

by Keith Somerville

Botswana's Elephants And Conservation - Are Things Starting To Fall Apart?

Just over a year ago, stealing the title from Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, Professor Keith Somerville wrote a report entitled *No longer at ease: clouds on the horizon for Botswana's conservation success story* after a research trip to the Chobe Enclave, eastern Linyanti, Maun and Gaborone. In it he pointed to the gradual growth in elephant poaching, 30-50 a year, according to Michael Flyman, head of the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks elephant surveys. Now, he warns that the title of another of Achebe's novels, *Things Fall Apart*, could become a more relevant description of elephant conservation and rising human elephant conflict in northern Botswana.

The picture of Dr Mike Chase grimly viewing the carcass of a poached elephant in the Chobe Enclave in northern Botswana is doubly poignant. Not only is it one of at least 26 elephants poached for their ivory there recently, but Mike Chase has just completed the Great Elephant Census of many of Africa's savannah elephants.

This survey is aimed at providing data to help conserve elephants and their habitat and inform debates over the levels of poaching and of human-elephant conflict. It found a decline in savannah elephant numbers in 18 states surveyed (but oddly excludes those in Namibia, Central African Republic and South Sudan and all forest elephants) over the last nine years (much of which was already known, though and recorded in the African Elephant Database) and the full import of the new minimum estimate of 352,271 has still to be assessed against existing data.

Poaching and conflict on the rise: In late August reports emerged from northern Botswana that 26 or more elephants had been killed in the eastern Linyanti area of the Chobe enclave where some 150,000 elephants roam between Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and Angola. With its river, the Linyanti swamp, Savuti Channel and other water and food sources, Chobe is the territory's core.

The elephants had been killed between the Linyanti Bush Camp, the public camping site and less than three kilometers from the Botswana Defense Force's (BDF) camp. Drawn from the army, its anti-poaching unit has permission to shoot-to-kill armed poachers. In recent years scores of Namibian and Zambian suspects have been shot.

Three weeks before the publication of the photos above, I was following up reports (and photographs) on the bush 24 website about attacks on elephants in a small area along the Linyanti Swamp. This was the same area where, in July 2014, I found poachers' tracks and drag marks from tusks leading to the swamp and the exit route by boat to Namibia's Caprivi Strip.

My guide confirmed local people had started helping Zambian poachers to find and poach elephants.

Amos Ramokati, the regional wildlife officer for the DWNP in Maun, and Michael Flyman both admitted

by Keith Somerville

that since the government's 2014 ban on commercial and trophy hunting, there had been an increase in the number of local people assisting poachers. In the past they had backed the DWNP and defense force's efforts to stop poaching.

After the hunting ban, many rural communities lost the substantial income they had received. Some, like those in the Khwai River area were getting an annual income of over a quarter of a million dollars, according to Southern African Sustainable Use Specialist Group (SASUSG), which had petitioned against the ban. The Group said that it would hit rural communities hard, forcing them to poach for 'bushmeat' and because of the loss of irreplaceable earnings to even help ivory syndicates.

The current rise in poaching does not immediately spell disaster for Botswana's elephants - the biggest single population in Africa. But it is a threat and a possible indication that a combination of national parks, high-cost tourism, legal hunting quotas and concessions, and sustainable-use programmes had built up in Botswana, giving it one of the best conservation records in Africa.

Poaching and the Great Elephant Census: One of the worrying things about the increase in poaching is that it not only suggests a growing exploitation of Botswana's previously sacrosanct populations, but also a threat to long-term plans for increasing elephant ranges, migration corridors and thereby encouraging conservation in this wider region. The Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), which has been established to encourage the migration and dispersal of elephants to avoid environment damage by concentration in the Chobe region and to repopulate areas denuded of elephants by poaching and the effects of conflict, notably in Angola, is full of good intentions. However, according to Botswana DWNP officials and conservation NGOs, it is largely a paper organization.

The wave of poaching in northern Botswana adds to Mike Chase's reports, derived from the Great Elephant Census (GEC) survey, of large-scale killing of elephants in south-eastern Angola. Once home to well over 100,000 elephants, the population there was nearly wiped out by a campaign of killing and tusk removal carried out in the 1970s and 1980s by the apartheid South African Defense Force and the Angolan rebel movement UNITA. After the withdrawal of the SADF in 1989 and the end of the Angolan civil war in 2002, Chase hoped that the population would recover and he said there were signs that elephants were moving back there from Botswana via the Caprivi Strip in large numbers, which Michael Flyman in Botswana also confirmed.

But when he conducted the surveys for the GEC, Chase said he found large numbers of carcasses and very few elephants, given that large numbers were thought to have moved into empty areas of bush from Botswana. This expectation was based on Botswana's dry season surveys in 2013 and 2014 which showed a drop in Botswana's population from the range of 156,401-166,882 down to 129,939-142,453. Flyman told me this did not indicate massive poaching but movement between Botswana and neighboring states. He and Chase over the last couple of years have denied that there is a growing poaching problem in Botswana and said few carcasses of illegally killed elephants had been found. The recent discoveries suggest, rather, that poaching is increasing, which was what I have been told by safari and hunting operators who know the region well.

Chase estimated that Angola was losing 10 percent of its elephants each year, a higher mortality rate

by Keith Somerville

than any other country on the GEC and that its population was a mere 3,400. This indicates the poaching problem there was among the most severe in Africa at the moment - following on from the poaching disasters in Tanzania and Mozambique which lost 60 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively, of their elephants between 2009 and 2016.

