

Part II: Using cinema, theatre and a virtual toolbox to address the conflict between humans and elephants

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Introduction

The value of art in science is undisputed. From Da Vinci's drawings came a plethora of inventions, most notable is arguably his "aerial screw" which is highly suggestive of the helicopter we know today (Da Vinci 1894), and the night skies of Charles Messier who, through his drawings documented countless formerly undocumented celestial bodies (Messier 1781). In these and many other cases great art has undoubtedly gone on to aid science. Within the field of conservation the benefits of art are more nuanced. Recently art in its modern forms has been proven to be impactful in terms of attitudes to nature, with multiple nature documentaries being empirically proven to have a range of impacts (Jones et al. 2019; Silk et al. 2021). For example, the film *Blackfish* caused a decrease in the market value of Seaworld (Boissat et al. 2021) but viewing *Blue Planet II* was found to yield knowledge gains that did not translate into a reduction in plastic usage (Dunn et al. 2020). Animal imagery including photos and drawings as well as movies have also been shown to generally improve attitudes to nature (Thomas-Walters et al. 2020). But does art really have a place in modern day conservation approaches where more species than ever before are on the brink of extinction due to human activities (Barnosky et al. 2011)?

The Elephant Queen

The Elephant Queen (www.elephant.co.ke) is a feature-length documentary film released in 2019. It was filmed in the greater Tsavo ecosystem

and directed by award-winning team Mark Deeble, Victoria Stone and Assistant Director Etienne Oliff. It follows the life of Athena, an elephant matriarch, and her family as they attempt to survive a severe drought. It shows elephants in nature unadulterated by the blight of humanity. The film highlights the gentle, engaging, and human-like characteristics of elephants and places elephants as keystone species at the centre of a wider eco-system—a contrast to the perception of some of the communities that live alongside them, who too often only see highly aggressive creatures in tense conflict situations.

The authors of this field note are currently undertaking an in-depth impact assessment of whether the film does have an impact on attitudes to elephants or not. Viewers of *The Elephant Queen* film are taken through a questionnaire, and answers are compared to a control group. Our control group carry out the exact same questionnaires but undertake a snakebite awareness activity (Fig. 2), while others view *The Elephant Queen* allowing a direct comparison on attitude towards elephants to be made between the two groups before and after their respective treatments. Interviews with elders, chiefs and wardens are also conducted to better understand the conservation impact this film might have on communities viewing it. We expect to see a nuanced impact, but every community is already demonstrating slightly different responses to the film depending on their location, socio-economic status and cultural circumstance.

Since November 2021 a team of six education engagement specialists have been driving through Kenya delivering *The Elephant Queen* to communities in human-elephant conflict (HEC) hotspots (Fig. 1). The

film in being shown to communities via projection onto a 12-metre-wide inflatable screen and to schools on a smaller classroom sized model. So far, the team has shown the film to communities surrounding the Shimba Hills, Arabuko-Sokoke forest, the greater Tsavo ecosystem, and Amboseli, all of which have communities living with different types of experiences of elephants. The goal of the programme is to bring awareness to the biology of elephants, how similar their family lives are structured to human families and to increase empathy for these misunderstood creatures. The engagement aspect has brought to light the wide range of perceptions of elephants, with conversations before and after the screening intended to initiate a dialogue surrounding the issues of living with elephants and pave the way for other organizations to engage more deeply with mitigating these issues.

Preliminary observations

Alongside the common response of viewers seeing a sudden likeness between humans and elephants there have been a multitude of surprising observations. We have learnt first-hand that screening documentaries can have unexpected impacts, with audience members noticing unexpected levels of detail. One viewer, for example, noticed that the green seedlings sprouting from elephant dung (and being fed on by a tortoise) were young green grams, leading the individual to conclude that the elephant must have been raiding crops. For a small proportion of viewers we are finding that the film is triggering much more basic insights, such as the realization that elephants do not eat meat.

The tribal influences on responses to the film have also been revealing. The Taita communities of central Tsavo face some of the greatest conflict with elephants and it was here that we experienced the toughest crowd reception, exacerbated by alcohol consumption.

