INVESTIGATION INTO NAMIBIA'S SALE OF LIVE FREE-ROAMING AFRICAN ELEPHANTS (LOXODONTA AFRICANA)

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BY ADAM CRUISE **SEPTEMBER 2021**

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1 / Introduction

On the 11th August 2021, Namibia's Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) issued a press release stating that it will capture 57 wild African elephants. It had sold them to interested but as yet undisclosed buyers. Of the 57 elephants, 42 are to be exported 'outside Namibia'.

After a two month field-investigation into Namibia's overall conservation model, it has been found that these captures and exports are likely to endanger some of Namibia's isolated elephant populations, in particular, the uniquely desert-adapted elephants from the arid Kunene Region in the northwest of the country. Also, despite claims by the Namibian MEFT, the income generated from these sales is unlikely to benefit local communities, and will most-likely violate Namibia's international wildlife trade obligations under its agreement with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

In December 2020, the MEFT published a tender for the sale of 170 wild elephants from four commercial farming areas in the north of the country (see fig 1. below). Half of those elephants, including 4-6 family groups, were set to be captured from the Kunene Region, the habitat of rare desert-adapted elephants. Ostensibly, the sale of these elephants is necessary to reduce their number and thus reduce human-elephant conflict.

Republic of Namibia

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT
FORESTRY AND TOURISM

TENDER

The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) is a custodian of Government-owned game, including high value wild elephants in Omatjete area, Kamanjab commercial farming area, Grootfontein-Kavango Cattle Ranch area and Grootfontein-Tsumkwe area. Due to drought and increase in elephant numbers coupled with Human-Elephant conflict incidences, a need has been identified to reduce these populations.

Interested parties are invited to provide MEFT with written financial offers (in Namibia Dollars only). The financial offer should indicate the price per individual animal. The table below outlines the composition of the lot.

Lot Number	Species	Location	Lot Size	Lot Composition
1	African Elephant	Omatjete area	30	1-2 family groups: 4 adult bulls
2	African Elephant	Kamanjab commercial farming area	50	2-4 family groups: 7 adult bulls
3	African Elephant	Grootfontein-Kavango Cattle Ranch area	60	2-4 family groups: 8 adult bulls
4	African Elephant	Grootfontein-Tsumkwe area	30	1-2 family groups: 4 adult bulls

Written offers in sealed envelopes should be deposited in the tender box at MEFT Headquarters, Cnr Robert Mugabe and Dr Kenneth Kaunda Street, Basement, Permit Office Reception, on or before (29 January 2021, by 16h30).

Full payment must be made, account details to be provided to successful tenderer and proof of payment must be submitted by the date to be agreed in advance with successful tenderer. Failure to do so will lead to automatic cancellation of the offer, and the next bidder in line will be given the offer.

Important:

- Tenderers must provide the name of the buyer and property where elephants will be kept
- Tenderers must also provide a game proof fence (elephant) certificate for the property where elephants will be kept
- Tenderers must provide name/s of the registered game dealers to be used for capturing and translocation. Only the Namibian registered game dealers will be considered
- Tenderers are to find / build their own quarantine facility (including electric fencing and ditches)
- Tenderers will capture entire herd as per lot size and not leave infants/juveniles behind in order not to disturb social group
- Capturing and all related activities, including disease testing as well as boma care at cost of buyers
- The buyer to bear all risks during and after capture
- Tenderers that wish to export must provide official proof that their respective conservation Authorities will permit them to export elephants to their countries (preliminary import permit will be required)
- For export purposes, the buyers must ensure that CITES requirements are met by both exporting and importing States for the trade to be authorized
- The buyer must also adhere to all veterinary regulations set out by both exporting and importing States
- Companies wholly or partially owned by Previously Disadvantaged Namibians will be given preferential treatment;
- MEFT reserves the right to cancel part or this entire tender.

For further enquiries, please contact:
Mr. Fillemon Iifo - 061 284 2545 (iifo.fillemon@meft.gov.na);
Ms. Janine Sharpe - 061 284 2533 (janine.sharpe@meft.gov.na) and
Mr. Colgar Sikopo - 061 284 2123 (colgar.sikopo@meft.gov.na)

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fig. 1

By August 2021, the MEFT was only able to sell 57 of the 170 elephants (see fig. 2 below). The sale to three undisclosed bidders, according to the MEFT Press Statement issued on 11th August 2021, is expected to fetch 5.9 million Namibian dollars (about 400,000 US dollars), down from the originally stated figure of 13 million Namibian dollars (870,000 US dollars) as per the a statement given in an article to the Namibian Sun.[1] The earnings apparently are going back into conservation and to financially benefit Namibia's rural poor in community-based conservancies living alongside elephants.

