**Elephant Engagements and Indigenous Peoples: Borders, Boundaries, and Barriers in Southern Africa[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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and

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Two complex political issues in southern Africa today revolve around (1) elephants and (2) indigenous people. Southern African nation-states are willing to promote transboundary movements and protection of elephants and other wild animals, but they are distinctly reluctant to recognize the rights of indigenous people within their borders.

Southern Africa is somewhat different from other parts of Africa when it comes to elephants. In Botswana, for example, elephant numbers have increased substantially; some estimates place elephant numbers as high as 190,000. The expansion in the distribution of elephants in Botswana is significant, with elephants now appearing in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, for example, at Molapo, where they are destroying the crops of G//ana San and Bakgalagadi). Elephants are also found now in the southeastern part of Botswana, some in the agricultural fields (*masimo*) of Molepolole, the Kwena tribal capital, and even as far as the peripheries of Gaborone, the capital of the country, in the southeastern part of Botswana.

In Zimbabwe, on the other hand, elephant numbers are declining in many parts of the country. Some of the decline is due to natural factors (drought, insufficient food, disease, fire) but can also be attributed to both legal and illegal hunting. Members of indigenous groups are often blamed for involvement in illegal hunting even though the evidence suggests that they play a minor role in poaching. Pressure on the San and other indigenous peoples continues in southern Africa, with arrests for suspected violation of hunting laws on the increase in Botswana and Zimbabwe.

In late September, 2013, over 130 elephants and other animals died as a result of cyanide poisoning in Hwange National Park and adjacent areas. This event led to over two dozen people being arrested and numerous detentions. Tshwa San and Ndebele living in areas south of Hwange were told by the Zimbabwe government and Matabeleland North provincial officials in late 2013 and early 2014 that they had to relocate their homesteads to other places.

It is important to note that during a survey undertaken in November-December, 2013 not a single individual mentioned engaging in hunting, and there was no evidence to suggest that people were obtaining wild animal meat. The majority of the subsistence of the Tshwa San at the time consisted of mopane worms (*Imbrasia belina*), wild plants, and garden products.

The security situation for the Tshwa was exacerbated by the killing of a collared lion named Cecil by an American dentist from Minnesota, on 29 June-1 July 2015. Cecil was lured out of Hwange National Park by a professional safari guide. A worldwide outcry about the ethics of sport hunting ensured, which has worried some local people because they are feeling the brunt of pressures from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management and the government of Zimbabwe. Some Tshwa have said that they were concerned about the possibility of cessation of hunting in Zimbabwe since a few people do get short-term employment on occasion with safari companies and local people get some of the meat that results from the safari operations, something that was true in Botswana in the past and is still the case in Namibia.

While historically some indigenous groups including the Tshwa participated in elephant hunting, few indigenous people today hunt elephants. They do engage with them, however, in a number of different ways. Some local people take part in community based natural resource projects that include photographic ecotourism or safari hunting. Others get jobs with private companies that take people out to see wildlife including elephants. In at least one place in the Okavango Delta in Botswana there are elephant-back safaris tourists pay huge sums to enjoy.

Dealing with human-elephant conflict (HEC) is a major concern of governments, NGOs and local communities in Southern Africa. One way that governments and NGOs have attempted to reduce human-elephant conflict is to build barriers including fences around their homes, fields, and water points. Barrier creation is not easy, however, as elephants have been known to break through fences and to intentionally short out electric barriers. The issue of using fences to deal with human-elephant conflicts is the subject of intense current debate.

Governments in southern Africa, including those of Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe have drilled boreholes to provide water for elephants and other animals. This was done, for example, in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe and in the Nyae Nyae region of northeast Namibia. Local community members attempt to keep elephants away from their water points and gardens by placing rocks and building walls around boreholes. Another strategy that has been attempted in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique is to plant chille peppers around gardens or to use chille bombs, guns that shoot ping pong balls filled with chille pepper at problem elephants. This strategy has been employed with mixed success.

Concern for the conservation and protection of elephants has led to the end of elephant culling, as seen in South Africa once the new government came into power in 1994. The protection of wildlife is a major reason for the Botswana government’s imposition of a country-wide hunting ban on January 1st, 2014. Other strategies to deal with wildlife protection have included the deployment of armed anti-poaching units, and the translocation of elephants to new places, though both strategies are extremely costly.

The anti-poaching issue has become a significant source of debate in southern Africa. Botswana’s decision to employ a shoot-to-kill policy against suspected poachers has led to serious tensions between governments (e.g. Namibia and Botswana) and between the Botswana government and local people. The arrests of people for the alleged violation of wildlife laws has led to economic difficulties for their families Several dozen people have been arrested in the past two months in Botswana, some of them merely for the possession of meat or ostrich eggs.

