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Silence the guns

by Sunday Standard Reporter
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"We are talking about an animal that eats 250kg of food a day", says Mike Chase. The Founder of Elephants without Borders is trying to drive home his point: Botswana has been mobbed by giant gluttons, eating us out of house and home. Well, maybe not exactly eating us out of house and home, but Botswana's huge elephant population is decimating the country vegetation, destroying crop fields and escalating conflicts with communities of Northern Botswana.

Not once, however, does the phrase elephant cull come up during the interview as he explained how the problem can be resolved once and for all. In Chase's vocabulary, "cull" is a four letter word. In fact, in his vulgar-o-meter, culling probably ranks up there with poaching and other forms of slaughter.

Chase who has been studying the ecology of elephants in Botswana for nearly 15 years has a simple solution: Resolve political conflicts in Africa and deal decisively with poaching. With poachers and guerillas' guns finally quite, Botswana's elephant overpopulation problem will fizzle away with the smell of gun powder. These are not crazy rumblings of a tree hugging zealot, far from it. In fact, Chase who in 2007 became the first Mbotswana to read for a doctorate specifically in elephant ecology, has been continuously searching for novel and creative ideas for progressive research, which will impact conservation in a timely and meaningful way. In the process, he has created a body of knowledge on how poaching and civil wars impact elephants' migrations and populations.

By his account, Botswana is "bearing the brunt of poaching in Africa. 40% of our elephants, about 80 000 are political refugees."

Angola's intermittent 27-year civil war decimated wildlife populations. During the 1980s, African elephants in Angola drew international alarm with reports of 100,000 elephants killed. Luiana Partial Reserve (PR), a conservation area in south-east Angola, was the military operations centre for UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), which used elephant ivory to pay for arms and meat to feed the troops.

Following the end of the civil war in 2002, aerial surveys of Luiana PR indicated that elephant numbers were increasing rapidly, from 366 in January 2004 to 1827 in November 2005, and expanding their

range in the Reserve. Concurrently, elephants tagged with satellite collars in northern Botswana and the Caprivi Strip, Namibia, moved into Luiana PR. The animals were returning in ever-growing numbers to the vast south-east Angolan landscape in which thousands were massacred during the country's protracted conflict and only some were able to escape into Botswana and Namibia. Since the end of the civil war, it seems that the elephants had begun to sense that it was safe enough to go back to the Luiana Partial Reserve that takes up a major portion of Angola's sparsely populated 199 049 square-kilometer Cuando Cubango province that borders southwest Zambia and Namibia's Caprivi. Aerial surveys also showed a corresponding decline in Botswana elephant populations. "It may be that, as they came to understand during the war that southeast Angola was a no-go area for them, they were now realizing that they could return without threat of persecution", says Chase.

He says, while the Botswana government has committed a lot of resources to wildlife conservation, the same cannot be said of neighboring Zimbabwe and Zambia where poachers are forcing elephants to seek refuge in Botswana. Chase, whose PhD research dissertation under the heading Elephants without Borders was based on the study of elephants' cross border migrations between Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe says Botswana's huge elephant population is part of a much larger Southern Africa's elephant population. He argues that once armed conflicts in the region have been resolved and poaching dealt with most of the elephants currently roaming Botswana will return to their homelands, and Botswana will be left with a much smaller elephant population. There are already encouraging signs that the vacuum created by Angola's decades-long war could siphon off a good many elephants from across the border

After graduating for his PhD, Chase who had previously done the research under the auspices of Conservation International established a non-governmental organisation named Elephants without Borders, a name borrowed from his PhD research paper. The NGO strives to improve understanding of elephant ecology as a way of helping to deal with the burgeoning issue of northern Botswana's overweight of elephants as against the practically denuded area of Angola and the comparatively small population of Zambia and the rest of Namibia.

The organization's study area takes in most of the proposed Kaza (Kavango Zambezi) Transfrontier Conservation Area that includes the Victoria Falls region of Zimbabwe as well and which is intended

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Opinion POLL

Based on the performance of opposition parties in the by-elections that have taken place in the recent past do these political parties stand a chance against BDP at the general elections next year?

a) Yes
 b) No
 c) Can't say

(VOTE)

Poll Results

Yes	No	Can't say
1682	3114	171

Conservation Area that includes the Victoria Falls region of Zimbabwe as well and which is intended eventually to constitute a mammoth 287 132 square kilometer area.

Chase says “we are currently losing an elephant every minute in Africa. This is frightening especially for elephant lovers.” An unprecedented increase in the price of ivory has resulted in record elephant poaching. The World Elephant Day estimates that as many as 100 African elephants are killed each day by poachers seeking ivory, meat and body parts, despite a 1989 global ban on ivory trade. Approximately 30,000 African elephants were killed illegally in 2012, the most in 20 years according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare. “This unnecessary killing has led to the highest elephant mortality rate in history. There’s a serious risk that Africa’s elephants could disappear from many parts of the continent. Elephants are a lynchpin to Africa’s ecosystem and losing them would be a detriment to other species”, says Chase.

