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EDITORS' NOTE: the following two articles by Hagos Yohannes and Shoshani *et al.* compliment each other.

**REPORT ON DAMAGE CAUSED BY ELEPHANTS TO BANANA
PLANTATIONS IN HAYKOTA AREA, ZOBA GASH-BARKA, ERITREA**

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Before the commencement of armed struggle, when human and livestock populations and agricultural activities were relatively less dense, the elephant range in Eritrea extended from the Setit (Tekezze) in the south to the Gash River in the north, a distance of about 65-70 km. However, with the advent of the liberation war and the chaotic 30 years that followed, this elephant range seemed to have shrunk to a strict minimum around the Antore area in Eritrea and the Shire area in northern Ethiopia. Hearsay is that the elephants used to migrate to the west as far as the Sudan in search of food and tranquillity. One way or another, they have managed to survive the long and difficult period during which protection of wildlife in general, and that of elephants in particular, was not even a secondary objective. Considering the then prevailing conditions, the persistence for survival shown by the elephants is certainly an important encouraging factor for their future protection and welfare.

When the era of war and chaos was replaced by the era of peace and stability over the entire region in 1991, elephant migratory habits began to steadily modify. In a reconnaissance survey undertaken in late 1993, elephants were more or less contained along the Setit River on both the Eritrean and the Ethiopian sides. However, the 1996 survey revealed that the elephants seemed to have adopted their old migratory routes, traveling northwards up to Haykota (or Haicota), thereby getting into direct confrontation with farmers by starting to invade banana plantations. As a result, human-wildlife conflict has become a major problem that demands a solution, no matter how difficult that solution may appear.

OBJECTIVES OF THE SHORT TRIP

A short trip by the Department of Wildlife Conservation to the Haykota area where the elephants have reportedly caused damage to banana plantations, was undertaken from June 5 through June 8, 1996 in order to:

- a). evaluate the extent and seriousness of the damage,
- b). meet concerned farmers and listen to what they have to say,
- c). contact zonal administration authorities to discuss future conservation plans with regard to elephant, and
- d). evaluate bush-fire damage of the surrounding elephant habitat intentionally started by some individuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE AREA VISITED

Kabat — a banana plantation area some 10 km to the southeast of Haykota town, a 3 hectares (0.03 square km) concession owned by Ato Ibrahim Taher and an adjacent 20 hectares (0.2 square km) concession owned by Ato Solomon Hagos. Both these plantations have recently been raided by a small herd of elephants of 10-15 individuals. According to first-hand information given by the plantation workers, the elephants destroyed most of the central shoots of the banana plants. Some trampling effects were also conspicuously visible. Elephant dung was seen everywhere in the banana fields, an undeniable proof that the damage was attributed to elephants.

One of the farmers, Ato Solomon, has already started to replace banana with citrus fruits as a direct consequence of what the elephants had done to the banana plants. This may prove to be a judicious decision in the long run. The damage perpetrated by elephants is quite considerable even though no systematic evaluation method was applied to support this fact.

Gurasha — a plantation area some 3-4 km to the south of Haykota town, a 3 hectares (3 square km) concession owned by Ato Abdullahi Idris and a number of other small holdings along the Gash River owned by different persons. Damage to Ato Abdullahi's bananas was extensive, and he feared the elephants would return. Other adjacent small holdings were more damaged, such as that of Ato Yebio's.

As a counter-reaction to what the elephant had done to their banana plantations, some workers intentionally set fire to the doum-palm vegetation in the immediate vicinity. According to evaluated reports done by representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture of the area, some 40 hectares (0.4 square km) of doum-palm and other trees and shrubs were burned. This occurred in the month of March, 1996. The effects of the fire on the vegetation in general was less conspicuous at the time of the trip, as a firebreak limited the spread and most of the doum-palm had regenerated. Undergrowth vegetation and small wildlife species suffered more than the doum-palm. Those persons who set fires in this area have been apprehended and the case is under investigation. According to local information, this illegal act was committed to chase the elephants away from their "hiding places".

DISCUSSION WITH ZONAL AUTHORITIES

A 20-minute discussion with the deputy administrator of the Gash-Barka Zone (=Zoba) in Barentu was conducted in an atmosphere of good mutual understanding. Some of the important points raised in the discussion were human-elephant conflict, farmers' attitudes towards such a conflict, an elephant survey project jointly organized by Eritrea and Ethiopia, and future plans to establish a protected area in elephant country.

The deputy administrator was given a brief résumé concerning the points mentioned above; his reaction was encouraging in the sense that he endorsed all the points and reaffirmed his preparedness to cooperate in the best way he could. He emphasized the importance of communication prior to any action between concerned parties to coordinate logistics and availability. This is a concern that has to be shared by all sectors involved.

Comments. Direct human-wildlife conflicts exist almost everywhere in the world where wildlife conservation and human interests exist. The case of the elephants that are causing damage to banana plantations in the Haykota area is no exception. Shooting problem animals occurs in many African countries but, in most cases, the results are not that effective. In the case of Eritrea, shooting elephants to protect plantations is out of the question because of the extremely limited size of the elephant population. Electric fencing to prevent elephants from invading plantation fields is considered to be an effective protection method but, taking into account the prevailing economic situation of the country and the incomplete land classification patterns along with the scattered nature of the plantations, this solution is not feasible at present. Compensation in the form of money and in kind to those farmers who have been victims of damage caused by elephants has to be seriously considered. This would certainly have a positive impact on the relationships between farmers and conservation authorities, provided that it is properly and equitably applied. Once again, compensation should be preceded by serious and systematic evaluation of the damage and the financial implication involved. However, this compensation process will depend on government approval.

Recommendations. To minimize elephant impact on plantations, no additional land should be allocated for cultivation all along the Gash River from the vicinity of Tokombiya to the areas around Haykota, a distance of some 60 km in an east west direction.

Existing plantations around the Haykota area will certainly continue to be damage targets. Consequently, the present human-elephant conflict will, no doubt, escalate to a point where frustrated farmers will commit illegal acts to counterbalance their damage. Eventually, the one solution would be to relocate all the farmers elsewhere with compensation and other relevant assistance and leave the area free from human settlement. This would be a difficult task and, at the same time, a heavy burden for the government but, worth considering before events get more and more complicated. An alternative solution would be to erect an electric fence using solar power. The aforementioned joint elephant survey was held immediately after the rains in 1996 and disclosed realities that were not apparent at the time of this visit, such as the number of elephants, their migratory routes and feeding habits. The result of this much awaited survey will certainly help to determine the future of the elephants in relation to their natural habitats as opposed to agricultural development (estimated number of elephants in Eritrea is discussed in the accompanying article by Shoshani *et al.*).

CONCLUSIONS

It is unfortunate that such human-wildlife conflict appears at a moment when Eritrea is engaged in national reconstruction involving all development sectors and in which food security is a top priority. The challenge of this conflict is enormous considering the resources and materials required, but it is of paramount importance that it be handled with care and seriousness. These elephants should be protected at any cost in order to guarantee their continuous existence. ❧