The Status of Elephants in Uganda: Queen Elizabeth National Park

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Uganda now has seven national parks with Mount Ruwenzori, Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable being the most recently gazetted. At least three parks, Murchison Falls (MFNP), Kidepo Valley (KVNP) and Queen Elizabeth (QENP) contain elephants within their boundaries. The density of elephants increased in both MFNP and QENP during the 1960s (Laws *et al*, 1970; Field, 1971; Ellringham, 1977). In MFNP the increase led to severe habitat deterioration, especially south of the Nile where the elephant density was highest. The increase in QENP (then Rwenzori) was less.

In an attempt to reduce the damage done in MFNP (then Kabalega), rangers shot 2,000 elephants between 1965 and 1967, and a recommendation was made that a further 3,500 should be culled from the park and the neighbouring grasslands of Bunyoro (Laws *et al*, 1970). The Scientific Advisory Committee of the Uganda National Parks considered this recommendation, but, before agreeing to its implementation, decided that a further study was needed to find out if the situation had changed (Eltringham and Malpas, 1980). The new count showed that poaching had increased to such an extent

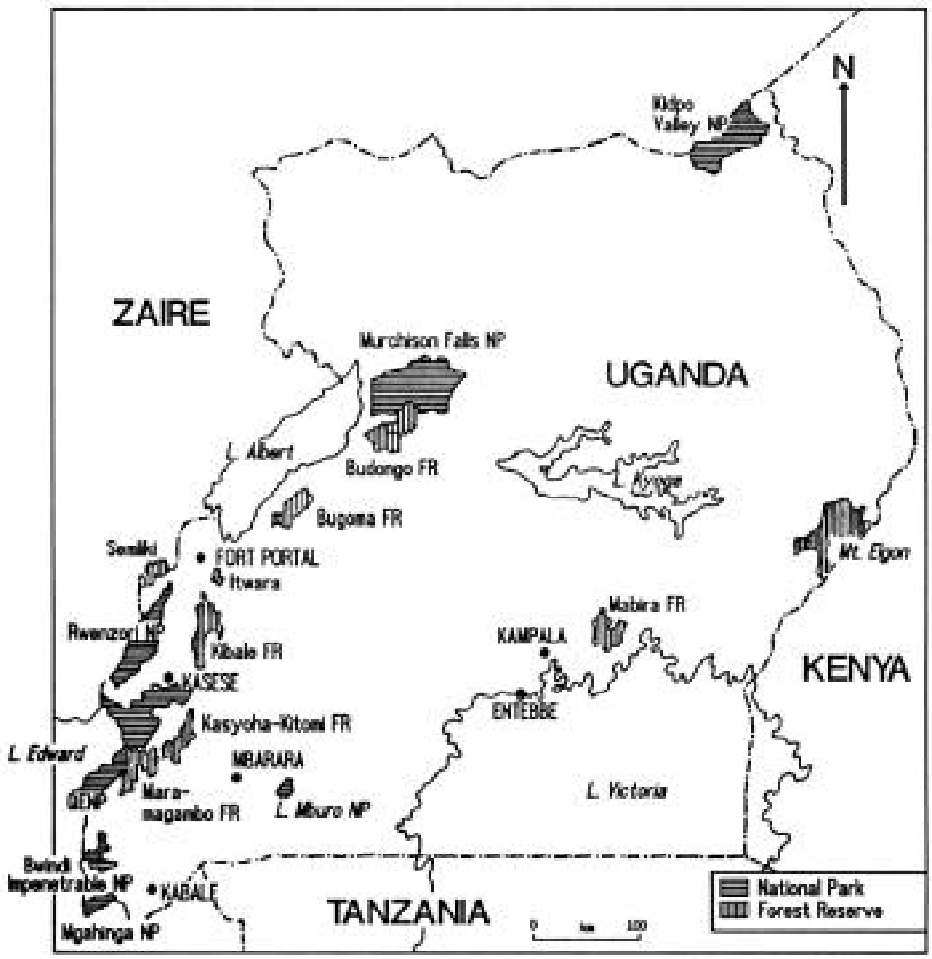


Figure 1 : *Map of Uganda showing the locations of the National Parks.*

that there had been a very large decline in elephant numbers in both parks (Malpas, 1978).

