



T: + 264 (0)61 234455
F: + 264 (0)61 222567
E: info@napha.com.na
P.O. Box: 11291
Windhoek, Namibia
www.napha-namibia.com

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NAPHA Media Release on Elephant issues

Like so often in life, it is sometimes better to wait until the dust has settled - especially if 170 elephants have just stampeded past.

The sale or auctioning off of 170 elephants from different parts in Namibia has resulted in a major uproar, albeit a social media uproar, like is the order of the day nowadays. Everybody that has only half an opinion participates in this uproar and very quickly it takes on a life of its own - the result oftentimes similar to a game of "Chinese whispers". What makes matters worse is that self-proclaimed investigative journalists then - contrary to what their job title would imply - spew 'articles' that are so full of blatant lies and ridiculous assumptions that it is simply astonishing and really amounts to works of fiction. But yet again, this is not surprising in the times we live in, and when debating topics that already have been guided into a specific direction by mainstream media, against all facts.

Luckily, the Namibian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), has released a stern statement on the elephant issue. As Namibians we can be proud to have a responsible ministry that is not afraid to take a stance on such issues, especially involving sustainable use of our natural resources. The MEFT has made it clear that they do not intend to participate in any further misinformed and/ or deliberately jeopardising debate on this.

We as NAPHA however feel that we should make our concerns heard in this, and maybe have one or the other critical person rethink their position on this.

The main problem in this is that it is mainly an emotional debate by people - however well-meaning - who live detached from nature and far away from any and all direct problems associated with wild elephants. These people nonetheless feel an emotional connection to all things natural - understandably so. Yet what these people fail to see is that also those who are directly affected and confronted by wild elephants on a daily basis are emotional about this topic, with the difference that their livelihoods are deeply threatened. So we always have to bear in mind that there is a different side to the coin as well.

The MEFT in its statement said that the ministry and by implication the government have a responsibility to first and foremost protect the lives of Namibian citizens; this is a vitally important aspect when one has to consider the bigger picture. Conservation can simply not be at the *expense* of human life at large; that is something we will have to live with. For a moment just imagine that your life or the life of a loved one is at an immediate and grave threat from an elephant - what would you do?

However, the issue is naturally more complex than this. Especially because as hunters we are concerned conservationists as well. Conservationists, also those that do not hunt, have to take a holistic look at what needs to be done to conserve elephants for future generations. In order to do this we have to put emotions aside; we need to be aware of them and understand them, but we need to base our decisions and understanding on scientific facts. That is if we really want to sustainably protect natural surroundings. And that should be the essence of it all: protect natural surroundings, habitats, instead of focussing on individual species or, even worse, on individual animals.

If we truly want to look at conservation from a healthy-habitat perspective, we will in some way also have to look at the carrying capacity of such a habitat. This is important for any game species, and all the more important when looking at elephant, who often are called architects of nature (this however can also have a very negative connotation). Critics of carrying capacity from the scientific community



(at least in Namibia) will immediately say that nature is not static and one cannot define a specific carrying capacity - this is true, but of course it simplifies the phrase "carrying capacity" dramatically. Over time, there will well be a certain figure which is the carrying capacity, and like anywhere with statistics there is a margin of error in both directions. The point is that game numbers fluctuate over time (roughly speaking they rise with good rain periods and fall with drought related conditions); if one were to draw a line across this wave (the fluctuations), it would be the carrying capacity. Historically, game animals - including elephants - were able to freely move between dry and rainy season feeding grounds (some of these great migrations are still taking place in some or other form). These migrations between the seasons enabled habitat to rehabilitate and rejuvenate likewise. Today, with the dramatic loss, fragmentation and degradation (by us humans) of habitat, rehabilitation and rejuvenation does not take place anymore or is severely impacted. All of these things negatively affect the carrying capacity over time. This should be a serious matter of concern.

Although the ministry lauds the expansion of elephant range in recent times, we need to take a differentiated look at this. Expansion of range does not necessarily equal availability of habitat. It may well mean that the original habitat where the elephant expand from is either saturated or in such a bad state that it can simply not maintain high elephant numbers anymore. However romantic it sounds, Uis is plainly not elephant habitat. Neither are communal areas near Omatjete or commercial farming areas to the east of Grootfontein. Any serious livestock farmer will make it clear to you that farming (in the true sense of the word) and elephant are not compatible. Fullstop. The same goes for communal subsistence farmers, who are "just" that: *subsistence* farmers. Have an elephant destroy their entire crop yield or kill livestock and they sit with absolutely nothing. Not even tolerance for elephant (and lion and hippo and crocodile).

This is the predicament the ministry sits with, and that has led to the auctioning off of elephant. The ministry, on a very short-term, aims to alleviate problems that are simply not bearable anymore by those immediately affected.

So what can be done?

The easy answer is: protect the available habitat before anything else.

Sooner or later we will all have to accept that if we want to ensure the survival of elephant and other game species in a sustainable manner, we need to take decisions that are unpopular in the public eye. But as the MEFT has stated, Namibia is a sovereign country that is able to take responsible decisions.

Sooner or later we will have to ask ourselves whether we want to further degrade the available habitat by for example installing more and more waterholes in our arid country; these waterholes having a two-fold detrimental effect (causing environmental degradation and drawing people into wildlife areas). But this is a multi-faceted topic and by far outreaches the realms of this write-up.

Also in our overall conservation approach we have to revisit our strategies, especially in communal areas and in particular if we want to maintain game populations outside of protected areas in communal lands. In the long run this is only going to work if proper zoning is done and more importantly this zoning is strictly enforced in both directions. This means that wildlife exclusive zones have to be reserved strictly for wildlife and kept in an as natural state as possible; and human-use zones have to be reserved for the local communities, with the understanding that game animals may be controlled and even eliminated in these zones, especially if they are problem-causing, like elephant often are. And if for example elephant venture beyond where they are still tolerated, we cannot bemoan the steps that have to be taken. It is utopian to think that elephant can still roam the entire country.

This also means that we have to get away from thinking in numbers and measuring our success in how many elephant there are in Namibia, and comparing these mere numbers to the presumed numbers of a century ago. It is of little to no worth having thousands of elephant crammed in areas



that are a fraction of the habitat available in the early 1900s. Such statements unfortunately are misplaced and bring no value to the debate. We have to work with what we presently have available, and ensure that we manage these areas to the advantage of nature at large. This in a nutshell should give food for thought for all parties involved.

There also has been criticism that there was no stakeholder involvement before it was decided to sell these elephants. This criticism is definitely understandable and to a certain extent perhaps also justified. On the other hand, as stated before, the ministry has to consider many different things and was now faced with a dilemma of having to act on a problem in hotspot areas that has been brewing for quite some time and was no longer bearable. The MEFT has justified why they had to take the route they did.

And bluntly put, the removal of these elephants from the identified hotspots will have no effect whatsoever on the elephant population at large. In no way does it jeopardise elephant conservation in protected areas or in communal conservancies. We are actually still a long way from really addressing the “elephant problem” in Namibia, as mentioned above.

NAPHA does not wish to interfere or question our line ministry’s decision making in matters that are not related to hunting as such. Nonetheless, we still see a responsibility to engage in a constructive and measured debate, as we are as always concerned about the health of our natural surroundings. Elephants - if properly understood and seen in context - are an important part of nature. As a hunting community we continually evolve and with special regard to elephants, see an obligation to ensure that our doings are truly sustainable and of no detriment to the population at large. Not least for this reason, NAPHA is proud to have introduced an age-related trophy measuring system that in the long run - if taken up by policy makers - will ensure that hunting and elephant hunting is sustainable.