

ELEPHANT MANAGEMENT: A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

By JP STURGEON
Resource Africa

Introduction

- This is a community perspective of the roles and functions of SANParks agency, with particular reference to elephant management.
- Protected areas are the property of the nation, managed on its behalf by the state and its agencies. The state's first priority to do this as efficiently and effectively as possible - the first guiding principle for SANParks.
- SANParks is responsible for the conservation of biodiversity. This is an adaptive management process, based upon management hypothesis, management action, monitoring and evaluation, modification of the management actions, and if necessary, adaptation of the management hypothesis.
- SANParks must ensure that our parks are maintained as areas of recreational, cultural, scientific and spiritual value.
- This broadly defines the responsibilities of SANParks. The complexities that such responsibilities entail are part and parcel of the challenge facing any national conservation agency working on behalf of the nation.

Challenges

- For historical and geographic reasons, communities adjoining protected areas constitute a special case as stakeholders.
- From a historical perspective, loss of land, denial of access to natural resources and places of spiritual and cultural value, other issues
- From a geographic perspective, uncomfortable juxtaposition of impoverished rural communities and relatively well-conserved wilderness areas
- Poaching, problem animal issues, conflict and dissatisfaction, feeling of being excluded.

Challenges

- This is a common feature of protected area management throughout the world, and constitutes one of the major challenges to the protected area movement.
- This is why local communities must be seen as a special case as stakeholders.
- The challenge for South Africa particularly difficult. The populations of adjoining communities are often very large, and levels of poverty within them extreme and chronic. National parks were often established alongside *apartheid's* labour reserves and subsequent *Bantustans*, making the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty even more extreme. The dictates and consequences of South Africa's particular brand of racial capitalism added a further dimension to the challenge facing SANParks in 1994.

Current initiatives

- Affirmative employment and procurement policies
- Incorporation of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) requirements into commercial concessions
- Return of selected pieces of land to communities.
- The commercialisation of tourism facilities has itself been an instrument to address inequalities in the economic value derived from the operations of national parks.
- Partnerships between national and provincial parks, private landowners, and communal landowners have also been developed as a mechanism for addressing conflict and creating value for local communities.
- The tourism industry has been a major driver of all these initiatives, and remains one of the most significant factors for SANParks in its efforts to balance the often conflicting demands of biodiversity conservation and local beneficiation.
- While there has been much progress, much remains to be achieved. Land reform continues to present a major challenge, not only to SANParks, but also to South Africa as a nation.

Opportunities

- regular interaction with local councils and traditional structures
- joint planning of Integrated Development Plans
- educational/awareness programmes aimed at schools and community organisations
- Support for community commercial enterprises eg, use of hides, ivory, meat

Conclusions

- Local communities would agree that population control is necessary
- Whatever management actions SANParks undertakes to do so, they need to have sound scientific evidence to back it up. They need to be proactive about making this evidence available. TFCAs' are a good idea, research, new approaches are all essential.
- Communities would not have an ethical or moral problem with culling, provided it is done as humanely as possible. I note that KNP already shoots between 50 and 100 elephants a year as problem animals. While there is a moral issue around the killing of elephants, it has to be weighed up against a range of issues, the most compelling of which is the issue of habitat damage and the impact upon other species. Is culling necessarily worse in terms of impact on elephant populations than translocation or death by starvation?
- Local communities have a long history of living with nature, and with elephants. They have an understanding of nature which is to an extent not well understood or accepted within a scientific paradigm. Local communities in Africa are probably better able to 'think like a mountain' than most.