

Mine clearances allow elephants to return home to Angola

Jane Flanagan

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ELEPHANTS WITHOUT BORDERS

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Elephants are slowly returning to former war zones in southern Africa on rediscovered ancient migration routes after the clearing of landmines and fences.

Fighting, poaching and farming have kept generations of herds from centuries-old pathways, penning them into overpopulated pockets of safety and leading to clashes with people over shrinking space. When herds congest in one area, not only do food and water become more scarce, but the land becomes inviable.

A venture between Botswana and Angola to embolden elephants to retrace the steps of their ancestors to explore their former ranges is beginning to bear fruit.

Before its decade-long civil war, which ended in 2002, Angola was home to about 100,000 elephants, compared with fewer than 10,000 today. Those that survived the chaos headed to the safe haven of neighbouring Botswana, which now boasts Africa's largest population.

Emboldening elephants to return to Angola's former battlefields, by removing hazards such as landmines and livestock fences, has become increasingly urgent. Under pressure from rural communities who report trampled crops and property, the government has reintroduced elephant trophy hunting and mooted a possible cull to reduce numbers.

Encouragingly, tracking data and aerial surveys show that, after decades of staying put, herds are finally feeling safe enough to move, according to Mike Chase of Elephants Without Borders. "Re-establishing these ancient corridors is one of the greatest natural solutions to reducing the bottleneck in Botswana," Dr Chase told *The Times*.

How elephants apply their extraordinary natural compasses to revive ancient paths they have never trodden continues to puzzle scientists and is impossible to measure. The Botswana-based organisation's tracking of scores of collared animals is helping to plot traditional routes between food and water sources to identify which areas should be opened up and made safe. Before the scourges of poaching, conflict and fences, a southern African elephant could easily traverse the borders of what are now five nation states, Dr Chase said.

One of the most established routes was the so-called Kwando Corridor which provided a seasonal escape from the harsh dry seasons of northern Botswana through Namibia to the forests of the south-eastern highlands of Angola. "A lot of Botswana's elephants are really political refugees from Angola and given the opportunity to safely go back and stay there, they would," Dr Chase added.

Signs of progress have boosted Angola's ambitions to develop as a tourist destination and a sizeable elephant population is seen as a must-have draw in the lucrative overseas market. Adjany da Silva Freitas Costa, 30, the country's recently appointed environment minister, has a doctorate in wildlife conservation from Oxford University and is committed to saving its last wild spaces.

President Masisi of Botswana is likely to be delighted to lose a large number of the country's 135,000 elephants, which are confined to 201,000 square miles, where incidents of clashes between crop-raiding animals and rural communities are rife.

It is estimated that there are about 350,000 elephants left in Africa, with up to 15,000 killed each year by poachers. While poaching levels in Africa have dropped in the past eight years, the sustainability rate of the elephants remains low, largely because of clashes between people and elephants over shrinking space.

The 22 countries in the world with the fastest birth rates are in Africa and all are elephant-range states, except Burundi and the Gambia, where they are locally extinct. Uganda's population, for example, which is estimated at 43 million, is projected to rise to 105 million by 2050, according to the UN.