephants, and we have a problem,” he observes.

Successful conservation management in Botswana has boosted the elephant population, along with tourism.



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And that indeed is a hotly contested issue in Botswana at the moment, and one that has regularly surfaced over the past 20 or so years. A prevailing public perception is that there are too many elephants in Botswana, that they eat and damage villagers' and commercial crops, that they can be, and sometimes are, aggressive and dangerous, that they are destroying the vegetation of the Chobe riverfront and causing the demise of other wildlife species there, and that the situation is steadily worsening.

However, Michael strongly asserts, "There are no figures to support these value judgments." He adds that the concern that other wildlife species along the Chobe riverine are declining is unwarranted, and if anything, there has been an increase in the diversity and numbers of other wildlife species in that area.

What are the possible management solutions to the 'elephant problem' in Botswana?

For 'problem elephants' roaming areas near human settlements, eating crops and acting aggressively towards people, Michael is very clear and direct. He says the only solution to this type of situation is to harvest the problem animal; once this has been done, other elephants will naturally stay clear of that area.

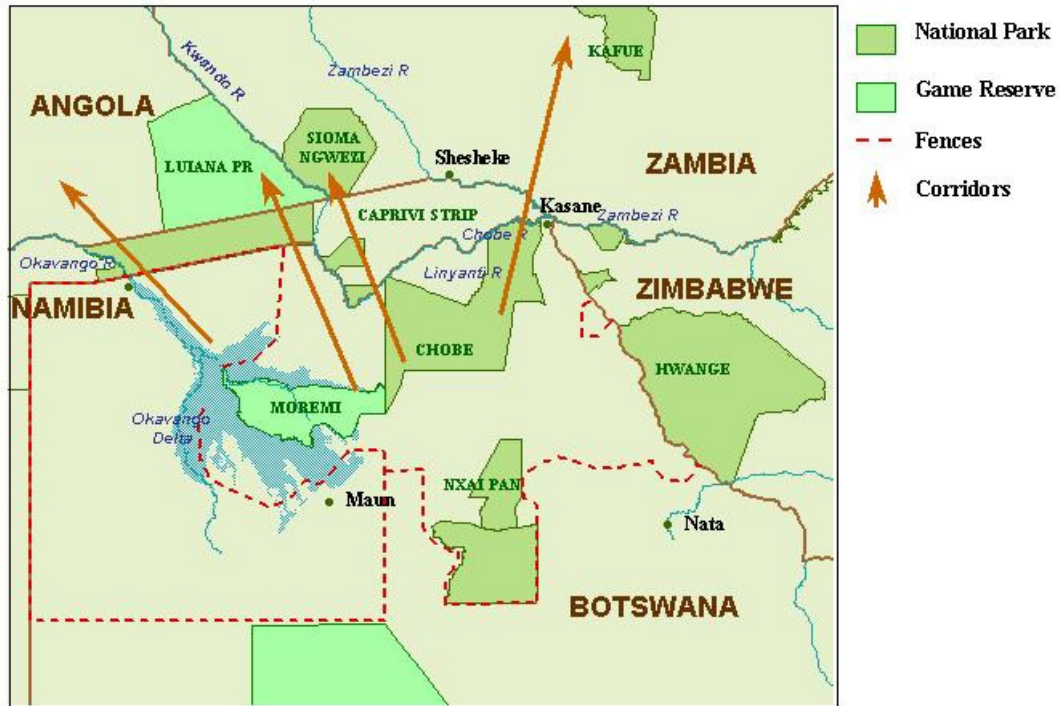
And what of the large majority of essentially peaceful, non-aggressive elephants?

Culling, i.e. the controlled killing of complete breeding herds of elephants, to bring down and control population numbers, is a strategy that has been debated for years. It had been practised in South Africa's Kruger National Park for decades, but was discontinued in 1992, due to contentious issues surrounding the 'acceptable carrying capacity' of the land, international pressure, and park officials' concern over the obvious effect it was having on the elephants' collective personality. Due to the violence and aggression directed towards them, many had become nervous, fearful, distrustful, skittish and at times aggressive. The question also arose - 'What amount of shooting would bring the population numbers to what would be deemed 'acceptable'?

Other possible solutions include the translocation of elephants, fencing and contraception; all have proved either ineffective and/or too expensive. And it is likely that none, culling included, would have the desired impact of reducing human-elephant conflict.

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Drawing on the extensive data and findings deriving from its research, Elephant Without Borders puts forward a sensible, well-thought-out and non-violent solution that follows current trends in wildlife management.



It proposes the establishment of four major wildlife corridors that would derive from the elephants' trans-boundary migration routes, and would allow the elephants – and other species - their natural seasonal movements through them. In effect EWB wishes to determine a large scale wilderness area that would help disperse elephants and other wildlife species back to their historical ranges. It would see the development of regional elephant management programmes.

“We now have the ability to better understand the migration routes of elephants, and the opportunity to let them tell us what they need, rather than to arbitrarily draw lines on a map,” says Michael.

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I'm now sitting on an anthill overlooking the Kwando River, and Kwando floodplains, in Mudumo National Park, in the Caprivi, Namibia - just a few kilometres away from the Botswana boundary. This is part of one of the four major wildlife conservation corridors EWB proposes, to facilitate the movement of elephants, and other wildlife species, through their natural seasonal migration routes.

These corridors are not new; they already exist, and are already being used by wildlife. What is new is EWB's proposal that they become conserved areas, through international cooperation, and the involvement of local communities.

Villages situated in the proposed corridors would be encouraged to set up community based tourism projects, such as photographic safaris, village walks

and cultural tourism, and the sustainable harvesting of elephants and other animals. This addresses the critical issues of unemployment and poverty in rural Africa, and is an important aspect of EWB.

"EWB is one solution to poverty, through the establishment of community based tourism projects," emphasises Michael.

EWB is thus intimately linked to Namibia's exemplary conservancy programme that puts natural resources and wildlife back in the hands of villagers through community based tourism projects. In fact, parts of the four proposed corridors run through already established conservancies in the Caprivi.

EWB is also linked to the proposed Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA-TFCA) that seeks to link more than 14 major protected areas across international boundaries to create an integrated conservation and tourism destination.

Covering an area of approximately 300,000 square kilometres, running across the five southern African countries of Botswana, Angola, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, this transfrontier park, when formally established, will be the largest TFCA in Africa with contiguous wilderness and wetlands, and has the potential to become the biggest tourism destination in southern Africa.

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Papu will
provide
EWB with
important
elephant
movement
information

The implementation of EWB would therefore ensure that the great bull, Papu - whom we never did find on that glorious ride through the Chobe that day – and the tens of thousands of other elephants that call Botswana home – will be free.

Free to live, reproduce and raise their young, free to seek food and water resources according to their needs, free to move across boundaries, following ancestral migration routes - as they have done for generations, because it is their right to do so, and because it is our responsibility to ensure that they do so.