
CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: AFRICAN ELEPHANT SPECIALIST GROUP

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On the eve of Mozambique's national elephant planning exercise, it feels very much as though elephant conservation is a constant and unending process with truly no beginning and no end. As one initiative is brought to fruition another is just starting out. It is a normal ebb and flow and a healthy progression but for a volunteer Chair, an exhausting one.

As I ended my last report, we were anxiously awaiting the results of an aerial survey of one of Mozambique's last viable elephant populations, conducted by Dr. Debbie Gibson (a member of the AfESG). The count has now come and gone and confirmed that the Niassa region, in the northern part of the country, is indeed an important stronghold of elephants for the southern African region; certainly it is the largest population remaining in Mozambique ($8,707 \pm 1,937$). The elephant's survival is an amazing outcome considering more than 30 years of civil disruption that has plagued this beleaguered country. The government's clear will to go forward in planning a future for all its elephant populations, many having been devastated during the drawn out civil instability, is a testimony to their commitment. The AfESG has been closely involved in this process and a number of members will be participating in the strategic planning workshop in mid-April 1999.

It is not Mozambique, alone, that has strategic management planning at the top of its elephant agenda. In February 1999, technical experts (both from government and non-governmental organisations), including members and staff of the AfESG, convened in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, to draft a sub-regional strategy for the conservation of the African elephant in the West African sub-region. In all my time in this position I have never experienced such honest and absolute dedication to a cause. One could easily feel that for many of the avid conservationists who took part, their *raison d'être* is their respect for the elephants themselves. The strategic framework established a strong vision, "to ensure the conservation of the elephant and its habitats in West Africa". A number of measurable targets, with key milestones to evaluate progress along the way, were agreed and clear guidance for ongoing and newly-initiated efforts on behalf of elephants over the next five to ten years was provided. It is intended that the final draft will be taken to the highest levels of

government for adoption. It is hoped that with the political backing and commitment of the relevant governments of the sub-region and the support of donors, the strategy will ultimately be implemented at all levels. Although southern Africa has long worked at the sub-regional level on technical and policy issues, West Africa is really the first to promote management planning at the sub-regional level. Given the critical status of elephants in West Africa (over 90% of both range and numbers lost since the turn of the century), the fact that a number of the significant populations of the sub-region straddle international boundaries, the growing problems of desertification as well as forest fragmentation and loss and a clear shortage of management resources, a sub-regional approach is very likely the best hope for the persistence of elephants over the next 20 to 30 years. The adoption of a strategic framework for the sub-region will certainly herald a major achievement for the conservation of elephants in West Africa.

The members of the Data Review Taskforce and members of the AfESG Secretariat staff have been "on overdrive" for months in an all-out effort to complete the 1998 African Elephant Database (AED). The updated version, which is scheduled to be printed by the end of May 1999 and ready for distribution by the middle of the year, has been a mammoth undertaking. In some ways it is a relief that the onerous task of producing a hardcopy update is undertaken only once every three years but, in other ways, it forces us to look for means to streamline the process and have it take place as a perpetual activity rather than having to make such a strong push every triennium. Out of the 37 African elephant Range States, 32 have been updated with new population estimates, while three countries (Congo, Sierra Leone and Sudan) have no population estimates whatsoever. There are a total of 284 survey zones across Africa, of which 193 have had population estimates during the past three years. In 151 of those zones air and ground surveys and dung counts have been conducted during the past ten years. For the remaining 133 survey zones only guesses have been supplied. This gives a clear indication that there is still considerable uncertainty concerning elephant numbers on the continent.

Again, the question of future funding looms and we

await word from several donors who have been asked to support the next phase of the AED. Over the next couple of years, the intent would be to begin to use the database, in combination with other data sets currently being compiled, to develop a number of models that could provide us with insights to the future challenges for elephant conservation across the continent.

The statement on the role of the captive community in African elephant conservation, drafted by the AfESG at our meeting in January 1998 in Burkina Faso, has stimulated interest both in Africa and further a field. I am glad to report that far more attention is now being drawn to the plight of elephants, both African and Asian, in captivity. Clearly the situation for Asian elephants, with a far greater percent of their overall numbers, now living in logging camps across their range in Asia, is very grave and of urgent priority for action. African elephants, however, must not be forgotten in the debate. In May 1999, the American Zoological Association will host a special meeting in the United States, with experts from Africa and Asia, to discuss the issues and to help identify constructive solutions for those elephants whose fate has destined them to a life in captivity.

The 41st CITES Standing Committee meeting has come and gone and the decision to allow a limited, one-off trade in ivory from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe is now a matter of history. As I write, the ivory sales are underway in the three countries. The individual shipments are to be consolidated in a central point and then moved as a single shipment from southern Africa to Japan. We currently do not know the outcome of this process but by the time *Pachyderm* goes to print, these sales, the price and the amounts of ivory sold will also be on public record. But there are many things that remain unknown. What, if any, will be the impacts of these sales, not only in the political arena but also in the real world of the elephants? In the short-term an "early warning" system has been established through the CITES Secretariat but any future debate regarding ivory trade will require more time and refinement by the Parties regarding the conditions under which any further trade could be allowed. The members of the AfESG can continue to contribute to the technical rigor of such debate, a challenge we should not shy away from.

The monitoring system for the illegal killing of elephants (MIKE) and the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) have been approved and funds have been committed from the CITES Trust Fund and the British Government for the initial phase of implementation. There has been enormous confusion regarding the respective objectives of MIKE and ETIS and an unfortunate linkage was made between the adoption of these systems and the

approval process for the one-off sales. These systems were not designed to monitor the effects of the recently approved sales nor were they developed as a mechanism to countenance future trade decisions. What is more important than clarifying what these monitoring systems are not is to make clear what they are and what they can become given real commitment and support by governments and their NGO and donor partners.

Surely, these monitoring systems should be seen as a major step forward in the recognition that elephants are an important and highly-valued global resource and, as such, their fate should be much more deliberately charted than it has been in the recent past. The establishment of a system to bring better information to managers and decision-makers at all levels is an excellent place **to** start. Although it may not be possible for this to take place for every population of every nation, ETIS and MIKE represent an opportunity to "kick start" the kind of trade monitoring and on-the-ground surveys and data collection that has in some countries fallen into abeyance and in others has never even put in place. For some of Africa's most important elephant populations, particularly those in central Africa, MIKE provides an opportunity to keep a watching brief on a number of highly vulnerable sites. In West Africa, ETIS and its associated data sets could get to the bottom of the domestic trade markets that may be playing a far greater role in the trafficking of ivory from central Africa than previously realised. It will not be easy and the successes of implementation can be no more guaranteed than the success of any other initiative on the challenging continents of Africa and Asia. There maybe "fits and starts", no doubt there will be continuous criticism. I prefer to cast my energies forward in the belief that like most things, ETIS and MIKE will grow, evolve and adapt **to** the challenges before them. Of one thing I am sure, these systems will help **to** give African and Asian elephant conservation, in all its manifestations, the profile and support required **to** ensure these magnificent beasts a future in our world.

The AfESG Secretariat will be "under construction" over the next few months. While we await word on funding requests for core support over the next year, Lamine Sebogo, the Programme Officer for West and Central Africa, will be moving back from whence he came to Burkina Faso, where he will be based in the IUCN Regional Office for West Africa. And, of course, as you are all aware, my very diligent Programme Officer of the past two years, Greg Overton, will be leaving the mainland of elephants for the island of elephant birds as he makes his way to Madagascar. I know that you will all join me in thanking Greg for his hard work and in wishing him good luck as he ventures into a life "beyond elephants".