[1] https://www.namibiansun.com/news/elephant-exports-reported-to-cites2021-08-17/

Republic of Namibia

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, FORESTRY AND TOURISM

Tel: 061 2842840
Fax: 061 229936

Private Bag 13306
Windhoek

OFFICE OF THE EXCUTIVE DIRECTOR
Press Release
(For Immediate Release)

11 August 2021

Editors and Journalists

Ministerial update on the Elephant Auction.

The Ministry has successfully sold 57 out of the 170 elephants which were put on tender in December 2020. The sale of these elephants will raise a total 5.9 million Namibian dollars and attracted five bidders of which only three where successful.

A total of 15 elephants will be captured and remain in Namibia while 42 will be exported out of Namibia. The capturing will start this month to be conducted by Namibian Registered Game Capture Operators and supervised by the Ministry's officials.

The Elephant tender for 170 elephants was advertised on the 3rd December 2020 and closed on the 29th January 2021. The elephants that were put on auction includes 30 from Omatjete area, 50 from Kamanjab-commercial farming area, 60 from Grootfontein-Kavango cattle ranch area and 30 Grootfontein-Tsumkwe area.

With this auction, we intend to reduce elephant numbers is specified areas to minimize human elephant conflicts which has become persistent leading to extensive damages to properties, life losses and a disruption of people's livelihoods.

The allocation of where the elephants will be captured from is still to be done, the Ministry will consider the social behavior of elephants and how severe the situation is in the listed areas to inform the allocation.

The funds generated through this auction will be transferred into the Game Product Trust Fund to be reinvested in the conservation of Namibia's wild animals, including in community conservancies. Particularly the funds will be used for human wildlife conflict management, wildlife management among others.

Issued By:

Romeo Muyunda
MEFT SPOKESPERSON

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, FORESTRY AND TOURISM PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE 11 AUG 2021 PRIVATE BAG 13306 · WINDHOEK

fig. 2

However, even though the number of elephants to be sold has been reduced from the original number, the figure is still large enough to have serious negative effects on the viability of the desert-adapted elephant population. This investigation on the ground in Namibia found that the removal of just a handful of elephants from the Kunene Region could have severe consequences on an already fragile elephant population reeling from years of drought, trophy hunting and government mismanagement.

Of major concern are the extremely low numbers of

breeding bulls and high infant mortality rate (100% since 2014). This means no baby elephants have survived into adulthood for the past seven years. This concern is made worse by the lack of breeding adult male elephants. The reason for the lack of breeding male elephants is that they are the ones always targeted by trophy hunters and are also the most likely to be killed as 'problem animals' due to their ability to break fences and water installations.

Furthermore, as part of a wider investigation into Namibia's conservation model (soon to be published), it was found that any proceeds from these sales would make little to zero difference to local people who rarely benefit from this type of wildlife 'management'. The investigation found most rural farmers in the surrounding Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) conservancies received almost zero income from wildlife utilisation.

Since its independence, Namibia has introduced a variety of strategies aiming at engaging rural communities in the conservation and utilisation of their natural resources and wildlife populations. In 1996, the government granted communities the right to create 'conservancies' – areas with defined borders and governance and management structures outside of State-owned parks. These rights include the 'consumptive and non-consumptive use and sustainable management of game [...] in order to enable the members to derive benefits' and mitigate or 'offset' the costs of living alongside populations of large-bodied mammals such as elephants which have a tendency to raid the crops of conservancy residents.[2]

These 'conservancies' are called Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) areas. CBNRM areas are designed to give communities the right to manage and benefit from their natural resources and wildlife. The aim is to increase the income of impoverished rural Namibians, while leading to a recovery in wildlife populations in Namibia that were decimated in the decades prior to independence.[3] As with CBNRM programs elsewhere in the world, the ethos of Namibia's program is that appropriate incentives to use natural resources sustainably will arise if these resources have sufficient economic value to local people, conferred through rights of use, benefit and management.[4]

The broader field investigation and analysis, however, concluded that the perceived success of wildlife conservation and concomitant economic benefits for previously disadvantaged rural communities in Namibia is found to be predominantly a fabrication rather than a fact. Neither were there many job opportunities available to them through any form of wildlife management. Elephant captures and sales are conducted by central government in partnership with private enterprises based outside the region.