He explained that elephant estimates from aerial surveys form the basis to develop conservation management plans; unfortunately, surveys in many countries have not been flown in ten years. Without this data, it is impossible to assess the current status of elephant populations. Because of the remoteness of many wildlife areas in Africa, aerial counts continue to be an important tool for wildlife management. Survey operations are also very expensive, making long-term monitoring plans difficult. As a consequence of these limitations, surveys of elephants are outdated and speculative, and the populations’ fate in some places is completely unknown.

There is however a bright light at the end of the tunnel. A number of conservation NGOs, among them Elephants without Borders, African Elephant Specialist Group, World Wildlife Fund, Wild life Conservation Society, Frankfurt Zoological Society, African Parks Network and Save the Elephant have mobilized resources for a huge Elephant census.

Advanced by investor and philanthropist Paul G. Allen, the Great Elephant Census will provide accurate data about the number and distribution of African elephants, providing new information critical to their future survival. Nonprofit partner Elephants without Borders (EWB), based in Botswana, has for the past 15 years studied the ecology of elephants in Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe under the official endorsement and full support of government authorities. EWB conceptualized this research project and will take the lead counting half of Africa’s elephant population which is found in parts of Botswana, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

“Reliable information on the status of elephants is needed to settle long-running disputes over how many elephants exist. Paul G. Allen is driving a pan-Africa aerial survey to accurately determine the numbers, trends, range, size and challenges of key elephant populations in Africa. Elephants without Borders will conduct the survey in close collaboration with in-country conservation organizations and governments”, says Chase.

The project is scheduled to take two years to complete; year one will survey elephants and other large herbivores 13 countries, covering about 80% of the savanna elephant range with the aim of counting 90% of Africa savanna elephants: Angola, Botswana, Chad, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Year two will entail data analyses, publication, presentation and dissemination, with preliminary survey results expected to be released in mid-2015. This data will be made available to academics, NGOs and governments championing animal and land conservation.

Paul G. Allen is a leading investor, entrepreneur and philanthropist who has given more than \$1.5 billion to charitable causes over his lifetime. He founded Vulcan Inc. in 1986 with Jody Allen to oversee his business and philanthropic activities. Today, that Seattle-based company oversees a wide range of the Allen family’s investments and projects throughout the world. Allen created the Allen Institute for Brain Science to accelerate understanding of the human brain in health and disease, and Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence to explore opportunities for development in the field of AI.

He is the co-founder of the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, which has awarded more than \$475 million to non-profits in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. His commitments to the long-term sustainability of Africa are focused in the areas of conservation and anti-poaching, community development and education, and sustainable tourism. Through his foundation and direct gifts, Allen has given about \$10 million since 2008 to support key research, education and technology initiatives across the African continent. His \$26 million gift to Washington State University for the Paul G. Allen School for Global Animal Health is fueling critical research that will mitigate and eradicate animal-based disease in Africa.

The Wildlife Conservation Society on the other hand saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, global conservation, education and the management of the world’s largest system of urban wildlife parks, led by the flagship Bronx Zoo. Together these activities change attitudes towards nature and help people imagine wildlife and humans living in harmony.

The African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) focuses on the conservation and management of African elephants. The broad aim of the AfESG is to promote the long-term conservation of Africa’s elephants and, where possible, the recovery of their population to viable levels.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) works in 100 countries and is supported by 1.2 million members in the United States and close to 5 million globally. WWF’s unique way of working combines global reach with a foundation in science, involves action at every level from local to global, and ensures the delivery of innovative solutions that meet the needs of both people and nature.

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The Frankfurt Zoological Society provides logistical support of National Parks and other Conservation Areas worldwide, assisting public authorities and organizations in the establishment and implementation of conservation areas. They specialize in advising government agencies in conservation queries, financing and assisting in animal census surveys and providing individual protection programs and reintroduction programs for endangered species, conservation education. They also specialize in

and reintroduction programs for endangered species, conservation education. They also specialize in land acquisition to secure valuable habitats for flora and fauna and the protection and regeneration of natural landscapes.

The African Parks Network takes on total responsibility for the rehabilitation and long-term management of national parks and other protected areas, in public-private partnerships with African Governments, placing emphasis on achieving financial sustainability of parks through tourism and associated private enterprise. They currently manage Liuwa Plain National Park in Zambia, Majete National Park in Malawi, Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Bangweulu Wetlands in Zambia and Akagera National Park in Rwanda.

Save the Elephants was founded by Dr. Iain Douglas-Hamilton, one of the world's foremost authorities on the African elephant. Douglas-Hamilton pioneered the first in-depth scientific study of elephant social behavior in Tanzania's Lake Manyara National Park at age 23. Save the Elephants works to secure the future for elephants and sustain the beauty and ecological integrity of the places they live.

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