In 1971, after the military coup, the parks suffered a series of unexpected blows of catastrophic proportions. Tourism first collapsed and then was banned in 1973. Law and order steadily deteriorated. With the dramatic rise in the world value of ivory, government officials and security officers began to poach elephants from the national parks. It was impossible for park wardens and rangers to cope (Kayanja and Douglas-Hamilton, 1983). From 1973 lo 1976, the Uganda Institute of Ecology regularly made aerial surveys of the country. Over this three-year period estimates of elephant numbers in QENP declined from 2,700 to 700. Following 1976, no more surveys were allowed until after the fall of Amin's regime. When monitoring resumed in 1980, only 150 elephants were counted in QENP, although 250 were seen just across the border in Parc National Albert in Zaire (Kayanja and Douglas-Hamilton. 1983).

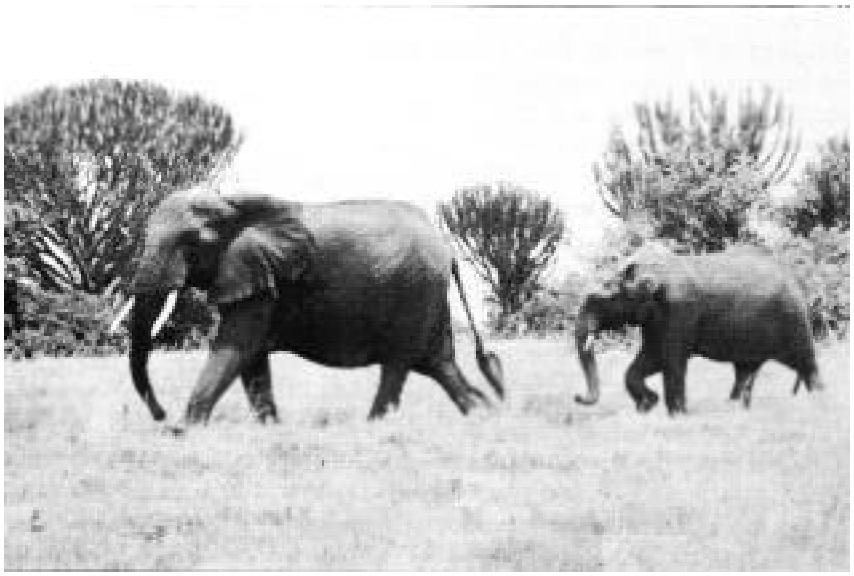
In 1989, the European Community provided a scholarship for a study of this daunting decrease in the number of elephants. This paper reports briefly on elephants in QENP, where the author is presently studying the effects poaching has had on the elephant population.

Three groups of elephants are currently in QENP, totalling about 500 individuals. There is a Northern Sector group of 250 elephants, a group in the Kazinga area of 60, and another around Ishasha of 200 animals. All the groups live in semi-permanent aggregations, which are believed to be a result of poaching activities (Eltringham, 1977). Little is known about the Ishasha elephants except that they move between QENP and Parc National Albert in Zaire. The animals living in Northern Sector are the main object of the present study.

To monitor ranging patterns in all three groups, individuals from each have been fitted with radio-

Figure 2: *Queen Elizabeth National Park*

collars. The only criterion used to choose the elephants to collar in the Ishasha and Kazinga populations was that they be adult females. This was because the two areas are so dense and thick with vegetation that it is almost impossible to select individuals; because there are few known individuals especially in the Ishasha group; and because most females stay within the aggregations and are less likely than males to wander away on their own (Moss *et al).* An advantage of the elephants in these populations continuing to live in semi-permanent aggregations is that the groups can be located easily at any time.



There is no doubt that the number of elephants in Queen Elizabeth Park is increasing
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Specific individuals were chosen from the Northern Sector population. These were: Tom Ear (a matriarch—50-55 years old), Zola (an 'orphan'— 15-20 years old) and Rob (the highest ranking bull—30-35 years old).

