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Life, etc

Southern African elephant corridors blocked by poachers

- Don Pinnock



Don Pinnock

Don Pinnock is an associate of Southern Write, a group of top travel and natural history writers and photographers in Africa. He's a former editor of *Getaway* magazine in Cape Town, South Africa. He has been an electronic engineer, lecturer in journalism and criminology, consultant to the Mandela government, a professional yachtsman, explorer, travel writer, photographer and a cable-car operator on the Rock of Gibraltar. His present passion is the impact of humans on planetary processes.

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- 09 Jan 2014 11:38 (South Africa)



Elephants need far greater ranges than any other land animals. But attempts to make space for them in Southern Africa are being thwarted by greed and bullets. By DON PINNOCK.

In the dry end of a dry season, the blazing sun reduces water holes to circular irises of cracked mud. As the temperature rises into the 40s, animals follow ancient paths to rivers at the heart of the vast Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA). From the banks of the Chobe River hungry elephants from the world's greatest herds gaze across the lazy water to the tempting green floodplains on the Namibian side, but few cross. Hunters wait there and the elephants know it.

A conservation management map indicates the problem. To the south of the river is the Chobe National Park, but on the Namibian side, between the Chobe and Zambezi rivers on the western toe of the Caprivi Strip, are the Impalila, Kasika and Kabulabula conservancies.

In 1996, the Government of Namibia introduced legislation giving communities the power to create their own conservancies, which were to manage and benefit from wildlife on their land. It also allowed the local community, working with private companies, to use natural resources on a sustainable basis and to benefit from ecotourism.

In general, this has worked well, but in this part of the Caprivi the system seems to have gone awry. Among the areas on the map marked for 'settlement, cropping and tourism' is a barrier – starting less than a kilometre from the river – marked 'Exclusive wildlife trophy hunting only'. Several kilometres north of that is an area labeled 'Exclusive wildlife: No disturbance'.

doing to stop poaching or elephants being shot by hunters in our front yard?'

The KAZA website seems to have not been updated since March 2013. Its strategic action plan is puzzling and talks about organisational bureaucracy rather than ground-level conservation.

But as KAZA's Kasane technical adviser, Simon Munthali, pointed out, his organisation is more about government-to-government cooperation, information gathering and research facilitation than action on the ground. 'We look after conservation and development in five countries,' he said, 'and we protect and manage ecosystems to ensure that wildlife can move freely.'

When I pointed out that wildlife wasn't able to move freely and asked how he thought this could stop poaching, he said that, personally, he thought KAZA should form an armed protection force, but that this wasn't on the cards.

One of the problems across the Chobe is that KAZA doesn't have the teeth and the conservancy committees don't have the foresight or interest to establish corridors, limit trophy hunting or curb poaching. I put this problem to Chief Liswane 3, who controls a large area in eastern Caprivi and has the authority to move homesteads, punish poachers and outlaw hunting. He's a congenial, educated man and his response was encouraging.

'The trouble began when the South African military were here in the war,' he said. 'They killed so many animals and there were guns everywhere. They used to come to my area and shoot animals to relax. The animals fled to Botswana. Now I want them back. But on the floodplains there's nothing. For them to return we must secure their safety. For this there should be lodges along the Chobe and no shooting.'

'Elephants are my friends. We need to open corridors for them through from here to Angola and Zambia. I can ask my people to move back from a corridor and they will listen. The young men on the conservancy committees, I don't know what they're doing. But I think it's time for me to get involved there.'

Research by Elephants Without Borders has highlighted where the problems are in the KAZA area and what needs to be done about wildlife corridors, but cooperation and action between organisations and people who could make a difference seems to be lacking. And every 15 minutes, 24 hours a day, an elephant is killed by poachers.

There is, however, a measure of hope. At an emergency summit in Gaborone last November, African elephant range states as well as Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and China pledged to take urgent measures to halt illicit ivory trade. Among 14 measures was the commitment to classify wildlife trafficking as a serious crime, thereby unlocking international law enforcement under the UN Convention Against Organized Crime.

'Our window of opportunity to tackle the growing illegal ivory trade is closing,' said Botswana President Ian Khama. 'If we do not stem the tide, future generations will condemn our unwillingness to act. Now is the time for Africa and Asia to join forces.'

These decisions could make a difference to the elephants that stare across the Chobe River at the floodplains but don't dare to swim across. It might also spur Chief Liswane to knock his conservancies into shape so that his 'friends' can head north again into the succulent plains of Zambia and Angola. But until China outlaws the ivory trade, elephants in Africa will continue to bleed. **DM**

For more information see www.elephantswithoutborders.com and www.conservationaction.co.za.

Photo by Don Pinnock.