[2] Drake et al. (2021)

[3] https://www.mercatus.org/system/files/wp1064-community-conservation-in-namibia.pdf

[4] Naidoo et al., (2016)

2/Methodology

An eight-week field investigation was conducted in May and June 2021 and centred on the four commercial farming areas earmarked for the advertised sale of 170 free-roaming African savanna elephants (Loxodonta africana).

The investigation covered the entire northern range of naturally free-roaming elephants from the Kunene Region in the north-west, to the Otjozondjupa and Kavango West Regions in the north-east of the country. Elephants are central to Namibia's wildlife management policies and programs in that they are seen as a principal species both as a high-value income source and as a significant 'problem' animal. The former is considered in the form of money generated from tourism, trophy and own-use hunting as well as the sale of live individuals, while the latter as a primary cause of property, crop and livestock destruction.

Biologists often refer to African elephants as keystone species or ecosystem 'architects' and 'gardeners'. Their presence in the natural landscape increases and helps support the overall biodiversity and well-being of other wild species. Their presence, or lack thereof, also serves as a gauge with which to measure the overall health of an environment. African elephants are also an 'umbrella species' in that they require large areas of suitable habitat. They require vast ranges to roam and large, intact natural areas to maintain their populations. By protecting such vast areas in which they are, themselves, secure, many other species that share habitat with elephants are ultimately protected too.

In-person interviews with stakeholders involved in elephant management and conflict incidents – cattle farmers, Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) constituents, wildlife officials and elephant researchers – were conducted. Onsite assessments of elephant habitat, population movements and numbers, destruction of water and fence installations, and trophy hunting operations were likewise conducted.

Detailed literary research and assessment of elephant population surveys, elephant movement and behaviour studies, reports and documents as a comparison with and in support of the in-field findings was undertaken. The latest annual audits for the CBNRM conservancies were analysed. These audits are published by the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO). NACSO assists conservancies and other rural associations in the management of their natural resources.

The most current elephant population surveys were analysed. These came in two formats – aerial surveys conducted by Craig & Gibson, two biologists who have conducted such surveys for the Namibian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) for the past decade; and the annual game counts conducted by the CBNRMs as part of their mandate to monitor wildlife populations for utilisation purposes.

3/Live Sales as a Government Elephant Management Tool

On 3rd December 2020, the Namibian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), in a printed advertisement for tender in the New Era Newspaper, a State-owned publication, announced the sale by auction of 170 'high-value' free-roaming elephants from four commercial farming areas in the northern part of the country. Their reasoning that due to 'drought, the increase of elephant numbers and human-elephant conflict incidents' the sale was required 'to reduce their population numbers.'

The four areas identified were:

- **Omatjete area:**
  30 elephants (1-2 family groups; 4 adult bulls)
- **Kamanjab commercial farming area:**
  50 elephants (2-4 family groups; 7 adult bulls)
- **Grootfontein-Kavango Cattle Ranch area:**
  60 elephants (2-4 family groups; 8 adult bulls)
- **Grootfontein-Tsumkwe area:**
  30 elephants (1-2 family groups; 4 adult bulls)

The advertisement stipulated that:

- Tenderers must supply the name of the buyer and property where the elephants will be kept.
- Tenderers must also provide game-proof fence (elephant) certificate for the property where the elephants will be kept.
- Tenderers must provide name/s of the registered game dealers to be used for capturing and translocation. Only Namibian registered game dealers will be considered.
- Tenderers are to find/build their own quarantine facility (including electric fencing and ditches).
- Tenderers will capture entire herd as per lot size and not leave juveniles/infants behind in order not to disturb social group.
- Capturing and all related activities, including disease testing as well as boma care at cost of buyers.
- The buyer to bear all risks during and after capture.
- Tenderers that wish to export must provide official proof that their respective conservation Authorities will permit them to export elephants to their countries (preliminary import permit will be required).
- For export purposes, the buyers must ensure that CITES requirements are met by both exporting and importing States for the trade to be authorised.
- The buyer must also adhere to all veterinary regulations set out by both exporting and importing States.
- Companies wholly or partially owned by Previously Disadvantaged Namibians will be given preferential treatment.
- MEFT reserves the right to cancel part or this entire tender.

