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Elephants "Learn" to Avoid Land Mines in War-Torn Angola

Leon Marshall in Johannesburg, South Africa
for National Geographic News
July 16, 2007

Elephants moving into war-ravaged southern Angola from neighboring countries appear to have developed the ability to avoid the land mines that litter the region, scientists report.

Michael Chase, a biologist who has been studying the elephants for seven years, says he first detected the animals' apparent ability to avoid the mines from satellite-collar tracking images.

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The elephants are returning in growing numbers to southeast Angola, where thousands of the animals were massacred during the country's protracted civil war, said Chase, who heads the nonprofit conservation group Elephants Without Borders.

The region was headquarters for Jonas Savimbi's rebel UNITA movement, which is reported to have sold ivory to pay for

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weapons.

(Read related story: "Illegal Ivory Trade Boosted by Angola Craft Markets, Conservationists Say" [October 27, 2006].)

Since the end of the war in 2002, elephants have begun to go back to the Luiana Partial Reserve in Angola's sparsely populated Cuando Cubango province that borders southwest Zambia and Namibia (see Africa map).

Chase said that when the initial migration began a number of elephants had their trunks and legs blown off by mines, condemning the animals to agonizing deaths. But the elephants that followed since have avoided those areas.

"I don't know if elephants have 'learned' to avoid land mines, but my limited observations suggest they might have," he said.

"Once I overlay the movements of our five satellite-collared elephants with the location of [the known] mine fields, it would appear that they were avoiding these areas."

Evidence that elephants are avoiding the danger zones is supported by his team's observations on the ground, he added.

"We have not seen any evidence of elephants being blown up or injured by land mine explosions in the three years we have been working in this area," he said.

"Incidents of elephants being injured or killed by land mines used to happen often when elephants were chased over these areas by people."

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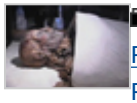

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- Zambia Wildlife Authority: Elephants Without Borders

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