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Response to Press Release by:
Permanent Secretary, Mr. Thato Raphaka
Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources Conservation and Tourism
24 February 2019

Today, Mr. Thato Raphaka, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources Conservation and Tourism, released a press statement about Elephants Without Borders' **2018 Aerial Survey of Elephants and Wildlife in Northern Botswana**. It is regrettable that the Government of Botswana (GoB) deem it necessary to lodge a media statement about the report and issue rebuttals and doubts regarding the report through a press release - rather than engage in the accepted standard review practice - which is to contact the researcher directly. I wish to reiterate, that to date, I have not been contacted by GoB regarding the survey report or its contents. I therefore deem it necessary to respond to the claims in the press release, which acknowledges that the methodology for transect surveys was "sound and was based on established methodology."

Claim 1: "...concerns about the blending of several different techniques i.e. sample counts, total counts and reconnaissance flights", saying that the "rationale for this is not well explained."

Fact: The rationale is well outlined in the report, with different techniques used in distinct strata (areas into which we divided the survey area to facilitate counting) of differing elephant densities: Total counts – areas of high density and clumped distribution; sample counts – extensive areas of moderate density; Reconnaissance – areas of low density at edge of range, where distribution is unknown. The results are not "blended" - implying mixed together - but are reported separately, before the respective totals are then combined in an overall estimate. There is absolutely no scientific or statistical basis for requiring that all strata use the same methodology.

Claim 2: It is stated here (and in Page 2 paragraph 6) that it: "is standard practice [to submit raw data] to the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group (AESG), the foremost authority on continental elephant numbers so that it can be independently assessed."

Fact: This statement is not accurate. It is definitely not standard practice for all survey data from all countries in Africa to be provided to the AfESG African Elephant Database in raw form for independent assessment. The AfESG has a Data Review Working Group (DRWG) with terms of reference stating that they will: "Monitor the quality of data entered into the AED." If, after reviewing a survey report and results, the DRWG are satisfied that the methodology is sound, the results are accepted. They do not have the capacity to examine and re-analyze every raw dataset in Africa to see if the results are correctly represented.

Claim 3: Mr. Raphaka goes on to mix the findings of the survey report with a BBC press article from September 2018, saying that the "results of the survey are at odds with statements attributed to Dr Mike Chase in an interview with BBC."

Fact: Firstly, the BBC news article is a journalist's interpretation of comments that were made in the context of an ongoing survey that was producing some alarming observations of elephant mortality. The 2018 Aerial Survey of Elephants and Wildlife in Northern Botswana is a technical report of survey results. It is not reasonable to compare and contrast the two very different formats. Secondly, the BBC article

records impressions of poaching hotspots, and there is no discussion of population size estimates or trends, which had not been calculated as of September 2018 while the survey still ensued. So, the claim that EWB's survey report contradicts previous statements is false.

Claim 4: "It is regrettable that Dr Chase, in a report purporting to be scientific, includes an astonishing number of pictures of dead elephants, 63 pages to be precise. This is definitely not standard practice in aerial survey report writing."

Fact: We provided documentary evidence of poached elephant carcasses in an appendix to our report. Surely all evidence should be presented, particularly when illegal poaching is being claimed and when the initial warning was labelled a "hoax and fake news". Under such circumstances, I felt it imperative to provide visual evidence. Annexes with documentary evidence are standard practice in wildlife survey reports. For elephants, survey reports typically include photographs of poached carcasses where present.

Claim 5: "only a portion of all carcasses observed during the aerial survey were verified by helicopter"

Fact: We observed a total of 1677 carcasses with an estimate of 11,044 in the survey area. We visited carcasses that were of concern, reported as possibly poached, numbering at 104, out of a total of 128 fresh carcasses. We used a helicopter to visit 72 fresh carcasses; 33 of which we were able to visit on the ground, 39 were photographed at low level by helicopter with confirmed evidence of poaching, another 22 photographs were from survey photos, a total of 94 or 90% of "concerned elephants as poached." We continued to verify a limited sample set of older carcasses in an area observed as a "hotspot" to assess cause of death. Of the 79 carcasses examined on the ground, 63 were confirmed as poached. This is a high sampling frequency, given the cost of helicopter hire.

Claim 6: It is noted as "interesting" that the increase in carcass ratio, from 2% to 7%, from 2010 to 2014 was not reported at the time as a concern, but that the increase to 8.1% is now cause for alarm.

Fact: The key point here is that the increase in the carcass ratio from 2014 has been sustained and increased, with ratios now greater than the 8% threshold considered by experts (Douglas-Hamilton et al) to indicate significant mortality and possible illegal killing. The main point of the current report is to raise awareness of the ongoing, and indeed likely acceleration, of poaching in northern Botswana. The 'alarm bell' was raised because we had evidence that carcasses showed obvious signs of poaching once again - hence the 120+ pages of photographs in our appendices. Our 2014 survey of northern Botswana did not record any poached elephants.

Claim 7: It is said that unnamed "independent reviewers" have raised concern about the report's discussion of carcass ratios.

Question: Who are the unnamed "independent reviewers" they are referring to? If media are furnished with statements such as above, for the sake of transparency, it is vital that such "independent reviewers" be named. EWB has had no problem in naming all independent peer reviewers.

Fact: The 2018 Aerial Survey of Elephants and Wildlife in Northern Botswana report was submitted to the DWNP on the 7th January for their comments. Again, we reiterate that we have received no feedback, questions, comments or request for data since the report's submission. The PS Press Release is the first response of any kind from the Department. After waiting nearly two months their professional feedback comes in the form of a press release. In addition, prior to submission to DWNP, EWB had our report reviewed by nine scientists who are experts in elephant conservation and aerial survey methodology. All nine of those reviewers agreed with our conclusion that poaching is on the increase in Botswana.

The commitment of the Ministry to transparency and willingness to work cooperatively with the international community on conservation of elephants and our natural heritage is appreciated and supported but one has to question in this case whether it is in actual fact practiced. What is regrettable is the overly critical response to this neutral technical report, which runs counter to the principle of transparency. If there is early evidence of an increased incidence in poaching, particularly in key localized hotspots, it would seem that all sources of information should be embraced and fed into a proactive, forward-looking strategy for dealing with the clearly identified threat. I encourage the GoB to share this report with the public. Botswana deserve the truth. Targeting one organization to seek vindication of what has been acknowledged as a solid scientific report is not conducive to solving a problem that everyone should be addressing.