NOTES FROM THE AFRICAN ELEPHANT SPECIALIST GROUP

Report: Sixth meeting of the African Elephant Specialist Group

Leo Niskanen

Senior Programme Officer, IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group
email: leo.niskanen@ssc.iucn.org

AfESG held its sixth meeting for members from 4 to 8 December 2003 in Mokuti Lodge, next to the world-famous Etosha National Park in Namibia. In addition to participation of most of the AfESG members, the meeting was attended by Mr Martin Brasher, director of the Global Division of UK-Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, and Dr Malan Lindeque, the permanent secretary for Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism and former AfESG member, both of whom actively participated throughout.

The tightly packed agenda consisted of technical presentations and work sessions on a variety of issues relating to African elephant conservation and management. The main themes are summarized here.

Multiple species of African elephant

The growing evidence that there might be more than one species of African elephant and the possible conservation and management implications of such a finding had been exhaustively discussed at the 2002 AfESG members meeting in Shaba, Kenya (see *Pachyderm* issue 32, January–June 2002, p. 74–77). As a result of these discussions, the group issued a statement in February 2002 cautioning against prematurely allocating Africa's elephants to two or more species, which could result in significant populations being left in taxonomic limbo because of the uncertain status of elephants in West Africa, and because some populations of high conservation value might consist wholly or partly of interspecific hybrids under a multiple-species scenario.

This issue was revisited at the December 2003 meeting, where members were presented with results of the most recent genetic and morphological studies on the taxonomic status of African elephants. After much discussion, the group agreed that more studies were still needed before AfESG could formally accept the taxonomic division of the African elephant into multiple species. However, the importance of morphological as well as genetic evidence was noted and the list of sites recommended for further sampling was expanded to include Dzanga-Sangha (Central African Republic), Noubalé-Ndoki (Congo Brazzaville), Minkébé (Gabon) and Gourma (Mali). The 2002 statement on multiple species was revised accordingly and is now available on the AfESG website: http://iucn.org/afesg.

Listing of the African elephant by IUCN Red List criteria

At its 2002 meeting, AfESG agreed to become the IUCN Red List listing authority on the African elephant and to carry out the global assessment for the listing of *Loxodonta africana*. The 2003 members meeting provided an ideal opportunity to move this initiative forward with the help of experts from various parts of the continent. After a brief discussion of the listing process, a temporary task force was established under the leadership of David Balfour to carry out a rough-and-ready assessment using the revised IUCN Red List criteria, version 3.1. This task force,

which included representation from all four subregions, worked in the evenings after the close of the official meeting sessions. The findings they presented to the plenary on the last day of the meeting are as follows.

The Red-Listing process requires that the population change be estimated within a 'moving window' of three generations or 10 years, whichever is longer. A generation time of 25 years was chosen for the African elephant. This figure, which represents the average age of breeding females, is based on data from Kruger National Park in South Africa. The moving window approach permits projecting likely population changes into the future, but it was felt that such a projection would be too speculative in the present circumstances. Instead, the alternative of going three generations (75 years) back in time was settled on. However, as figures for the late 1920s are unavailable, and since elephant populations in southern and eastern Africa, which today harbour the largest known populations in the continent, are believed to have been lower in the early 20th century than in the 1970s, it was deemed more precautionary to assume the continental population of three generations ago to have been equal to that of one generation ago. Thus figures from the *African ele-phant status report 2002* (Blanc et al. 2003) and the *African elephant action plan* (Douglas-Hamilton 1979) were used for national, regional and continental comparisons. This produced a *Vulnerable* listing for the species. It was agreed that after checking through the data used in this assessment the AfESG Secretariat would submit the official listing to the IUCN Red List Committee for review and consideration together with relevant supporting documentation.

Furthermore, it was agreed that AfESG would continue, through its internal processes, to work on subregional listings to bring them into the strategic planning processes under way in the subregions.

Wild sourcing of African elephants for captivity

Recently there has been an increase in the number of captures of African elephants from the wild for a wide variety of purposes including zoos and elephant-back safaris. While in many countries it is considered perfectly legal to export and import African elephants (even from Appendix I populations) to captive facilities, it is much less clear whether an argument can be made that such moves truly contribute to the conservation of the species overall. Faced with increasing transfers of elephants from the wild into captivity (some supposedly justify-

Iain Douglas-Hamilton

Participants attending the African Elephant Specialist Group meeting at Mokuti Lodge in Namibia, December 2003.

ing the transfer as contributing to efforts to conserve the species), it was deemed essential that AfESG make its position on captive use clear. This was considered particularly important in light of the fact that the group's 1998 statement on the role of captive facilities had focused exclusively on zoos and zoological parks.

