
THE DOMESTICATION OF THE AFRICAN ELEPHANT

Eve Iversen

International Agricultural Development, University of California, Davis, 1953 22nd St, San Pablo, CA 94806 USA

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of elephant domestication in Asia and Africa stretches back for centuries. On both continents elephants have served humans in times of peace and war. While the tradition has remained intact in Asia, it has not been stable in Africa.

African elephants were trapped in the wild and tamed for military use in ancient times (Armandi, 1843; Grower, 1947; Grower, 1948; Scullard, 1974). One of the most famous generals of long ago who used elephants was Hannibal. His crossing of the Alps from Gaul into Italy to fight the Romans in 219 BC is still well known. In 1988 three Asian elephants participated in a re-enactment of Hannibal's march. Two cows, Tali and Dido, completed the walk but the third, Batman, was returned to Circo Medrano due to lameness (Taylor, 1990).

The ancient Carthaginian victories were celebrated with silver coins which depicted African elephants and their riders (Grower & Scullard, 1950). The size ratio of man to elephant on the coins indicated to Scullard (1948) that the elephants were less than eight feet high at the shoulder and probably belonged to the forest subspecies (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*).

In military units elephants were valued because they caused panic to men and horses not accustomed to them (Armandi, 1843; Scullard, 1974). However, in many battles, injured or frightened elephants harmed their own side more than the enemy. Riders sometimes carried weapons to kill elephants which threatened them (Scullard, 1974).

There are no records describing any domestic use for elephants in the Mediterranean region apart from their participation in parades, Roman "games" and other ceremonies. It seems odd that the Carthaginians and Egyptians did not use their elephants for any other work. They may have accorded them a status higher than a beast of burden, much as that of the sacred white elephant in Asia. This may be the reason why they were no longer used after the fall of the Roman Empire. They were also neither employed by Europeans for farm work, nor by

the Goths, Vandals or other tribes for military enterprises.

THE ASIAN ELEPHANT IN AFRICA

King Leopold II of Belgium was impressed by the value of elephants during a trip to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) before he ascended the throne in 1865. Previous efforts to enter central Africa using animals such as oxen, horses, and donkeys had met with failure (Laplae, 1918). The King believed that Asian elephants might be used to secure and expand his new conquests in the Congo (Zaire). His Majesty paid all the expenses for the experiment.

On 1 June, 1879, the ship *Chinsura* debarked four Indian elephants from Bombay at Msasani, Tanganyika (now Tanzania). The two males (Sundergrund and Naderbux) and two females (Sosan Kalli and Pulmalla) swam ashore and caused a sensation (Laplae, 1918). Domesticated elephants still had the same shock value as they had displayed on the ancient battlefields.

The expedition proceeded into the interior. Progress was slow but the people along the route were impressed by the sight of white and brown men commanding *tembo*. However, the animals died one by one, probably from overwork and diseases acquired in Africa, while the last, Pulmalla, apparently died of "sadness" (Watson, 1990; Smith, 1992). A second Belgian-sponsored attempt also met with failure. In spite of this, King Leopold continued to believe in the concept of domesticating elephants for use in his colonies.

A later importation of Asian elephants was made by Sir Hesketh Bell, Governor of Uganda, in the early 20th Century. This also failed, due to the misuse of a trained tiger/game hunting elephant.

THE MODERN DOMESTICATION OF AFRICAN ELEPHANTS

The first modern domestication of the African elephant was accomplished by missionaries at Fernand Vaz in Gabon in the late 1890s. They had

trained a male (named Fritz) which had been bought from local people who had trapped the animal in a marsh. The missionaries taught him to do simple tasks around the compound. Reports of this success came to the attention of King Leopold II who decided to try domesticating African elephants in his colony.

In June 1899 Commander Jules Laplume was sent by His Majesty to begin a regular programme of domestication in the Congo. In March 1900 Laplume established an elephant school at Api. With the help of the Azande chief Kiravongu, pit traps were dug but all the captured young animals were rescued by adult elephants or died (Laplume, 1911; Smith, 1992).