Some of these stipulations explicitly mention the possibility of an international export of elephants, although it makes no mention as to whether the elephants will be exported to in situ (within their natural range) or ex situ (outside their natural range) States. The stipulations for export does say 'buyers must ensure that CITES requirements are met by both exporting and importing States for the trade to be authorised'.

On 11 August 2021 the MEFT issued a press release stating that 'the Ministry has successfully sold 57 of the 170 elephants' while '42 will be exported out of Namibia'. They claimed to have successfully accepted three of five bidders for the elephants and would generate 5.9 million Namibian dollars (400,000 US dollars). The money generated is to be 'reinvested in the conservation of Namibia's wild animals, including in community conservancies.'

The MEFT have not released any further details as to who buyers are, or whether they intend to permit the export beyond in situ States under the Appendix I listing, the legality of which under international rules has been questioned, and is to be considered at the next meeting of the Standing Committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).[5]

[5] https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/ac/31/sum/E-AC31-ExSum-03.pdf

4/Namibia's Previous Exports of Live Elephants

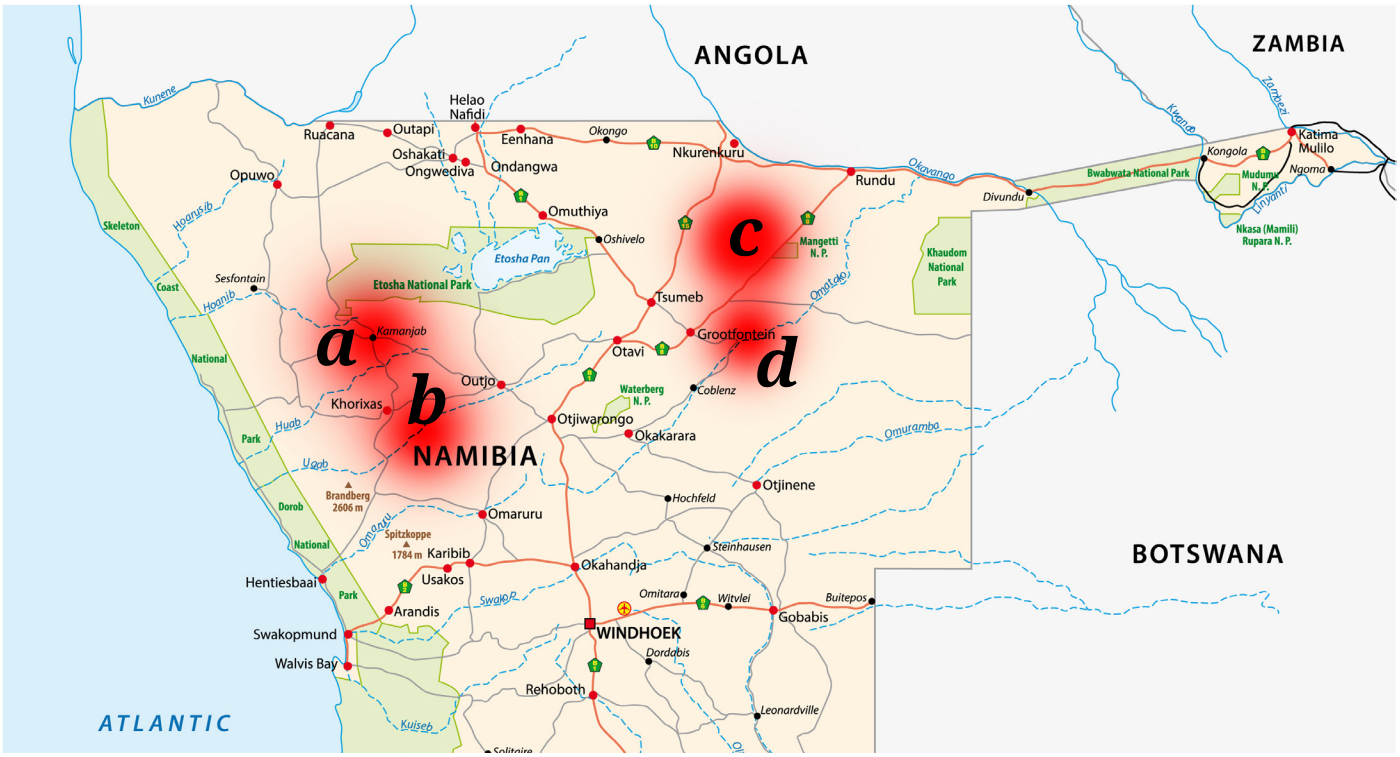
Namibia has traded internationally in live elephants to ex situ (outside natural range) countries in the past. In 2012 and 2013, the country exported 24 live wild-caught elephants under CITES regulations to Mexico (18 elephants) and Cuba (6 elephants).[6] In both these instances, Namibia exported elephants under an Appendix I listing, despite the fact that elephants in Namibia are listed in Appendix II. The annotation for the Appendix II listing specifies that trade in live elephants from Namibia is strictly for 'in situ conservation programmes only', i.e. no live elephants may be exported beyond their natural range. Since neither Cuba nor Mexico are African elephant range states, the exports were not in accordance with the CITES Appendix II annotation relevant for Namibia.