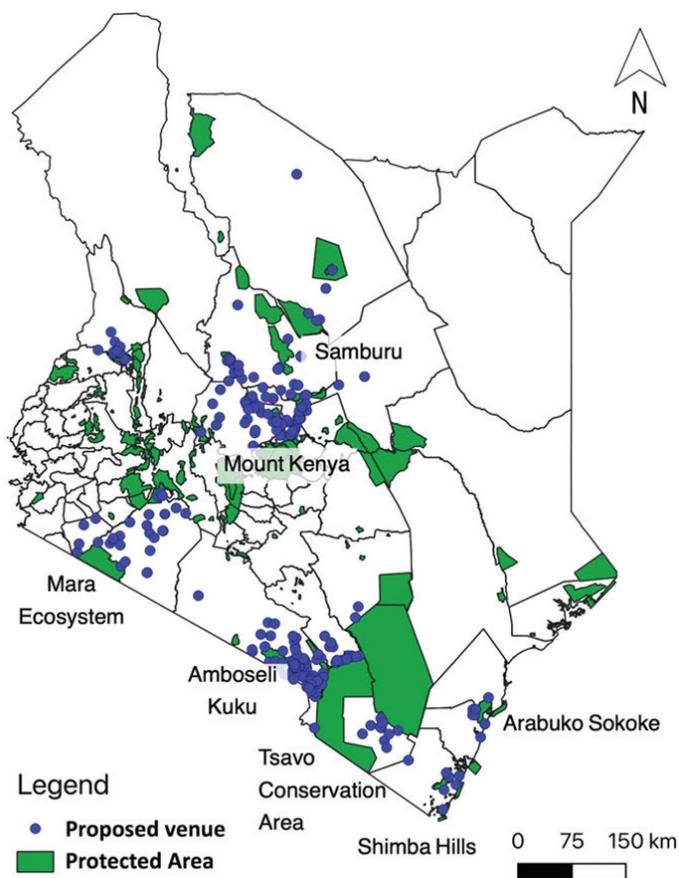


Figure 1. Protected areas throughout Kenya in relation to the intended screening venues for The Elephant Queen mobile cinema.

Historically, a Taita person who killed an elephant was considered a murderer and underwent a ritual of cleansing as elephants were revered (Kamau and Sluyter 2018). But more recently defending crops from elephants has led to anti-elephant behaviour becoming normalized. The Digo and Kigiriana tribal strongholds of the coast are now mostly fenced off from elephants but a bitterness towards elephants seems to remain to some extent. The historically pastoral Maasai still have positive relations with elephants for the most part and the role of elephants as a sacred creature still holds firm in their culture. There are variations: the Maasai of northern Tanzania (Kioko et al. 2015) have a fairly utilitarian relationship with elephants, while the closely related Samburu of northern Kenya in general maintain a strong tradition of conserving elephants (Kuriyan 2002). The Kamba still appear to see elephants as a potential food source and show a level of irritation at their inability to tap into this historically important protein source. These cultural influences appear to be one important variable affecting reactions to the film. Those who are struggling to live with elephant damage to their property or crops are clear in expressing that they just want mitigation solutions that work.

Through the full impact assessment, we hope to disentangle the nuance of these relationships, but initial indications are that such outreach activities may be most effective on those who have never suffered losses to elephants or on younger generations but that older generations who suffer from elephants are unlikely to change their attitudes based on a film. Without doubt those suffering most from elephant conflict are also those most deserving of the benefits of this country-wide educational effort. (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

The Trial of Athena

At the beginning of May 2022 a theatrical production written by Lizzie Jago with Victoria Stone and Etienne Oliff and named *The Trial of Athena* was added to the programme. This is set in a court where Athena, the matriarch from *The Elephant Queen*, is being tried for the killing of a child and engages the audience to play the role of the jury in deciding her fate. It aims to disentangle some of the intricacies of this complex conflict and initiate empathy for elephants, especially those elephants acting in

self-defence (Fig. 5 a, b). The benefit of a stage play as a conservation tool is that it enables the script to be adapted for every audience depending on the conflict factors in a location (for example crop raiding in agricultural areas or competition for water in pastoral regions), and sensitivity around recent events (such as deaths of young children in each community). This enables the directors to adapt the play for increased impact as it moves through Kenya. One character called by the prosecutor says “Is it our mistake to be on this land or should we step aside and leave it for the elephants”, a line which is met with much agreement in areas experiencing conflict and appears to capture the zeitgeist for these communities.

Communities have shown a diversity of responses to the two artistic aspects of the programme. A very small minority show signs of resentment at perceived insensitivity shown by those deciding to bring a film about elephants to a community whose livelihoods are put in jeopardy by elephants. However, results so far show that 100% of individuals involved in the study enjoy the experience with many never having seen a film before, let alone on a huge 12 metre wide blow-up screen. Whether the film actually has conservation impact and increases human tolerance for elephants remains under study with our results expected to be published in early 2023. However, for entertainment value alone there appears already to be evidence for such outreach activities to be undertaken following the creation of high calibre conservation films. A documentary can do what many other forms of education cannot, that is to provide a level of verisimilitude, leaving viewers unable to deny what they have witnessed first-hand—in this case the indisputable similarities between humans and elephants.