After hearing presentations on recent case studies of elephant captures, the group concluded that captive use presented no direct benefit to in situ conservation and that AfESG could not endorse removing African elephants from the wild for any captive use. A statement to this effect was drafted and has now been placed on the AfESG website.

Strategic thinking to conserve Africa's elephants: a scenario-planning approach

At the fifth members meeting in 2002, it was suggested that AfESG consider developing a continental strategy for conserving and managing Africa's elephants. Subsequently, the AfESG Chair consulted widely about the best way to take this initiative forward. Ideally, a continental elephant strategy would take into account not only current threats and opportunities for the continent's elephants but also consider future developments that might affect them. As a result of these consultations, an innovative planning approach known as scenario planning was identified as a promising way forward. Scenario planning is a tool for strategizing in a world of uncertainty with perhaps increasing but unknown risks along the way. It has been used for almost three decades by multinational companies such as Shell International. Taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the meeting in Namibia, members decided to devote the fourth day to applying this approach to African elephants.

Developing scenarios for African elephants involves identifying the forces that will influence their future. These include economic issues (for example, changing prices and availability of fossil fuels; the effect of corruption), social dynamics (including demographic issues and the spread of HIV/AIDS), political issues (how is the status of African elephants likely to respond to a greater degree of local democracy? or greater centralization? more civil instability?), technological issues (including transport and communications), and environmental issues (climate change, habitat loss and fragmentation, changes in fire regimes). By enabling African elephant managers to consider different forces and how they might shape future developments on the continent, new threats, risks and opportunities become apparent, leading to better strategies for decision-making. Such scenarios can also help managers determine priorities for research and monitoring, including identifying gaps in our current knowledge and information needs for the future.

To start the scenario-planning process, meeting participants were divided into subregional groupings and each group was given the task of developing a historical time line for its subregion, highlighting events of the past that have had a direct bearing (positive or negative) on the status of Africa's elephants. Each group was also asked to identify, describe and prioritize the critical issues and forces that are likely to shape the future of African elephants and to outline the characteristics of pessimistic and optimistic future scenarios for elephants in its subregion. The results of these group sessions were presented to the plenary.

This exercise proved highly stimulating and provided a fascinating picture of the past and future for elephants in the different subregions. It also identified some of the key players from different walks of life that were likely to have an effect on African elephants in the future. As a next step in this process, information from the group exercise will be used to develop a fund-raising proposal to organize a series of workshops in the various subregions involving all relevant parties, including the private sector, that are likely to have a stake in the future of Africa's elephants or to affect their future conservation and management. The final subregional scenarios will be combined to form a strategy for the future.

The Local Overpopulation Task Force

Although several options exist for managing local overpopulation of elephants, the practical application and comparative costs and benefits of each are not widely known or understood by many management authorities because active elephant management has not taken place in most range states for a decade or more. As a result, poor management decisions are often undertaken that end up both harming biodiversity conservation objectives and reducing the potential for generating local benefits.

In response to calls by individual AfESG members that more needed to be done to address this issue, the group agreed that a special task force be established to produce a technical document on best practices, outlining the pros and cons of various management options. This task force will compile and synthesize existing information into a concise document for wide dissemination to relevant practitioners and decision-makers. The task force planned to begin its work by the end of May 2004.

In addition to the main themes of the meeting, latest results of cutting-edge research into a wide variety of topics were presented including human–elephant conflict, illegal killing and trade, and elephant survey techniques. Several of the presenters have submitted papers to *Pachyderm*, some of which appear in this issue.

Overall, the meeting was highly productive, and in spite of the few unavoidable logistical hiccups, it was conducted relatively free of glitches—a considerable feat given that most members had to spend several days in transit to and from their home bases. As always, the timing and venue of the next members meeting will depend on availability of funds but likely will not be held before the end of 2005, following re-appointment of the membership for the next IUCN quadrennium.

References

Blanc, J.J, Thouless, C.R., Hart, J.A., Dublin, H.T., Douglas-Hamilton, I., Craig, C.G., and Barnes, R.F.W. 2003. *African elephant status report 2002: an update from the African elephant database.* IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, UK. 302 p.

Douglas-Hamilton, I. 1979. *African elephant action plan.* IUCN/WWF/NYZS Elephant Survey and Conservation Programme. IUCN, Nairobi.