However, an addendum to Namibia's Appendix II annotation that elephants may only be destined for in situ conservation programmes also states: "If this condition is not complied with, then the specimen is treated in the same way as 'African elephants from other African States and all Asian elephants (Appendix I)."'[7] Namibia, therefore, was able to export the elephants under the controversial Appendix I interpretation, which has no such restriction (albeit any export must be conducted for primarily non-commercial purposes and a Scientific Authority of the State of import must issue a finding that it is satisfied that the proposed recipient of a living specimen is 'suitably equipped to house and care for it').[8]

Namibia's use of an Appendix I listing rather than the actual Appendix II listing highlights the problematic interpretation and implementation of the CITES Appendices for African elephants and it is this interpretation that continues to allow for the potential export of elephants beyond their natural range. The potential export of the 42 elephants currently to ex situ States must therefore be treated as within the bounds of probability.

[6] https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/ac/31/sum/E-AC31-ExSum-03.pdf
[7] https://cites.org/eng/news/statement/international_trade_in_live_elephants#1
[8] Ibid.

5/The Four Commercial Farming Areas



a. Kamanjab commercial farming area

There appears to be few elephants in this area.

There were no visual sightings of elephants in the two weeks of surveying the area in May 2021, although there is evidence of their presence (in terms of dung, spoor and broken branches) of a small family herd moving from the commercial farming area to the conservancy along the D2667 gravel road close to the ≠Khaodi //Hôas Conservancy entrance. There was also dung/spoor evidence of a small herd moving from the commercial farming area to the conservancy on the C40 road (see photo below).

fig. 3

Ground observations of low numbers of elephants in the area were corroborated by in-person interviews with conservancy pastoralists and villagers in May 2021, as well as several different commercial farmers in the area surrounding Kamanjab. All stated they do not often see elephants and have not had any significant conflict incidents. As the area does not support crop growing (cattle and other livestock are the main agricultural activities), most incidents are water-installation destruction related (such as pumps, pipes and tanks), especially during the dry season when there is a lack of surface water. One farmer informed me that government does not compensate for the breakage of water pumps, pipes and tanks. He resorts, instead, to elephant mitigation techniques in the form of providing an extra water source just for the elephants so as to keep them away from the installations (see fig. 3).

There are other elephant-mitigation techniques commonly used in the area and throughout Namibia. One is surrounding water tanks with sharp rocks that effectively prevent the elephants from reaching the tanks. Another is to encase pumps in steel cages.

The Craig & Gibson fixed-wing survey in 2016 revealed only 18 elephants were counted in the Kamanjab area (block FH3).[9] In the Kamanjab block, only 2 of the 18 elephants sighted were bulls.[10] These extremely low numbers of bull elephants could be because they are either more difficult to spot from the air due their solitary nature; and/or that only bulls are targeted for trophy hunting; and/or that bulls tend to be the damage-causing animals and are more frequently killed as 'problem elephants.'

According to the ≠Khaodi //Hôas annual report for 2019, sightings in this neighbouring CBNRM conservancy totalled just 14 elephants. However, the official annual game count only listed three elephants. The population status is listed as 'uncommon'. No population estimates are given.[11]

b. Omatjete area

Ground observations of the commercial farms and areas along the Ugab River in May 2021 revealed little elephant presence (just some old dung). Interviews with farmers, the manager of a private lodge (Vingerklip Lodge), and other stakeholders in the area all said elephant sightings were rare. The lodge manager said elephants had not been sighted for two years.