By trial and error other systems of capture were tested (Watson, 1990; Smith, 1992). The most successful involved startling a herd with gun fire. The hunters chased the frightened herd and grabbed the calves with bare hands and ropes. If the mother could not be frightened away by more shots she was killed along with any other adults that tried to rescue the calves.,

By the end of 1902 four calves had been caught and domestication had begun (Watson, 1990). Once enough trained animals were available, experienced adults ("monitor" elephants) were used to move and calm the newly captured orphans. The men assigned to training were called *cornacs* and they hand-fed their assigned calves with the "monitor" elephant providing psychological and social support., Training progressed gradually as the animal grew. Kindness and rewards formed the basis of the training.

The first basic commands taught the elephants to move around, stop, turn, and allow a *cornac* to guide them. Later they were taught to pull loads such as logs and wagons, which proved more effective than loading the elephants with back packs. Elephants were even employed to pull ploughs when the land was cleared around the station.

By 1925 Captain Keith Caldwell, Deputy Game Warden of Kenya, reported that there were 50 elephants in the Belgian Congo at Api (Caldwell, 1925). Of these, 19 were adults doing full work, 25 were young animals doing light work and six were still in training. He also noted that the elephant school had been directly supported by King Albert I of Belgium since about 1918. In 1920 seven Indian (or Ceylonese) mahouts were sent to improve the local training methods (Watson 1990). Their techniques were more forceful than those which had evolved in the Congo. Captain Caldwell reported that the

mahouts "seemed to be afraid of the elephants and treated them with great severity. Of five newly-caught animals two died immediately on account of the *dressage des Hindous*" (Caldwell, 1925). The mahouts left after a labour dispute, but their methods had a beneficial effect on the training at Api. The same methods, which stressed the need for the trainer to dominate the animal, are still in use. The original Indian commands have been replaced by commands in the local language, Bangala (Smith, pers. comm.).

Between 1927 and 1929 the school was moved to a new location in the northeast corner of the Belgian Congo which was originally a hunting reserve, and became Garamba National Park in 1938. The number of elephants at the new Gangala station reached a maximum of 84 (Smith, 1992). Twice, the wildlife photography team of Martin and Osa Johnson took pictures of the operations at the station. These provide some of the best documentation of the school at the height of its success.

Watson (1990) reports that operations continued until Independence in 1960., He states that "By then there were only 15 elephants left. Serious internal disturbances followed, culminating in the infamous Simba rebellion., The area around Garamba National Park was overrun by rebels and the cornacs took as many elephants as they could into hiding in the forest until the rebels were defeated ... Now (1989) four of the original herd remain: Lwiru, Kukutu, Zombe and Kiko ...their average age is about 35" (Watson, 1990).

Watson further reported that "... in the early 1 80s, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, Frankfurt Zoological Society and UNESCO agreed to sponsor a rehabilitation project at the park...further proposals for rehabilitation of the centre itself are being considered along with renewed domestication of local elephants." (Watson, 1990). He concluded by writing "...it still seems too much to hope that the domesticated African elephant will ever be seriously used as an economic asset, working in forests, farms or game parks".

DOMESTICATED AFRICAN ELEPHANTS IN THE 1990s

The first stage towards the redevelopment of Garamba's Elephant Domestication Centre took place in 1987, with the capture of three young elephants (Smith, 1992), followed by more in 1989. Although tourists are now few at Garamba, the income generated by the domesticated elephants is an economic asset to the park



Riding domesticated elephants in Garamba National Park, Zaire.

(Smith, 1992) and elephant riding “is one of the long-term hopes for helping to support ecosystem conservation” (Smith, pers. comm.).

In the 1980s Randall Moore took up the challenge of returning three circus and zoo elephants to work in Africa. In the Okavango Delta in northwest Botswana he helped to develop a new form of safari for tourists. African elephant riding safaris were initiated at the Ker and Downer Inc. safari concession of Abu’s Camp on the banks of the Xhenege River.

Unlike in Zaire, all the animals are bush elephants (*Loxodonta africana africana*), rather than forest elephants or an intergrade between forest and bush elephants (Smith, 1992). The adults, Abu, Bennie and Kathy, were orphaned in a culling operation in Kruger National Park in South Africa. The calves, Letaba, Sirheni, Gika, Nandipa, Kideboni, Thando and Mafuyane are all less than three years old. This is a core group which is as large as that at Api in the early days of domestication. With three working adults available to act as role models, the project looks promising.

