
CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: AFRICAN ELEPHANT SPECIALIST GROUP

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Change, we are told, is good for us all. This is a relief because the simple reality is that change is unavoidable and a lot of it goes on around us. For the most part, the changes experienced in 1996 have been remarkably good. It is clear, however, that as we get older change becomes more difficult to grapple with, despite its inevitability. Your ageing Chair and the, considerably younger, African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) have been through many recent changes but seem to be emerging intact and full of energy for the challenges of the coming quadrennium.

Ruth Chunge, as anticipated, left her post at the end of 1996 and was ably replaced by Keiren Bluestone in January and February. Greg Overton, our new Programme Officer for the AfESG, assumed his duties amidst a swirl of activity as February seamlessly merged into March. The production of this, the 23rd volume of *Pachyderm*, is evidence that Greg is already very much "on the job". In addition to appointing a new staff member to the Secretariat here in Nairobi, the AfESG has also taken on a full-time manager for the African Elephant Database, Willy Simons. Willy will be bringing the benefits of his considerable technical expertise in Geographical Information Systems to bear in the next updating of the African Elephant Database while assisting with the AfESG's newest initiative in the field of human-elephant conflict (see below).

The AfESG Secretariat (the Chair, the Deputy Chair, and both the Interim Programme Officer and Programme Officer) was honoured to participate in facilitating the African Elephant Range State Dialogue Meeting held in Dakar, Senegal last November. The meeting provided a unique opportunity for senior range-state officials to discuss the full breadth of their concerns regarding the issues facing conservation of Africa's elephants. The attitude was candid and open and the dialogue informative and spirited. The meeting concluded with an extensive joint communique covering a wide range of topics, including: ivory

stocks; current illegal killing and trade; the possible re-opening of a limited ivory trade; and the problems which occur in securing sustainable funding for elephant conservation. This dialogue meeting will be followed by a second round of discussions immediately prior to the opening of the Tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to CITES in Harare, Zimbabwe in June 1997.

Acting on recommendations emerging from the African Range State Dialogue Meeting. TRAFFIC and AfESG immediately launched a joint study into the dynamics of the illegal ivory trade and the status of ivory stocks in West and Central Africa. To this end, Lamine Sebogo, the AfESG Programme Officer for West and Central Africa, has been expanding his skills since the first of the year by taking on a special assignment. In close collaboration with TRAFFIC, Lamine has conducted the first of a series of proposed country studies to determine the scale and extent of illegal ivory trade and the status of private and government-held ivory stocks in West and Central Africa. Lamine began in Burkina Faso and will try to complete the inquiry and several additional investigations before the COP10.

In January 1997, the AfESG took a major step forward on the development of its initiative on human-elephant conflict with the first formal meeting of the Task Force on Human-Elephant Conflict, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya. The Task Force, chaired by AfESG member Richard Hoare (Zimbabwe), and attended by other experts in this field, Martin Tchamba (Cameroon), Moses Kofi Sam (Ghana) and Sam Kasiki (Kenya), along with Willy Simons, set an ambitious work programme for the future. Beginning with an extensive multi-regional assessment of sites experiencing human-elephant conflict, the Task Force has plans for extensive follow-up activities over the next several years. With the help of the AfESG Secretariat, the Task Force is now drafting a proposal to carry out more detailed work on: the factors involved

in human-elephant conflict in different bio-geographical zones; establishing a central information point on human-elephant conflict, containing a library and standardised data from around the continent; the sites where this conflict is most likely to become a problem in future; determining the prospects for mediation and mitigation; and carrying out field trials in selected sites. We hope that this work will involve and assist many of our members and partners over the years to come on this important but difficult problem.

Just before this volume of *Pachyderm* is printed, the Parties to CITES will have met once again and made their decision on three significant proposals before them for the down listing of elephant populations in Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. At this stage, it is too early to predict the direction the debate will take this time around. However, it is certain that regardless of the outcome of COP10, the decisions taken will affect those of us who are involved in the conservation of the species. Outside the now-familiar array of divergent, opinions and arguments for and

against the proposed down listings one thing remains certain. Ban or no ban, down listing or no down listing, Africa's elephants continue to be killed in significant numbers to fuel the continued, and possibly growing, demand for ivory. As CITES fever rages around me, I cannot help but wonder about the Convention's direct relevance to the future of the African elephant. I continue to ask myself when the world will begin to understand the true cost of conserving a species as psychologically and/or economically dear to all as the African elephant. And, when we finally understand the true cost, who will pay?

Over the next few months, the Chair of the AfESG and the Chair of the SSC will be formalising the new membership. This membership will be appointed for a four year period and will lead us into the new millennium. To all new members, I wish you a warm welcome. To all those leaving the AfESG, I would like to extend my appreciation for your contributions over the last triennium. The AfESG has grown from strength to strength over the past three years and I look forward to similar progress over the next four.