

# elephants on the move

Living up to its name, the Tracks of Giants expedition spent some time with the Botswana-based Elephants Without Borders NGO and discovered what it is learning from its monitoring programmes. The news, reports **Ian Michler**, looks good for elephants and for transfrontier conservation.



KELLY LANDEN

**ONE OF THE MANY HIGHLIGHTS** on the Tracks of Giants expedition is the quality time we are spending with researchers, conservationists and community leaders along our route. And because a principal objective of our venture is to raise awareness about the twin concepts of corridor and transfrontier conservation, we try to meet up with people who embrace this focus.

In this respect, an encounter we had with Michael Chase and Kelly Landen of Elephants Without Borders (EWB; [www.elephantswithoutborders.org](http://www.elephantswithoutborders.org)) was significant. This NGO has been doing research that is both vital and visionary on a number of fronts since it was founded as a trust in 2004. It is based in Kasane, northern Botswana, in the heartland of the recently formed Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier (KAZA) project – and KAZA, by some margin, is home to the largest elephant population in Africa. The elephant is, of course, the umbrella species for EWB, but the NGO's work now also encompasses most herbivores.

EWB's primary focus is monitoring the movements, population dynamics and breeding behaviour of the meta-population of elephants in the KAZA region, an area that covers almost 300 000 square kilometres across Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Central to its work is the collaring of elephants. At present, 19 from across the KAZA range are carrying satellite telemetry collars; since the inception of EWB, a total of 93 (60 per cent bulls and 40 per cent cows) have been collared. With a lifespan of four years, the collars have made data collection a lot easier and more accurate; as long as there are satellites, they have a limitless range and download every hour.

Having collected data for close on a decade, EWB has documented a number of remarkable

findings, including the largest home ranges ever recorded: 32 000 square kilometres for a bachelor group and 21 000 square kilometres for a family or breeding group. Also astonishing was the discovery that a single bull covered 460 kilometres in approximately three months, the longest straight-line movement known to researchers.

But far more significantly, EWB's results with regard to corridor movements and recolonisation patterns indicate how vital corridor and transfrontier conservation initiatives are going to be. The most noteworthy finding has been the large-scale movement of elephants and other large herbivores back into Luiana and Mucusso national parks in south-eastern Angola. These sizable protected areas now form a substantial chunk of KAZA.

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Before the outbreak of civil strife in the 1960s, the region's estimated elephant populations exceeded 250 000 animals. It was only in 2003, after more than 30 years of war, that researchers were again able to enter the area to ascertain how the wildlife was faring. EWB staff were among the first to return, and while they found the habitat still mostly intact, their counts reflected how the wildlife had been decimated by the various military forces involved in the conflict. Many species had been poached out, others existed in small, scattered populations, and the elephant count did not even reach 1 000.

Suspecting that recolonisation was a strong possibility – and that elephants were not the only likely candidates – Chase and Landen

Elephants Without Borders is monitoring the movements and population dynamics of elephants in the KAZA region, the largest range ever studied.

returned in 2007. Much to their delight, aerial surveys showed healthy recoveries for a host of species. Buffalo, kudu, lechwe, giraffe and lion were among the species that reappeared on their count lists, and the number of elephants had increased to more than 8 000. Chase's current estimate for the elephant population is about 16 000, a clear indication of how vital corridors and transfrontier parks are to conservation planning. Their research also pinpoints a number of migration corridors used by elephants and other large herbivores, with the Okavango Delta to the Makgadikgadi Pans and Chobe to Hwange being the most significant.

It is also worthy of note that most of the elephants moving back into Angola and the Caprivi Strip are coming out of northern Botswana. So there's little surprise that Chase and Landen's research points to a stabilisation of this country's elephant population, which they believe peaked at about 130 000. 'We are on the cusp of determining whether elephants in Botswana have reached a zero per cent growth rate,' says Chase. This is certainly food for thought for the pro-culling and trophy-hunting lobbies, which have been the source of some of the most ill-considered proposals for elephant management in recent years.

Read more about the work of Elephants Without Borders in the June 2008 issue of Africa Geographic. You can follow Ian's blog about the expedition at [bit.ly/OjK99D](http://bit.ly/OjK99D)