From Abu’s Camp the three adult elephants take two guests each to see wildlife. Each person pays \$3,625

(single supplement of \$1,100) for a six-day luxury camping safari. There were 45 departure dates scheduled for 1994 which is an increase from the 31 offered in 1991.

The increase in the number of trips despite the premium price indicates that this method of game viewing is a success. Tim Farrell, Vice President of Marketing for Ker and Downey, had this to say when he compared his African elephant ride in Okavango to his Asian elephant rides in Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal: “The African elephant definitely provides a far smoother ride than its Asian counterpart. In Asia, the jungle is so thick and the grass so high, that it’s virtually impossible to see anything at all...riding in Botswana is akin to traveling through a beautiful planned park...truly magnificent, especially from the back of our elephants” (Ker and Downey, press release “Trunk call”, 1991, p.4).

THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN ELEPHANT DOMESTICATION

Tourists seeing wildlife from the back of an elephant represents a new marketing angle for managers of national parks and other protected areas. Tourism is

one of the largest industries in Africa and although domesticated elephants are slow to move compared to vehicles and the safari is expensive, apparently visitors are willing to pay for the unique experience. The use of tamed elephants in national parks and reserves can therefore potentially increase park revenue as well as increasing local employment. It might also help indirectly to reduce vehicle-related erosion to parks. However, it has to be recognised that trained elephants are a major investment and represent a long-term responsibility of 50 years or more per animal. Such a responsibility can only be taken up by people who are knowledgeable and experienced in the training and caring of elephants.

There is theoretically no reason to limit the work elephants can do. There are many places in subSaharan Africa where they could help to clear land, construct roads, erect buildings, harvest timber on a sustainable basis, and patrol reserves, as they do in Asia. The great naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote in book four of his *Natural History*: "There is always something new out of Africa". It is time to review the idea of domestication of the African elephant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following for their help: Margaret Acevedo and the staff of Ker and Downey Inc. for information on and pictures of the elephant riding safaris in Botswana; David Blasko and the staff of Marine World Africa USA for help in translating the original Belgian Congo records and for supporting this project; Barbara Henshall and the staff of The Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum, Chanute, Kansas, for the use of the Johnson photographs; Dr Jacqui Morris, editor of *Oryx*, journal of The Fauna and Flora Preservation Society (which is the successor of *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of Fauna of this Empire*), for permission to reprint quotes from Captain Caldwell's report; Agricultural Counselor Joze F. van Mullem and Ms. Moss of the Embassy of Belgium for help in finding additional sources of information on the Belgian Congo and the Elephant School; Rupert Watson for help in locating additional information on the current status of domesticated African elephants.

REFERENCES

- Armandi, P. (1843) *Histoire Militaire des Elephants*. Librairie D' Amyot, Editeur. Paris.
- Caldwell, K. (1925) Elephant Domestication in the Belgian Congo. *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of Fauna of the Empire*. New Series. Part 7, 71-82.
- Grower, W., (1947) The African Elephant in Warfare. *African Affairs*. 46, 42-49.
- Grower, W., (1948) African Elephants and Ancient Authors. *African Affairs*. 47, 173-180.
- Grower, W., & Scullard, H.H. (1950) Hannibal's Elephants Again. *Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of The Royal Numismatic Society*. Parts III-IV, 270-283.
- Laplume, J. (1911) La Domestication des Elephants au Congo. *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge*. 2,405-418.
- Leplae, E. (1918) La Domestication de l'Elephant d'Afrique au Congo Belge. *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge*. 9, 37-77.
- Scullard, H.H. (1948) Hannibal's Elephants. *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*. Parts III-IV 159-168.
- Scullard, H.H. (1974) *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*. Thames and Hudson. Cambridge.
- Smith, K.H. (1992) The elephant domestication centre of Africa. In: *Elephants*. Edited by J. Shoshani. Elephant Interest Group. Simon & Schuster Ltd. London.
- Taylor, D. (1990) *Vet on the Wild Side*. St. Martin's Press. New York.
- Watson, R. (1990) King Leopold's elephants. *New Scientist*. 22/29. 128, 25-28 December 1990.