Zimbabwe has complained about Botswana’s construction of fences along the Botswana-Zimbabwe border. There are no fences along the western side of Hwange National Park, so elephants have been moving out of the park into Botswana recently because some of the water points in Hwange have been shut down. The problem is that northeastern Botswana is also experiencing a drought and many of the pans which elephants visited in Botswana in the past are dry. A result of this situation is that elephants and buffalos are going into more heavily populated areas where they are coming in greater contact with both domestic animals and people. Several people have been injured by wild animals in the past few days in the Manxotae area along the Nata River in northeastern Botswana. Local people are pressing the government to protect them from elephants and buffalo.

` An examination of the ways in which water points are protected from elephants in southern Africa reveals that there are a number of different strategies that have been employed: These include the following:

1. Making of loud noises when elephants arein the vicinity (e.g. cracking a bull whip)
2. Placement of large stones around the water point to discourage elephants
3. Construction of electric fencing, with solar batteries
4. Building of large-scale protection facilities around water points and gardens using railway ties, cement, and stones as seen in Nyae Nyae, Namibia
5. Translocation of elephants (moving them to other places)
6. De-tusking of fence-breaking elephants
7. Use of chilles as a protection strategy
8. Use of strategically placed beehives
9. Elephant birth control
10. Culling (least preferred strategy)

Elephant damage to water points and gardens is an issue that has been well-documented in northeastern Namibia, as seen, for example, in the film “A Kalahari Family” by John Marshall. How to deal with the elephant problem is a matter of considerable debate in Namibia. One of the ways that the communal conservancies in Namibia have coped with elephants is to come up with strategies to keep them away from water points. At first this was done by placing large rocks around boreholes and hand-pumps, assuming that elephants have soft feet and do not want to walk over rocks. Later on, fences were constructed which were electrified using solar batteries. These fences kept elephants out for a while but the pachyderms figured out eventually that they could drop a log on the fence, breaking the connection with the power source. Then they would communicate with their relatives and friends who would come in from miles away for a drink.

A third strategy was to develop sophisticated rock and cement facilities around water points. This was done in Nyae Nyae and N/a Jaqna, Namibia. Below are some of the estimated costs which are in rounded figures (data from the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia, NNDFN):

-          Cement and transport of cement N$20,000

-          Daily labour collecting rocks and construction N$10,000

-          Food for workers N$5,000

-          Support and transport of cement mixer, rocks and foreman N$15,000

-          Fuel for cement mixer N$1,000

-          Periodically there is a need to purchase a cement mixer, a tent for the foreman, and

additional tools

- The total cost is approximately N$55,000 (US$3,877.08 at current conversion rates).

Some NGO representatives and observers have argued that increasing hunting offtake of elephants should be promoted by the government of Namibia. At present, the numbers of elephants that are allowed to be hunted in the Nyae Nyae and N/a Jaqna Conservancies in northeastern Namibia is approximately a dozen. Some local people have said that elephants should be moved out of the area to national parks such as Khaudum to the north or Etosha National Park to the southwest. However, it should be noted that elephants and other animals have been destroyed by large-scale fires in Etosha, some of which were blamed on local people. As a result, the government of Namibia and NGOs are considering how to develop a fire management strategy that will reduce the impacts of large, hot fires.

Many people in southern Africa see elephants as important symbols of power and prestige, and they admire their social organization, intelligence, and communicative abilities. Elephants figure prominently in indigenous peoples’ stories, myths, and memory. Most people in southern Africa do not want to see elephants destroyed; rather, they would prefer to see effective practices and policies put in place that reduce human-elephant conflict. They are fully aware of the limitations of barrier strategies, and many of them do not favor culling of elephants or increasing the numbers of elephants that can be taken by professional hunters and their clients.

Careful consideration will have to be given to how best to deal with the contentious issues of elephants, borders, boundaries, and barriers in southern Africa. One way to do this is to listen more carefully to local people. A second strategy is to come up with ways to provide fair and just compensation for elephant damage to people’s assets. A third is to expand the benefits that accrue to local communities from the presence of elephants in their areas. And last but by no means least, States, NGOs, and local communities must work out ways to dissuade elephants from coming in conflict with people, using innovative means that protect and promote the well-being of people and elephants.

1. Hitchcock, Robert K. and Wayne A. Babchuk (2015) Elephant Engagements and Indigenous Peoples: Borders, Boundaries, and Barriers in Southern Africa. Paper for the symposium on ‘Elephant Engagements: Cultural Values, Ecological Roles, and Political Action’ Stephanie Rupp and Robert K. Hitchcock, organizers. American Anthropological Association’s 114th Annual meetings, Denver, Colorado, November 18-22, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)