The nature of poaching in the region was shockingly demonstrated in July when tourists at a Namibian safari lodge on the banks of the Kavango River watched as men armed with AK-47 assault rifles attacked a herd of 40 elephants grazing on the Angolan bank of the river. The poachers opened fire on the elephants, taking no notice of the watching tourists. At least three elephants were killed and many others wounded, perhaps to die later. The attack was blatant and carried out with impunity.

Since the end of the war 14 years ago, the corrupt but oil-rich Angolan government and political elite have done nothing to redevelop the south of the country, which had been hostile, rebel territory; guns abound there. Poverty and weapons, plus a ready market in China for tusks, are the ingredients for widespread poaching aided by government corruption and little or no spending on either rural development or wildlife conservation or protection.

Hunting ban may be hurting elephants and people: Returning to the growing incidence of poaching in Botswana, many blame it on the ready market for tusks and widespread networks of criminal syndicates smuggling ivory out of Africa, but also on the hunting ban and failure by the Khama government to provide alternative sources of income to local communities deprived of hunting earnings.

Getting hard information was not easy as the Khama government does not take kindly to criticism of its policies. Many safari operators, former hunting concession owners and some NGO conservation specialists are wary of bringing down upon themselves the wrath of the president and his brother, Tshekedi Khama the environment minister. Many would only speak on condition of anonymity, fearing their ability to operate in Botswana would be curtailed by open criticism. Botswana has a tradition of democracy and free speech but has become noticeably less open and more authoritarian under President Khama.

But all those to whom I spoke or with whom I corresponded had much the same to say - that the hunting ban was introduced without any provision for local communities who relied on the income, forcing them to look at illegal hunting or helping poachers in return for payment as a means of survival. And the end of hunting and the abandonment of hunting concessions has had another very serious effect on local people.

The concession areas were policed by safari operators to keep out poachers (especially from Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and, most importantly of all, they operated boreholes which supplied water for the substantial range of wildlife on the land. This was particularly important for elephants and buffalo, which used the boreholes heavily in the dry season. Those boreholes are now dry and three different safari operators told me that the elephants that used them were now becoming problem animals on cultivated or grazing land beyond the hunting areas. They were moving in search of water and food and destroying crops, water pumps and damaging grazing land.

by Keith Somerville

The lives of local farmers were also put at risk. The lack of previous level of management of the areas and the withdrawal of the presence of safari operators and their staff was also attracting in poachers, I was told. Alongside this, the lack of quotas to kill problem lions was leading to greater loss of livestock. Rural people were no longer seeing benefits from conservation mixed with sustainable-use and opposition is growing both to the ban on hunting and to the stringent, army-backed anti-poaching program. The old consensus and systems of mutual benefit are falling apart.

The combined effect of this has been to end local support for conservation, increase direct poaching or assistance for incursions by poachers and to demand for the shooting of problem animals in farming areas now being invaded. There has been a very worrying increase in the poisoning of carcasses to kill predators and scavengers, which is taking a huge toll of vultures, while killing lions whose bones can be sold to traders for use in Chinese traditional medicine.

About 120 vultures were found dead north of Maun, having been poisoned by feeding on two cow carcasses laced with chemicals. The director of Birdlife Botswana, Kabelo Senyatso, said the incident marked yet another mass slaughter of increasingly endangered birds. Vulture numbers are falling as a result of widespread poisoning. The killing of vultures, lions and hyenas also aids elephant poachers as it removes scavengers which could draw attention to poached elephants and bring the BDF anti-poaching units round.

To the south of Chobe and the Okavango, around Nxai Pan and Makgadikgadi National Parks, there is also a growing problem of poaching since the ban. Last year I was told of poachers on horseback hunting zebra for meat and skins there. This year, one former hunting safari operator told me that the areas surrounding Nxai Pan and Makgadikgadi had one elephant poaching incident in 17 years while hunting companies managed these areas whereas as the complex has had 32 elephant poached since hunting stopped and the protection hunting companies provided was lost. He said, 'Without eyes in the field and feet on the ground the poaching in these now vacant areas will be enormous hence there being no buffalo and very few elephant remaining in these eastern concessions.

No easy answers and a ban wasn't one of them: It is not the hunting ban alone that is to blame for the threat to Botswana's conservation successes, but it very clearly hasn't helped. Depriving local communities of income, which cannot be easily replaced, makes them vulnerable to the blandishments of poaching syndicates but may also push them into bushmeat hunting to survive and poisoning to protect livestock or provide income through the sale of lion bones.

The loss of community income is made worse by the increasing elephant-human conflict in farming areas now being invaded by wildlife which relied on hunting concessions boreholes. This creates another grievance. The Southern African Sustainable Use Specialist Group argued against the ban on all these grounds. The Kalahari Conservation Society's acting CEO, Baboloki Autlwetse, told me that the intention of the ban was to encourage communities to develop an income stream through eco-tourism, but that this took time, funds and expertise which the communities lacked. In conversation with me a year ago, he stressed the need for a fast-track approach by the government to help such communities so they did not become opponents of conservation or resort to poaching from desperation.

by Keith Somerville

Little seems to have been done in the meantime and poaching and poisoning appear to be escalating. Action is needed by the government before things really fall apart.

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