
Chairman's Report

African Elephant Specialist Group

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Challenges continue in the conservation and management of the African elephant. Now, almost two years after the UNEP-sponsored African elephant donor and range states meeting in January 1992, most countries are reporting that their funding needs have not been met. The implementation of effective protection and conservation plans are, like most things in life, dependent on sufficient resources. These resources are still not forthcoming.

The international ban on ivory provided a breathing space, a time to regroup and to develop country and regional action plans - but the international ban has not provided a blanket solution to the longterm management and conservation of the species. We cannot sit back and rest. The shortfall in funding is now hitting hard. On the one hand, a number of range states are reporting an increase in elephants lost to poaching over the last two years mainly due to reduced funds available for protection. On the other hand, more and more countries are reporting an increase in conflict between man and elephants with no resources for-compensation nor the provision and maintenance of elephant-proof barriers.

These issues are not unique to the African elephant. At the International Seminar on the Conservation of the Asian Elephant in Mudumulai Wildlife Sanctuary, southern India, the shared problems facing the two species became evident as paper after paper underscored the similarities. Concern with the number of elephants killed by people has taken second seat to concerns over the number of people being killed by elephants. Both species are drawing considerable media attention throughout their range where elephants interface with man. Elephant conservation is presenting an increasing management problem for wildlife authorities. How many elephants are enough? How many elephants are too many?

Such questions were discussed at length at the recent East African Regional Elephant Conservation

Coordinating meeting in Arusha, Tanzania. Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda shared their problems and their mixed experiences with solutions. Whether it is construction of fences or the payment of compensation, virtually all solutions require additional funds and these are in woefully short supply. The AESG Secretariat frequently receives reports on the struggles of countries having to deal with elephant-human conflicts and requests for technical assistance. In response to the needs expressed, we have applied for funding to initiate field studies on these issues. It is our intention to host a formal working group on human-elephant conflict at the next meeting of the AESG, scheduled for mid-1994.

We also hope to use the next meeting as a vital opportunity to collect new information from members on elephant numbers and distribution. The AESG office has already distributed questionnaires on elephant status to members and specialists in nearly all the range states. Our overall aim is to publish an update of the continental database in time for the next Conference of the Parties of CITES in late 1994. The AESG data review taskforce, which met twice in 1993, has been working hard to improve the database and has set new goals for its future direction. Several issues have been debated at length, from basic concerns such as its role and its potential users, to the mere technical aspects of data quality, output, interpretation and analysis. The taskforce is also trying to secure a funding base for the longterm development of the database.

We must not become complacent. Current problems facing the conservation and management of the African elephant are not becoming fewer nor are they becoming any less challenging. The situation has not stabilised due to the international ban on trade in ivory and elephant products. The focus of our efforts on behalf of the species must continue to be responsive, dynamic and, to a large extent, adaptive to the needs as they occur.