
CHEWING OF BARK BY ELEPHANTS: PASTIME OR MEDICINE?

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Photo credit: Joyce Poole



In a study of elephant impact on woody vegetation on the Nazinga Game Ranch, Burkina Faso, I noted that elephants frequently stripped and chewed bark but did not swallow it. Most of the instances of chewing bark involved trees of the genus *Lannea*. The chewed boluses, which are discarded near the trees from which the bark is obtained, are collected by local peoples and used to treat cases of accidental poisoning from food or beverages. In Burkina Faso the Mossi tribe also uses various parts of trees of this genus to treat severe stomach pains.

The local people believe that elephants occasionally consume poisonous plants or parts of plants then treat

themselves with compounds contained in the bark of some species of trees such as *Lannea*. I am aware of no previously documented case of elephants eating plants to treat themselves, but this behaviour has been observed in primates. In Tanzania, Nishida noted chimpanzees eating a particular plant (*Aspilia* sp.) for medicinal purposes (*Discover*, March 119:10). The same plant was used by local tribesmen also for medicinal purposes. For elephants, the hypothesis that they have learned to treat themselves might be pure speculation but it could also have a factual basis. In either case, further investigation seems warranted.

Editor's note:

Anyone care to take up this challenge?