A fixed-wing aerial elephant population survey of the entire Kunene Region, undertaken by Craig, G.C. and D. St. C. Gibson on behalf of the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism in late 2016, counted 277 elephants but extrapolated the figure to 1,716 individuals for the entire region.[12] However, the survey showed a zero count of elephants in this current area of survey (block HL3 – Ugab River/ Omatjete area). The survey revealed an interesting fact – there were very few bull elephants in the entire Kunene Region – just 22 of the 277 counted (extrapolated to 59 of 1,716).[13]

[9] Craig, G.C. and D. St. C. Gibson (2016)
[10] ibid.
[11] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Khoadi_hoas%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf
[12] Craig, G.C. and D. St. C. Gibson (2016)
[13] Ibid.

Elephant-Human Relations Aid (EHRA) currently conducts foot patrols every other day of the week in the Ugab River/Omatjete area. Information is obtained from direct sightings of elephants. The EHRA annual report for 2020 shows low numbers of adult cows and adult bulls. Here are their findings:[14]

- Herds are small (6-12 individuals).
- Numbers of bulls are very low, while the western sector of the Ugab River showed a drastic decline of female elephants.
- Since 2003, sixteen female elephants have died. Only five remain.
- Since 2017, three adult bulls over the age of 25 years were shot, two of which were destroyed as problem animals and one as a trophy. Another young male of 19 years was shot as a problem-causing animal. One male over 30 years of age remains in the Ugab River West area. Males in normal populations only begin to breed when they are older than 30 years of age. The lack of breeding bulls is of major concern.
- Since 2014, calf mortality in the Ugab West population stands at 100%. The last surviving calf was born in June 2014. Since then, 9 new-born calves died at or shortly after birth. The last new-born death in the Ugab River West population occurred in January 2020. The last new-born death in the Huab /Aba Huab resident population occurred in October 2020.
- Severe droughts have been prevalent in this area for the past five years.
- Jointly with the MEFT and local conservancies, EHRA have managed to direct the Ugab West elephants away from the commercial farms, and west down the Ugab River "back into a safer area."
- EHRA also assist in various mitigation techniques to reduce human-elephant conflict such as elephant proof walls around water tanks.

Neighbouring Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) conservancies show a similar trend in low elephant counts. This is evidenced in their respective annual game counts. The latest figures are found in the annual reports on the NACSO website from the past decade.[15] They are as follows:

- The annual report for the !Khoro !Goreb Conservancy in 2019 listed elephants as 'very rare' with no recorded sightings since 2014.[16]
- The annual report for the Ohungu Conservancy in 2019 listed elephants as 'very rare' with no recorded sightings in the last ten years. However, one elephant was 'removed' as a 'problem animal'.[17]
- The annual report for the Otjimboyo Conservancy in 2019 listed elephants as 'very rare' with no recorded sightings since 2011.[18]
- The annual report for the Sorris Sorris Conservancy in 2019 listed elephants as 'very rare' with no recorded sightings since 2014, although elephants do feature relatively prominently in the Human-Wildlife Conflict section since 2016.[19]
- The annual report for the Tsiseb Conservancy in 2019 listed elephants as 'very rare' with no recorded sightings in the last ten years.[20]

[14] EHRA Annual Conservation Report (2020)
[15] http://www.nacso.org.na/conservancies
[16] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Khoro_goreb%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf
[18] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Otjimboyo%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf
[19] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Sorris%20Sorris%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf
[20] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Tsiseb%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf

fig. 4

c. Grootfontein-Kavango Cattle Ranch area

The Kavango Cattle Ranch (KCR) is a government parastatal farm conglomerate administered by the Namibia Industrial Development Agency (NIDA). The ranch area is approximately 168,900 hectares in size, and is comprised of over 40 individual farms, primarily used for livestock production.

Unlike the two previous areas surveyed in the Kunene Region, on the KCR there are a lot more elephants. Various estimates from local farmers and KCR management indicate there may be between 130 and 200 'resident' elephants that move in and out of the area.

Two female elephants were fitted with radio collars in 2014 by the Na'ankuse Elephant and Wild Dog Project to monitor long term movements but, despite this, there does not appear to be any solid data on their movements or any other assessments of these elephants.[21]

It is claimed by the MEFT that the elephants in this area cause damage to fences, water dams, water pipes and, occasionally, to crops grown by the local people. This damage is costly in terms of repairs, maintenance and labour. The claim of widespread human-elephant conflict was confirmed in June 2021 by resident livestock farmers and by the NIDA manager, who was interviewed in his office in person. The manager stated that the damage from elephants is widespread and continuous.