Monitoring Techniques/Methods

The working team was Michael H Woodford, Rob Olivier, Wilhelm Moeller, Marcel Onen and the author; Woodford was the dart man. Darts did not always work as expected due to detonators failing to explode. This was discovered after retrieval of the darts. All the shots except one were made from a Land Rover. A compressed air dart gun and the drug Immobilon/Revivon were used.

So far four elephants have been fitted with radio collars. These are Torn Ear, Zola, Rob and Ursula. For animals from the Northern Sector collaring was not a very difficult task, because the area the animals were in is not thick with vegetation and the elephants are used to people and vehicles. They are approachable to within five metres or less. The situation is remarkable in that when Zola was being fitted with a radio collar, the rest of the elephants, numbering about 15, were only some ten metres away from us. Rob was collared when he was in musth. When the dart hit him, he just moved aside and looked at the vehicle. He then walked away for about five metres, stopped and, about 17 minutes after the dart hit, finally sank down to his knees. I had expected Rob to come crashing through the bush at us, as males in musth are often aggressive (Poole 1989).

For the Kazinga and Ishasha populations fitting the collars has not been so simple. Aerial support was needed to find the elephants because from a vehicle you rarely can see through the bush for much more than a metre. With the aid of hand-held radios Olivier, the pilot, guided the people on the ground to the elephants. Trying to collar animals from these populations is aggravated by the fact that the elephants flee at the sound of a vehicle. There was also a chance of losing the animal after it had been darted. Thus the pilot usually stayed in the air for about 3-4 hours directing the ground crew until they located the fallen animal.

Elephant Conservation and Implications

There are no reports of elephant poaching activities within the last five years, but death due to accident has occurred thrice in the last two years. There is no doubt that elephant numbers are building up, with the population breeding rapidly (Abe in prep).

With the radio-collars fitted it is hoped some of the mysteries of where the elephants disappear to will be solved. There remains the problem of access in rugged terrain such as the Crater area, some of which is densely forested. Elephants frequent this part of the Park especially in the wet seasons. Few motorable tracks exist and beyond the areas open to vehicles aerial monitoring will be employed whenever possible.

Due to the nature of its establishment, QENP has 12 fishing village enclaves. Some of these villages, such as Mweya, Kasenyi and Hamukungu, form important parts of the elephants' range in the Northern Sector. The elephants stay in Mweya for an average of about five days every two months. Mweya is a peninsula. The movements of elephants in this area are routine and very predictable. They ascend to the upper part of the peninsula in the evening and spend the night close to human habitations. In the mornings, they descend to the lake-side where they feed and water.

In Kasenyi the most frequented area is the salt-pan at Lake Bunyampaka. People work their salt at a distance of some *50* m from the elephants when they are in the area. There has been no report of damage caused by elephants to the worked salt piled on the edges of the pan. Hamukungu is one of the larger villages in the park and is split into upper and lower parts separated by a belt some 500 m wide that has no buildings. Elephants usually use this as a path whilst moving from south to north, or vice versa. Two baby elephants have been found abandoned at the edge of these settlements. One, which was completely blind and less than six months old, died within 48 hours of being found. The other, Nile, was found in the same area about a year ago and is now some four years old and doing well in Mweya. Initially, the people of Hamukungu looked after her for 12 days before she was transported to Mweya. In this village the elephants are remarkable, spending nights amongst the buildings. The relationship between elephants and people is amicable.

The situation is different for the village of Muhokya and Kasese town, both of which abut the QENP boundary. Agricultural activities are carried out in these areas. Twice I have gone with park rangers to chase out elephants from banana plantations in Muhokya. There are also reports of *shamba* raids by elephants in areas around Kasese.

The frequency of elephant sightings is increasing, and more tourists leave the park happier after seeing elephants. Visitors, if asked: "What did you see?", often reply, "Nothing much." If elephants were seen, they say: "We saw lots of animals."

Everything else remaining the same, the future of the elephants seems good, and it is my hope that elephants in this park will recover in numbers.

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The Author

I was in Amboseli where I trained under C. Moss and J. Poole to age, sex and identify elephants in the field. Using the ageing techniques I learnt, I can age calves and juveniles to within two years; young adult males and females to within five years. This paper is from casual observations made whilst in the field. I am currently in my second year of data collection on elephant ecology in QENP, leading to a PHD.