Human-Elephant Conflict Needs More International Exposure

In Changing Planet, Wildlife Tags A Voice for Elephants, Guest Blogger, Michael Schwartz August 17, 2015 0 Comments

Guest Blogger

By Michael Schwartz

The Western world desperately wants to save Africa's elephants from poachers. But the public needs, and deserves, to know more about human-elephant conflict. Many elephant admirers living in the United States and Europe might not understand what is involved and how it plays out in the context of elephant conservation.

According to a 2007 paper "Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation," authored by Parker, Osborn, Hoare, and Niskanen, human-elephant conflict is "any human-elephant interaction which results in negative effects on human social, economic, or cultural life, on elephant conservation or on the environment."

The authors note that human-elephant conflict has been observed in most of the 37 elephant range states on the African continent. This is strongly correlated with an increasing human population and the expansion of agricultural production. That elephants are compressed into ever-shrinking areas of wilderness results in additional ecological consequences.

Wildlife experts believe that one of the biggest threats to elephants is conflicts with rural farmers. The human population of Kenya, for example, jumped from roughly 13 million in 1975 to an estimated 44 million in 2013, leading to an increase in human-elephant conflict occurrences.

Botswana's Pachyderm Conundrum

In 2013, the U.K. Institute of Commonwealth Studies published a thought-provoking blog post by Keith Somerville, the Institute's Senior Research Fellow and lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent.

Entitled, *Botswana's Jumbo Dilemma—the expanding elephant population and the environment*, Somerville wrote at length about the conundrum Botswana is facing as its burgeoning elephant numbers approach or exceed the carrying capacity of the land.

Nowhere is this quandary more evident than Chobe National Park during the dry season, according to Somerville. Even with natural elephant mortality occurring during dry spells, that hasn't slowed down the accelerated rate of Chobe's ecological destruction by large herds tearing down vast amounts of mopane trees and other foliage.

ELEPHANT IN CHOBE. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

In all likelihood, this will lead to starvation for other animals and a reemergence of the debate over relocating elephants or culling them.

What Causes Human-Elephant Conflict?

A myriad of factors are at play, all of which account for increased instances of human-elephant conflict and further stress on intact ecosystems.

One key aspect related to the case of Botswana is the closing off of previously demarcated elephant migration routes because of expanding human settlement in protected areas and park buffer zones.

As elephants are confined to tighter living quarters, ecological problems such as in Chobe, or the Okavango Delta, will become more commonplace.

ELEPHANT IN CHOBE. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

According to Somerville, Botswana rangers are concerned that an overpopulation of elephants will mean a loss of other browsers and grazers, such as buffaloes, which rely on vegetation for food and cover. This is an example of indirect human-elephant conflict.

Human encroachment can cause direct conflict with elephants, such as when they raid crops, often eliciting angry reactions from villagers that may result in the deaths of the marauding animals—or in other cases, human casualties.

The World Wildlife Fund has stated that between 50 and 120 "problem" elephants are killed by wildlife authorities in Kenya each year. Meanwhile, Kenya's elephants kill 35 people annually.

Islands In a Sea of Development

Uganda is another case of an African country undergoing human-elephant conflict owing to a heavy human presence and a recent resurgence of elephant numbers.

Uganda's elephants are now estimated at roughly 5,000 individuals, a significant boost from a low of 700 to 800 in the 1980s, when poaching for ivory was intense.

The increase is attributable to the continued efforts of the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the ongoing political unrest and poaching in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has forced herds to migrate into the western part of the country.

Unlike Botswana, which still has more space for elephants to roam, Uganda's national parks are islands in a sea of development. With a high human population density—366 people per square mile—the growing number of elephants in areas like the Ishasha sector of Queen Elizabeth National Park will likely result in an uptick in human-elephant conflict.

Like Botswana, Uganda will one day be faced with what to do if and when elephants have exceeded the carrying capacity of the limited available land.

Poverty: A Key Culprit

Most people in the world don't have to worry over whether or not they can walk safely home at night without coming head to head with the world's largest land mammal—a dangerous bull elephant or a protective mother with calves in tow.

The viewpoint for African villagers in elephant range areas is starkly different from that of Westerners who cherish elephants from afar.

Local people are not necessarily to blame when it comes to human-elephant conflict. Most rural Africans simply can't afford to protect themselves from elephants as effectively as people in the U.S. can, say, from wild animals like grizzly bears or mountain lions.

Poverty, then, is a major factor in human-elephant conflict, and conservationists and NGOs need to account for human population growth and what that will mean for elephants.

Some measures have already been tried and proven quite successful.

Malaika Honey, an NGO in Uganda, uses innovative fencing techniques for beekeeping enterprises, which helps deter elephants while at the same time providing earned income for community members.

Other methods of reducing human-elephant conflict include using chili peppers as deterrents, growing crops, such as sesame, which elephants won't eat, and putting in place crop barricades such as electric fences, cactus and agave enclosures, and deep trenches.

Human ingenuity is always tested. Elephants are highly intelligent creatures and have broken through what were thought to be pachyderm-proof enclosures to get at food supplies. There have been instances where they've broken through electrified fences with heavy branches from nearby trees and even filled up extensive trenches by kicking soil over the edges.

AN ELEPHANT BULL GRAZES ON NEARBY FOLIAGE. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

A Challenge That Needs More Exposure

While an exact estimate of annual occurrences across the 37 range states is difficult to quantify owing to so many unreported incidents, conservationists still need to address these and other socioeconomic factors that directly or indirectly contribute to human-elephant conflict.

Part of the solution should revolve around alleviating poverty and widening birth control programs.

Finally, the Western world needs to understand the realities and complexities of human-elephant conflict and keep looking for new ways to help solve the problems. NGOs should double down on increasing awareness of the issues.

Elephant poaching is a problem that must be dealt with. But human-elephant conflict also requires serious attention. Sadly, if poaching doesn't finish them off first, human-elephant conflict surely will.

Michael Schwartz *is a journalist and African wildlife conservation researcher. With field experience around the continent since 2005, his passion for Africa's wildlife is matched by his compassion for the people who live there. A significant portion of his field work is carried out in Uganda, where he studies lion and elephant conservation. You can visit his website at http://www.michaelwschwartz.com.*

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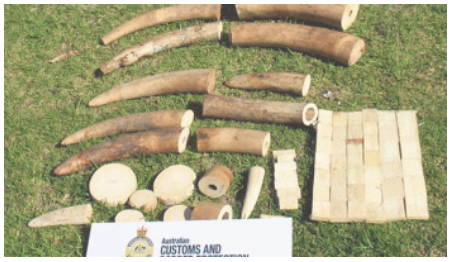

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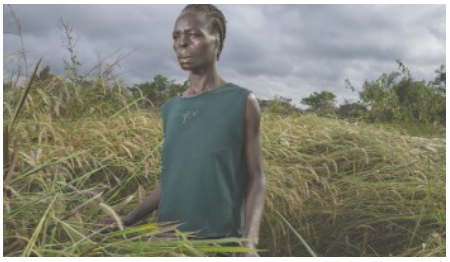

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