He says the cattle farmers are in a state of desperation and believes that if the current state of affairs continues for another six months the conglomerate would have to file for bankruptcy. The manager also maintained that a person was killed 2020 by an elephant. Cattle have also been killed by elephants. The manager said that apart from reading the advertisement about the auction of elephants in the New Era newspaper, he has yet to be contacted by government on the subject.

The north of the KCR is bordered by 120kms of veterinary cordon fence. The full length of the fence was surveyed in June 2021. Dozens of fence breaches caused by elephants were evident (see fig. 4 above). Teams of labourers working for the Namibian veterinary authority were observed repairing the fences. When asked about the frequency of breaches, all replied that fence repairs were conducted on a daily basis. "It's a full-time job," said one. Apart from fence destruction, other elephant evidence in the form of spoor, dung and broken water installations was observed.

There was a rumour circulating among farmers in the area that due to the continued and abundant presence of elephants and other wildlife, government has mooted that the KCR could be converted into a game reserve.

[21] https://naankuse.com/conservation-research/mangetti/

d. Grootfontein-Tsumkwe Area

The elephants here form part of the commercial farmlands and game/hunting ranches to the east of the town of Grootfontein to the west of the N≠a Jaqna conservancy.

The area was surveyed by vehicle and farmers interviewed in June 2021. Human-elephant conflict is generally regarded as 'occasional' and primarily concerns water installation destruction. There is very little sign of elephants both in terms of sightings as well as dung and spoor and fence destruction.

One farmer and wildlife rancher mentioned that there had only ever been one elephant – a lone bull – that had roamed into the area. It was apparently 'destroyed' by the MEFT.

There is very little information on these elephants in terms of official aerial surveys (unlike in the Kunene Region). No official aerial survey has been conducted in this area, possibly because there are not enough elephants to warrant a survey in the first place.

The neighbouring N≠a Jaqna conservancy annual audit for 2019 (road counts) lists elephants as 'uncommon', although there is a hunting quota of 4 elephants. The last recorded human-elephant conflict incident in N≠a Jaqna was in 2014.[22]

[22] http://www.nacso.org.na/sites/default/files/Na_jaqna%20Audit%20Report%202019.pdf

6/Conclusion

The elephant population in the Kunene Region could be on the verge of collapse. Of major concern are the extremely low numbers of breeding bulls and high infant mortality rate (100% since 2014). The big question is whether the MEFT's plan to remove live elephants from the Omatjete/ Kamanjab commercial farming areas is viable. The removal of any number could have severe implications on an already fragile and isolated desert elephant population. It also seems that the ability to capture highly mobile elephants in such a large area could be problematic, with the risk of injury and/or mortality.

In the Grootfontein-Kavango Cattle Ranch area, there appears to be a significant elephant population with widespread human-elephant conflict incidents.

The Grootfontein-Tsumkwe area, on the other hand, does not seem to share the same issues in that there are not too many elephants nor high conflict incidents. Elephant sightings and conflict incidents are deemed to be minimal, and do not substantiate the claim made in the MEFT advertisement that elephant numbers need to be reduced. Drought, cited by the MEFT advertisement as a factor requiring a reduction in numbers, is not evident here either. The wet season for 2021 in this region was one of the better ones on record, according to local farmers.

If these elephants are exported to locations outside of Namibia (ex situ) the process will most likely use the Appendix I interpretation. Again, the legal validity of which remains in question and the concern is consequently being referred to the next CITES Standing Committee.[23]

If these elephants are captured in the Omatjete/ Kamanjab area it could have detrimental effects on the future survival of Namibia's isolated desert elephants.

[23] CITES Thirty-first meeting of the Animals Committee Online, 31 May, 1, 4, 21 and 22 June 2021

7/About

Adam Cruise is an award-winning investigative environmental journalist, academic and author. He has contributed to a number of international publications, including National Geographic and The Guardian covering diverse topics from the plight of wildlife in Africa to coral reef rejuvenation in Indonesia. He has a PhD in Philosophy specialising in environmental ethics from Stellenbosch University in South Africa and is the editor of the online Journal of African Elephants.

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