
CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: AFRICAN ELEPHANT SPECIALIST GROUP

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In the last issue of *Pachyderm* (No. 24), I attempted to explain the process set in motion at the tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES. This process involved the application of obligatory conditions for the one-off sale of identified stocks of known origin from the populations of Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe and the one-off, non-commercial buyout of registered and audited stocks from these same three and 11 other Range States. There has been much progress since then. While sometimes slow and faltering, the process has been transparent, positive and productive.

Part of this process involved the active involvement of the membership of the AIESG. With the generous support of United States Fish and Wildlife Service it was possible for the vast majority of our membership to meet in the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou at the end of January 1998. The meeting took place during the height of the Harmatan winds coming off the great Sahara desert. At night the dusty skies descended like a thick, warm fog, obscuring visibility but fortunately not obscuring the vision or enthusiasm of the AIESG membership. In the tradition of the AIESG, the meeting was both positive and productive. The considerable talents of the Minister of Foreign Affairs' personal interpreter eased any linguistic difficulties, thus, ensuring total communication and having the Minister's very comfortable meeting chamber in which to hold our deliberations certainly contributed to our success.

Building on the recommendations of the December 1997 monitoring systems expert workshop, the Group discussed and made suggestions for the design of the proposed CITES system for monitoring the illegal killing of elephants (MIKE) and nominated potential sites for its eventual implementation. The Group also took the opportunity to review carefully and revise the formal terms-of-reference of the AIESG, the Data Review Task Force and the Human-Elephant Conflict Task Force and revisit the listing of the African elephant under IUCN's new criteria. A most interesting session, which fully engaged those present, debated the role of captive facilities in the *in situ* conservation of the species. Although experiences and opinions were diverse, there was a strong common thread. African

elephants will best be conserved where they belong in the wild, in Africa. This issue of *Pachyderm* highlights the major decisions and deliberations of the meeting noted above, as well as providing papers presented to the Group on topical issues in elephant conservation today. These papers ranged from human-elephant conflict to the new GPS techniques for tracking elephants.

This issue of *Pachyderm* goes to press on the eve of the third dialogue meeting of the African elephant Range States will be held in Arusha, Tanzania from 28 September through 2 October 1998. As I write, 32 of the 37 Range States have confirmed their attendance. In addition to informing the meeting on the current status of the African elephant, the AIESG will present the delegates with a draft proposal and budget for the implementation of the required MIKE system.

The AIESG members and Secretariat have fulfilled all their obligations to the tasks set for them by the Parties in Harare in June 1997. In just one year, the system has been conceptualised, the sites have been proposed and a transparent and objective statistical process has been applied for their final selection. Three scenarios of increasing precision are being proposed. It will be for the relevant Range States, the CITES Secretariat, TRAFFIC and IUCN to agree on the final profile of MIKE and its parallel system for the monitoring of elephant products, the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) which builds on the existing capacity of TRAFFIC's Bad Ivory Database System (BIDS). This agreement will be reported to the 41st meeting of the CITES Standing Committee in February 1999. At that meeting, the Standing Committee will pass judgement on progress, by the potential trading nations, against the set criteria. The decision of whether or not to allow the limited trade of agreed quotas of ivory to Japan will be taken. Much can happen between now and then. The onus to demonstrate compliance sits firmly with the relevant Range States. However, the AIESG and her sister Group, the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) carry the unenviable burden to assist in the development and implementation of MIKE. I see it as both an honourable recognition of the wisdom and expertise contained in these two Groups

and an equally major responsibility that is difficult to carry amongst a loosely knit group of volunteers. We will have a better idea of how satisfactory is our progress once the feedback is in from partners in the Range State management authorities. Arusha should provide us with a true forecast of the work before us.

Thanks to generous grants from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the United Kingdom's Department of Environment, we are financially in good stead through the end of 1998. The AIESG Secretariat finalised a major proposal for future support for all the core activities of the Group and it is now with the donors for their consideration. Although we have been successful in our attempts in the past, there is no cause for complacency. I send this issue of *Pachyderm* to the printers with a very real sense of concern for the future of the AfESG and the Secretariat's ability to support the membership. The CITES-related issues (detailed in *Pachyderm* No. 24 and above) have turned the attention of the donors to the pressing deadlines and unspoken financial obligations imposed by the decisions of the Parties. This leaves the AfESG in a funding environment predisposed to supporting CITES-related actions but not terribly conducive to the ongoing, day-to-day functional aspects of running this very active Group. At this stage, it is difficult to predict the future or the receptivity of the donors. We live in hope.

It is this hope and our raw determination that pays off in the end. The AfESG's Human Elephant Conflict Task Force (HETF) has finally succeeded in securing a generous support grant from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to begin on their most pressing priority issues. The grant will allow the Task Force to move forward on a number of fronts. This support will enable us to carry out a number of actions in parallel which will then be pulled together to help move the agenda on human-elephant conflict forward. The HETF will examine a number of important issues related to human-elephant conflict, including the determination of factors in human-elephant conflict, control of problem elephants, and spatial analysis of human-elephant conflict. Like myself, some of you may have read some rather curious statements in the press and in the newsletters of various NGOs querying the very existence of any such conflict between people and elephants throughout their shared range in Africa. Although there are a number of other pressing issues of importance to the conservation and management of the African elephant (as highlighted in the AfESG's January 1998 release of Review of African Elephant

Conservation Priorities—a working document of the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group), I am in no doubt that the mitigation of human-elephant conflict sits firmly among them.

In my experience, there is never a year without controversy for the African elephant and so far 1998 has been no exception. One, in particular, with which members of the Group have been involved in, springs to mind. As I write, many of you have contacted me about the capture and removal of 30 (with plans for an additional 20) post-weaning, juveniles from free-ranging herds in the Tuli Block of Botswana to be reared and trained in South Africa. With food in short supply, obvious signs of habitat alteration, and elephants wandering further afield to South Africa in search of sustenance, the question of population regulation in the Tuli Block no doubt enters the minds of its managers. But the capture of dozens of young animals and separation from their family groups hardly seems a way to address such problems. Although the question of legality may well be covered, the question of humane treatment surely should enter a decision of this nature.

Some of our members are currently grappling with the answers to these questions. The Elephant Managers and Owners Association in South Africa are undertaking the development and drafting of guidelines for such removals and eligibility criteria for potential recipients. I have appreciated the open and candid manner with which concerned members have tackled this issue and kept me closely briefed. Perhaps more professional advice might have been sought before such potentially controversial actions were undertaken. In future I would hope that the technical strength within the AIESG membership could always be brought to bear on such issues - preferably "before the fact".

This has been a good year for the AfESG and there are many exciting issues on the horizon where our members are engaged and contributing in a significant way. Before I next write, there will be a census of Mozambique's largest remaining population in Niassa; a subsequent national elephant management planning exercise; technical input to the Range State Dialogue meeting; the development of a sub-regional elephant strategy for West Africa and, hopefully, the completion of the 1998 African Elephant Database update. For the membership of AfESG, there is much to be proud of in our achievements to date but many more challenges lay awaiting behind every bush. Seek them out, take them on and rejoice in your accomplishment.