

Source:	Group writers SA	Date:	27 January 2008	Page No:	9
Publication:	Sunday Independent	Author:	Leon Marshall		



Long walk to freedom as elephants trek to Angola

A feisty cow leads her herd 180km north, giving hope to conservationists that Botswana's overpopulation problems might ease

An elephant cow named Letsatsi could hardly have known how she was serving the wellbeing of her species and benefiting conservation when she recently took her herd on a long walk from Botswana's Okavango Delta into south-eastern Angola.

The journey, from a region of known safety to a landscape where, until not too long ago, animals also experienced the ravages of war, has bolstered hopes that Botswana's serious elephant overpopulation problem might start to be relieved by some of the herds migrating into the former killing fields.

The country has an estimated 150 000 elephants and this is putting a severe strain on its habitats. Their destructive habits and the vast quantities of vegetation they consume have laid waste to much of the Chobe Reserve's riverine forests in the north.

The migration should also lend impetus to the initiative to establish a giant transfrontier conservation area that will link a major portion of southern Angola with Botswana's Okavango, Namibia's Caprivi as well as the Victoria Falls and parks in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Launched more than a year ago by the ministers of environmental affairs of the five countries, the so-called Kaza (Kavango-Zambezi) Transfrontier Conservation Area project will eventually allow animals - and tourists - freedom of movement across boundaries in an area of linked parklands which is estimated eventually to come to a massive 287 132 square kilometres.

As with some herds from Kruger National Park's burgeoning elephant population that have been moving across into Mozambique since the establishment of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier

Park, it is hoped that the Botswana elephant migrations might also help to stave off the painful option of culling.



Letsatsi was fitted with a satellite-tracking collar near Vumbra in the northern region of the delta in August last year.

Kelly Landen of the Elephants Without Borders organization that monitors elephant movements in the area says she was chosen because of her size, her feisty nature and the likelihood of her being the matriarch of the family group of 17, including four young ones. She says it was because of these attributes that she was called Letsatsi, which is the Setswana word for "sun".

The purpose of the tracking was to find out more about the migrations of the delta elephants - where they come from, how long they stay and where they go to.

When large congregations of elephants were seen in the delta last year, it was decided that it was a good time to do the collaring.

Letsatsi and her herd waited until the first rains in October, then started moving north towards Botswana's border with Namibia's Caprivi strip. In December they moved into the Caprivi and then crossed into Angola's Luiana Partial Reserve, which takes up a major portion of Cuando Cubango province. Sparsely populated, the 199 049 square kilometre province borders south-west Zambia and Namibia's Caprivi.

It includes Jamba Camp, which used to be the southern headquarters of rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and his Unita movement. The distance covered by the herd was more than 180km.

Landen says the migration underscored the importance of corridors that would allow elephants and other animals from Botswana to migrate into Angola.

"We cannot answer quite yet what has prompted this herd, and we believe many other herds as well, to leave such a lush and hospitable area as the delta and the protected lands of Botswana for perhaps unknown territories.

"Recently we had the honour of spending a little time in Angola and can confirm that the habitat is conducive to fresh new feeding grounds. But we also suspect that, as the elephants had been displaced by the Angolan war several years ago, it may be that they want to re-establish old migration routes they have in their cognitive memories.



"We know that the elephants are repopulating the area and expanding their ranges quite quickly, but we cannot verify their reasoning."

Landen's associate at Elephants Without Borders, Dr Michael Chase, says: "After seven years of monitoring elephant movements and having fitted 28 elephant cows with satellite units, we have not observed such dramatic movements by a family group.

"This is the first elephant cow collared by this project to move more than 180km from the Okavango Delta across the Caprivi Strip into southeastern Angola.

"This is a highly significant movement and an amazing illustration that elephants collared so far from the Angolan border have the ability to cross international boundaries and repopulate the reserves and coutadas [Portuguese for hunting area] in southeastern Angola."

The herd's movements can be followed on www.loveearth.com, Landen says.

Chase reported last year that elephants crossing from neighbouring countries into Angola might have developed the ability to step around the landmines that litter the vast region. Before, many had their trunks and legs blown off, and he thought it might be that they had learned to associate the smell of mines with danger and therefore to avoid them. The mines remain a serious problem for the formation of a transfrontier conservation area.