Elephant

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Clive Walker

REPORT ON THE ELEPHANTS OF TONGALAND*

by Clive Walker

At the request of the Kwazulu government, the Endangered Wildlife Trust Elephant Group flew to Tongaland on the 11th and 12th of June, 1978. Our host was Bob Langeveld, a man with many years of experience in East and Central Africa and now the senior conservation officer for Kwazulu. The trip was arranged by Les Luckoff of the Kwazulu Conservation Trust. Contact with the authorities regarding the elephants of Tongaland was made some 12 months prior to the visit, when Dr. Iain Douglas-Hamilton expressed an interest in this elephant population after receiving a report from Dr. Anthony Hall-Martin.

Kwazulu is probably the tribal area in South Africa which has the best hitory of wildlife conservation and also one of the worst. In the latter instance, I refer to the anti-Ngana shooting campaigns of 1929-30 and 1942-50 which virtually exterminated all the large game species, and it was only in the thick Sand Forest areas, viz. 'Sihangwane,' where any wildlife managed to survive at all. That we still have a remnant population of the African elephant in this northern part of Tongaland is partial proof of the fact that this dense sanctuary is suitable and is their last home. The elephants inhabit an area named after the Induna Sihangwane and a nearby swamp area named Mosi. This has led to the elephants being referred to as "the elephants of Mosi/Sihangwane."

For many years it has been thought that these elephants were only wandering bulls, but recent reports indicated that there may possibly be cows present. The future of these elephants depends on their presence. However, for the moment, the existence of these cows must be doubted because of lack of really reliable observation. Bob Langeveld has spent five years in the area and has never seen a cow, and observation of spoor of cows is suspect because of the nature of the sand. Indications are that bulls are predominant in this area, but it is to be hoped that cows do exist as a result of movement out of Mozambique. Only future study will reveal this answer.

The uncertainty about the specific nature of these populations underscores the need for reliable knowledge of all aspects of the ecology of these elephants. The Kwazulu Conservation authorities are concerned and are anxious to do something and have plans in hand. The area of Sihangwane has already been set aside as a future wildlife area, but it is not without problems. The elephants that are present in the area come, in various ways, into conflict with man, the main problem being crop damage and water use to the exclusion of cattle. The extent and nature of these problems have a distinct influence on the economy and sociology of the inhabitants of the area.

Contrary to certain reports, the size of the area that will ultimately be available to elephants will be very much less, and here the question of containment looms large. In order to conserve the elephants, basic data must be collected, taking into consideration habitat and water use in relation to elephants and other species of wildlife as guidelines. Also, it is necessary to study population numbers with the aim of producing an elephant management scheme which will be mutually beneficial to both man and elephant.

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.