North-west Namibian desert-dwelling elephant project

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The current project to identify and monitor elephants in the Kunene region of Namibia is an extension of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) policy related to the consumptive use of resources, ongoing Community-Based Natural Resource Management initiatives and more recently the Hoanib River Catchment Study. The study has been under way for the last two years. The project focuses on collecting and sharing elephant identification and monitoring data, with the aim of improving the understanding of elephants in the target area. This information will be incorporated into both long-term and local programmes for conservancy elephant management. Elephants are becoming increasingly important income generators for local conservancies and information is required to guide decision-making. This revenue has the potential to contribute to rural livelihoods as well as to ensure good monitoring practices over the long term.

The elephants involved in this study are resident most of the time outside protected areas and within communal areas. As populations of both humans and elephants are increasing, the chance of confrontation increases. As has been evident in many other areas of Africa (and indeed the world) the immediate losers will always be the animals and the habitat. However, the ultimate losers will be the communities living in these areas as they are faced with a disturbed and degraded ecosystem that is unable to support traditional livelihoods. Community-based initiatives for managing natural resources are an attempt by many southern African countries to conserve as much wildlife and as many habitats as possible. These initiatives seek to give communities livelihood options other than keeping domestic stock by providing income through consumptive and non-consumptive uses of wildlife.

While the desert elephants of the Kunene region have been photographed and discussed by many filmmakers and journalists, little actual scientific research has been carried out on these populations. Only two research teams have published data on them (Viljoen 1987, 1989a,b; Viljoen and Bothma 1990; Lindeque and Lindeque 1991), and their modern ranges, group sizes and dynamics are unknown. This scarcity of information has practical implications. The increasing tourist appeal of these elephants may already be disturbing their behaviour and their ranges to an unknown extent. In September 2002, eight GPS collars were fitted on elephants in north-western Namibia. These collars coupled with a photographic identification and database storage system that is currently under development will provide detailed information on movement, range, social structure and behaviour of this elephant population.

The project has recently received MET permission to expand into other geographical areas, and if funding becomes available more elephants will be GPS collared and additional researchers hired. Part of this programme will also be to develop a collaborative research effort with conservancies to monitor elephants in their respective areas.

References

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