

Uganda: unforeseen Consequences of Culling

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Between 15 and 22 January 1971, Alistair Graham and I carried out an aerial survey of elephants in the 'Gulu Elephant Sanctuary': an area of >4,500 km² along the Albert Nile's east bank north of the Murchison Falls National Park in Uganda (Parker 2018). We were acquainted with this area through repeated aerial reconnaissance between 1965 and 1968. Still a closed area since 1913, it had been virtually empty of people other than occasional Acholi hunters. On this occasion we found numerous hunting camps, saw many people, vehicle tracks and stacks of smoke-dried elephant flesh—whose dimensions were estimated roughly at around 4 x 2 x 2 m. We saw several hundred elephant carcasses, the greatest density of which were close to the bridge over the Nile at Pakwach from whence tracks radiated out into the Sanctuary.

This was the first time that I had seen or heard of such commercial hunting in Uganda outside of the culling programs in the Queen Elizabeth and Murchison Falls National Parks (MFNP) Laws et al. (1975) & Laws (2017). Indeed, it was the first blatant operation on this scale of which I was aware in East Africa post-independence. With hindsight I posit some connection with the legal culling that had preceded it between 1965 and 1969, most of which had been carried out under contract by Game Management (Uganda) Ltd.

Those reduction/research programs involved reducing the MFNP hippo by 4,000 and the elephant by 2,000 over a two year period. The contractors were obliged to use the carcasses, which they did by selling the resultant ivory, hides and flesh. Hippo carcasses were bought by local traders from Gulu, West Nile and Bunyoro Districts and retailed as fresh meat within a radius of 160 km of the park. The elephant flesh was partially dried and smoked in the park by West Nile traders and moved across the border into the Republic of the Congo (Zaire) where smoked meat was in high demand and bartered, *inter alia*,

so the traders said, for coffee, cotton, ivory and gold.

If hippo carcasses averaged 1,000 kg apiece (Laws et al. *ibid.*) they would have totalled c. 2,000 tons overall. Average elephant live weights in 1967 were 2,234 kg (Laws et al. *ibid.*) of which, about one third would have been flesh sold, totalling 1,489 tons. The MFNP culling thus put just under 3,500 tons of hippo and elephant meat into trade in just over 2 years. At the same time, in parallel to the work in MFNP the Uganda Game Department was running an experimental game utilisation program in the Aswa-Lolim Controlled Hunting Area along the MFNP northern border, selling buffalo and antelope as fresh meat to the local people. While the scale of production was much lower than from the culling in MFNP, the program made local people aware that Government was pursuing a policy of making wildlife pay through legitimate source of meat.

While the culling in MFNP and in Aswa-Lolim established a profitable and legitimate trade, no thought was given to what would happen when the two programs ceased. It is self-evident that abruptly terminating a commerce developed to meet a nutritional need and widely approved by local society will be resisted. What we saw in the Gulu Elephant Sanctuary in January 1971, may have been unlawful, but it was a logical extension of the legitimate trade built up in the 1960s. With hindsight, policy should have planned for a demand evolved and catered for by the legitimate programs. And with hindsight, it is a reasonable assumption that traders left dangling took the initiative to continue supplying that demand.

Other developments may also have been associated with the MFNP and Aswa-Lolim culling. Ivory entering Uganda from the Congo through barter with the West Nile traders, and from the unlawful culling in the Gulu Sanctuary that must have been going on for some time when we saw it in 1971, needed an outlet. It could have left Uganda as illegally as it has been imported or acquired. However value would have been enhanced if it could be sold legally. In Parker (1979) I reported that in 1968/69 the Uganda Game Department

had not only declared an amnesty for all ivory held unlawfully, but that it would pay for that surrendered. There was an aura of secrecy about this project (e.g. the Director of Uganda National Parks knew nothing about it which, considering the Parks were sources of ivory, was odd. (RJ Wheeler pers. com.)). Queries about the amnesty were met with hostility, but I was told that 81 tons of ivory had been handed in, a figure local ivory buyers felt was probably of the right order.

With hindsight it coincided with the Uganda Army under Obote and then Amin engaging in trans-border commerce in ivory among many commodities. While the details are obscure and speculative, it would be naïve not to assume that the commerce that emerged openly and legally from culling programs had no influence on events afterwards such as the amnesty, or what we observed in the Gulu Sanctuary in 1971.

In the absence of evidential continua, historians have, perforce, to assume links across breaks in evidence chains. In the conservation record the failure to plan for the commercial aftermath of the big culling programs should be noted. Taking place against a backdrop of change from Imperial to Independent governance, inter-departmental and inter-ministerial liaison weakened as inexperienced officials took up their responsibilities. Additional to this, managing and directing commerce is not and never has been a field in which conservation officials had expertise. If there is a historical lesson from this, it is that conservation needs holistic integration within governance and should not 'go it alone' in realms outside its specialisations as happened in Uganda.

partir des éléphants situés dans un biome forestier de l'Afromontaine, celui du Parc national Aberdare, ce qui ajoute à la littérature établie et donne plus de détails sur le rôle bénéfique des éléphants dans la promotion du fonctionnement des écosystèmes forestiers par le dépôt de crottes riches en carbone, azote, phosphore et potassium. Le dépôt de crottes par éléphant a entraîné une augmentation de 0,01 kg N/ha, 0,26 kg C/ha, 0,01 kg P/ha et 0,01 kg K/ha par année dans la forêt d'Aberdare. Cette étude met en exergue la nécessité de comprendre les répercussions du déclin continu des éléphants sur le fonctionnement des écosystèmes.

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