

## FIELD NOTES

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### **Elephants, Crops and People project in Ishasha Sector, southern Queen Elizabeth National Park, Uganda**

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By definition, Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP) Uganda as a Biosphere Reserve has elephants and humans cohabiting and 'sharing' resources, including land. Uganda's elephant population crashed by over 90% from poaching during the civil chaos of the 1970s and 1980s. One would imagine, therefore, that the human population and the resultant low elephant population would interact but little. This assumption could not be further from reality. Years of park encroachment, uncontrolled resource use and human pressure in the region mean that local farmers now cultivate land alongside elephants, sometimes even sharing resources. The interaction between humans and elephants in this region is negative, and it seems set to worsen as it continues. Ironically the Ugandan Wildlife Authority originally started in 1925 as the Elephant Control Department. What have we learned in 75 years? One aspect is that protected areas always need to be actively managed in close partnership with local people. After QENP was ravaged by severe poaching and began to be restored, government departments functioned under considerable fiscal, political and infrastructural constraints. Management priorities focused on other issues, to the detriment of community relations and partnerships.

Unlike in other African countries and parks, no land outside the protected areas is available to elephants, and the very borders of this reserve, which used to harbour Africa's highest biomass of mega herbivores, are under constant and ever-increasing pressure from human demands, in both the northern and the southern areas of the park.

Away from the well-researched northern QENP elephant population, the Elephants, Crops and People (ECP) project started work in southern QENP, bordering the Parc National de Virunga in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). ECP is researching the status of the elephant population and is carrying out long-term management-oriented research with the Uganda Wildlife Authority and local farmers to find ways to mitigate current and future elephant-human interactions in the region. The project is also monitoring the recent immigration of elephants into southern QENP from DRC as they attempt to move away from adverse human activity. From a feasibility study in 1998 to identify the key management problems in the area, ECP found start-up funds from the Royal Geographical Society, the Rufford Foundation and the US Fish and Wildlife Service and started fieldwork in early 2000.

Within one month of setting up a version of the standardized interaction monitoring system along the whole border region, we had confirmed over 150 separate crop-raiding incidents. All interaction has so far happened at night. Not only bull and bachelor groups raid the crops but also family groups and large aggregations sometimes numbering over 150. We have found that most of the interaction occurs when elephants move into Uganda from DRC in the wet season.

The ECP team monitors the transmigration between DRC and Uganda by walking a 25-km stretch of the Ishasha River and recording evidence of

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elephants at known crossing points. November 2000 saw a large influx of elephants into the area. During Uganda's poaching years it was thought that some elephants took refuge in DRC, and this does seem likely. However, the reverse now appears to be happening. We also believe that elephants are moving back into the southern areas of QENP, from where human pressure had previously forced them out.

Other than on the odd occasion, the southern QENP elephants have proved difficult to observe, not least because of their reactions and flight from humans and vehicles. Within the past year, ECP has found that the prospects for these elephants are good, and their numbers are once again increasing. Young and sub-adults are abundant, being supported by strong family groups. Few matriarchs are over 40 years old, and we have found only one bull over 50 years. We believe that elephants are still moving in semi-permanent aggregations but that these may be starting to break up. The aggregations usually contain regular-sized family groups (12 to 14 elephants). Only in one aggregation have we seen evidence of broken family

groups, some of which could be orphan groups.

ECP places priority on developing and expanding Ugandan expertise and experience. The ECP team consists of two research assistants, a field support team (including a driver-mechanic and cook) and 18 local community farmers who are employed to monitor the elephant-human interaction along the border. Core team members are given an ongoing opportunity to develop in a number of ways, from learning to drive and giving lectures to attaining academic achievements.

The ECP programme is also sponsoring two Ugandan master's research projects at Makerere University. The projects have been designed to be relevant to the concerns of both ECP and the Uganda Wildlife Authority. One is titled, 'The status and distribution of *Acacia sieberiana* regeneration in southern QENP and its potential effects on elephant-human interaction'; the other, 'The human natural resource use in southern QENP and its potential effects on elephant-human interaction'.

We will keep *Pachyderm* informed.

## Two successful elephant translocations in Kenya

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Although translocation of elephants has been practised in countries such as South Africa for many years, it is a relatively new aspect of conservation in Kenya, the first such exercise having taken place seven years ago. Thus we are pleased that two exercises undertaken in 2000 were successfully completed without the loss of a single animal.

In March, 10 elephants were moved from two private game sanctuaries in Laikipia (north of Mt Kenya) to Meru Park; in October, three elephants were moved from Shimba Hills National Reserve (in Kwale District, near Mombasa) to Tsavo East National Park. All three of the source sites had been fenced to keep

wildlife from ravaging the neighbouring smallholder farms, but certain elephants had taken to breaking down the fences and the havoc they were wreaking incurred the understandable wrath of the farmers. Previously the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) had dealt with such cases by shooting the culprits, but now it was decided that security in the parks had been improved to the extent that it would be possible to use these elephants to begin restocking the poached-out parks and broadening the genetic base of their remaining elephant populations. In keeping with the policy of not breaking up family groups, all the elephants moved were bulls—except one, who had