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Klaserie Elephant Project: Progress Report

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PROPOSAL: We suggest an initial three to four week "on-the-spot" investigation of all aspects of the future reserve prior to any major expense being incurred on a full-scale study of the elephants.

- * Tongaland is located on the northeastern border of Southern Africa. It is bounded on the west by the Lemombo mountains and Swaziland, on the north by Mozambique, and on the east by the Indian Ocean. The area inhabited by the 20 to 30 elephants a refuge for some of the last elephants living outside a protected area in South Africa.

KLASERIE ELEPHANT PROJECT: PROGRESS REPORT

by Clive Walker

The Klaserie Private Nature Reserve is a 60,000-hectare privately owned game sanctuary proclaimed under the Administrator's Notice 104 of 26 January 1972.

Being one of the two privately owned game reserves in South Africa left with a relict elephant population, the reserve poses interesting management options in relation to water use and habitat requirements of the other major herbivores with the potential to support a larger elephant population. The reserve is situated south of Phalaborwa and west of the Kruger National Park, with the Olifants River forming the boundary in the north and the Klaserie River running through the centre. The Klaserie River represents an important migratory link with the Kruger National Park, providing a source of winter feeding.

In September 1977 the writer initiated the first aerial survey to determine the elephant population in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve. This resulted in a minimum estimate of, at least, three small breeding herds. Proposals were submitted to the Committee of Klaserie in July of that year and the subsequent approval led to the above project. Studies will also include questions such as the number of predators that can be supported in the area at what carrying capacities, since these animals provide the last link in the holistic picture of ecosystems' functions.

Indications are that there is a seasonal fluctuation in elephant numbers and distribution. This has resulted in two darting and marking programmes under the direction of the writer and in collaboration with the warden and the private landowners. The University of Pretoria is jointly involved with the Trust in the overall project, which is under the direction of Professor J. du P. Bothma. The Transvaal Division of Nature Conservation approved the project and we have been assisted by Dr. E. Young, whose department provided the drugs. Dr. Young carried out the immobilization.

A total of 13 elephants - 4 cows and 9 bulls - have thus far been fitted with coded collars, tusks stamped and silver nitrate techniques applied. Various measurements have been recorded and drug dosages and times noted. Plotting of elephant movements has begun, and the National Parks Board personnel have been advised. It is to be assumed that movement into the Kruger National Park could result in losses through culling. Potential losses of bulls south and west of the reserve present further concern.