The Human-Elephant Coexistence Toolbox

The final element of this triad of unusual conflict mitigation education efforts by Save the Elephants is a new human-elephant coexistence (HECex) toolbox also reported on in this current issue of *Pachyderm* (King et al. 2022, pp. 153–157). A common reaction to the film and the play has been to the effect of “we would love to live in harmony with elephants, but how? We need solutions”. In response to this, a team from Save the Elephants has expedited the publication of Edition 1 of the Human-Elephant Coexistence Toolbox (King et al. 2022). The open-source and updateable web platform, <https://ste-coexistence->



Above. Figure 2. A school screening of *The Elephant Queen*.



Centre left and right. Figure 3. Community screenings of *The Elephant Queen*.



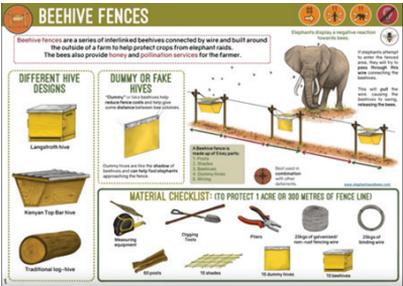
Below. Figure 4. The control activity; snakes and snakebite awareness.



Figure 5a. The *Trial of Athena*, being shown at one of the communities surrounding Lake Jipe, within Tsavo West, on the border of Tanzania.



Figure 5b. The giant puppet of Athena requires two actors inside controlling trunk, tusks, tail and grumbles.



Above left. Figure 6a. A Big Life Foundation ranger reading through a physical copy of the toolbox; **Above centre.** Figure 6b. The ToolBox logo; and **Above right.** Figure 6c. An example of one of the methods found within the toolbox with a breakdown of materials and step by step instructions in the subsequent pages of the toolbox.

[toolbox.info/](https://www.heccex.org/#!/toolbox.info/), has a series of “how to” tools that are now being introduced to partner organisations across the country as a library of methods aimed at promoting coexistence with elephants (Fig. 6 a, b, c). The highly illustrated toolbox provides step by step instructions for every known method of conflict mitigation that has proved to be effective. Including sections on understanding elephants, farm and boundary protection methods, early warning systems, non-palatable crops, elephant-compatible income generating activities, tree protection and school protection methodologies.

Methods of coexistence brings an unintended consequence to conservation. While they undoubtedly have the power to reduce conflict with elephants if used appropriately, they also provide farmers with methods by which to expand even further into wild land with a reduced fear of retribution by elephants, thereby having the potential for further diminishing elephant habitat. The toolbox must be used with caution and educated judgement in its application. For example, the rise of pesticides in farming in certain regions are making bee-based methodologies (King et al. 2017) impossible to implement due to bees dying from harmful pesticides. However, the smelly elephant repellent methodology has the power to act as a pesticide, fertilizer, and elephant repellent all in one (Oniba and Robertson 2019). Communities forced to coexist with elephants know well the importance of banging and fire in deterring elephants, but modern equivalents such as solar spot lights (Davies et al. 2011) and Buzz Boxes (an automated bee sound playback system created by Wild Survivors), provide solutions most communities will be unaware even exist but can also rarely afford.

Conclusion

Whether the use of these combined interventions in conservation are effective as a HEC mitigation strategy remains in question. However, responses from audiences to both *The Elephant Queen* and the *Trial of Athena* would leave no observer in doubt that such activities bring wildlife and conservation education enveloped in a form of welcome entertainment to communities that can feel marginalized and all but forgotten by

the State. Such programmes also have the potential to help fill the gap left by traditional storytelling, which modernisation is continuing to erode (Michuki 2020) and historically played a key role in shaping the folklore and taboos of old that often maintained the balance between humans and nature (Colding and Folke 2001; Riley 2010). Responses to Save the Elephants’ new HECex Toolbox and its illustrations have also been highly positive. We look forward to assessing the uptake and efficacy of the methods as the programme continues to roll out.

The Elephant Queen film is accessible in Kenya as an educational tool along with a number of other materials and the team’s programme at www.elephant.co.ke. There you can track their progress and identify a screening near you.

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