

Why there are "too many" elephants in southern Africa, and not enough elsewhere

When trying to explain to other people that elephants need our help as they are in danger of being extinct, then many people answer, "Oh, I did not know that, I thought there were even too many elephants in the meantime!" Obviously those people watched TV documentaries about the situation in southern Africa which report that the elephants are so numerous that they are devastating the landscape by their immense need of food.

I could never explain why elephants are endangered despite of these reports and therefore asked several elephant experts concerning this subject. I am very grateful for the answers I received from ElephantVoices, Amboseli Trust for Elephants, and Elephants Without Borders. As it is quite a lot of information they sent, I would like to summarize it in simple words as follows:

(Note: In case this summary should contain wrong interpretations although I did my best to understand the matter, then it is only my fault.)



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THERE IS A GENERAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE SITUATION:

1. It is a misunderstanding that there are 'too many' elephants in Africa:
There has been an increase of elephant numbers in **only 3 countries** (Namibia, Botswana, South Africa) over the last century.
In all other African countries the numbers have been decreasing, as are the numbers of elephants in whole of Africa.
Additionally, the situation in Namibia is relative: The populations in the north-west of Namibia are stable and self-regulating. Those in the north are growing (due to frontier crossing from Botswana).

2. The **complaint about the damaged vegetation** (due to high elephant numbers) in southern regions **does not have a realistic basis**, as the vegetation which the elephants have devastated did not exist during former times when elephants were more numerous in southern Africa. This vegetation just had a chance to develop after the years of extreme hunting (until early 20th century), during the absence of the elephants. Furthermore, forest is not the ideal landscape in every case. Vegetation systems and their cooperation with the various sorts of animals (with various sorts of eating behaviours) have to be much more differentiated. Additionally, or as one aspect of this, elephants do not only destroy landscape, they also create a new one and convey new vegetation and wildlife (distribution of seed in their dung, finding ground water sources and making them available for other species, etc.).
3. Countries with 'too many' elephants use the terms '**overpopulation**' as an argument for their request for legal trade with ivory and for a commercial exploitation of elephants. So facts are surely verbally exaggerated in some cases.

SPECIAL FACTS IN SOUTHERN COUNTRIES WITH INCREASE OF ELEPHANT NUMBERS:

BOTSWANA:

- Another surprising fact: The number of elephants in Botswana has **not grown any more since 1996 but has stabilized** since then!
- Before, elephant numbers have (among others), increased because **elephants fled from the wars** in Angola and Mozambique to the security of Botswana.
- The **government of Botswana is conservation-minded** and definitely cares for its wildlife areas (keeping in mind its tourism industry).
- In Botswana there is **few poaching**, as there are **less ways** (streets) towards the areas where elephants live and there are **less criminal networks** to smuggle the ivory out of the country. (Possibly due to the country's wealth, coming from diamond business, people are less depending on dangerous possibilities like poaching to get money from.)

(Note: Botswana follows, like Kenya, the ideal of a minimum of human interference in nature parks and therefore does not fence their wildlife conservation areas and parks.)

SOUTH AFRICA, ZIMBABWE, NAMIBIA:

- In the a.m. 3 countries there has been **less poaching** than elsewhere as these countries were white-minority police states the **security infrastructures** of which are roughly still existing. That means that the national parks and conservation areas are **better guarded** than those in the rest of Africa.
- The **economic situation** of these countries has generally been **stronger** than in the other african 'elephant countries', and therefore it is realistically possible for them to **pay for effective protection measurements** in the concerned wildlife areas.

- Increase of elephant numbers in South Africa: **Elephants moved** from Mozambique into South Africa's Krüger National Park. (Reason: War)
- In **Zimbabwe**, where elephant population had also been increasing in the past, the situation recently changed– there is probably more poaching now than the country admits. Elephants numbers are decreasing again!
- **Fragmentation of landscape** / Separation of natural habitats
Wildlife parks and conservatories are **fenced** in these countries. This means that **elephants cannot distribute** as they need, cannot move from one location to another, and are depending on what they get within the fenced area.
Especially in South Africa and Zimbabwe the **wildlife areas** (parks and conservatories) are not left to nature, but are **managed by humans** (they have to, as the areas are fenced) which means that humans are interfering in these ecological systems by changing and limiting natural activities and developments. (In these 2 countries culling had been practiced in the 60s as one of these measures.)
- This management does also include the **artificial provisioning of water** which means that the protected areas are somewhat 'managed like cattle farms'. By this, natural selection and natural living circumstances are avoided.

Fences and water addition are both proven to increase and potentize (!) the numbers of elephants.

(All this is not the case in Botswana, see above.)

Note: The southern african countries slowly move on to the scientifically elaborated and only reasonable solution for the ‚elephant problem’ by **creating corridors and transfrontier conservation areas** (like KAZA and the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park). This needs a lot of political effort and work with all envolved people, authorities as well as residents.



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WHY THE NUMBER OF ELEPHANTS IS DECREASING IN THE REST OF THE AFRICAN 'ELEPHANT COUNTRIES':

- Elephant populations in Africa where parks and wildlife reserves are not fenced, have **either regulated themselves** or (more often) have been **decimated by poaching**.
- Countries are themselves or are surrounded by **conflict areas** where there are a **lot of weapons** available which are used for ivory **poaching** in order to fuel ongoing wars. Also there are **a lot of people in need** (in the countries themselves or in neighbouring countries) who are desperate to do anything (also **poaching**) in order to earn money and feed their families. Especially during the last few years Asia has become even more eager for ivory, and the business with the 'white gold' is very profitable and enticing for poor people as well as for those greedy for money.
- **Governments are not so much concerned** about their wildlife treasures. There are many **corrupt officials** who are involved in illegal ivory business either themselves or do benefit from it in some way.
- **Less money** available **for the protection of wildlife** conservation areas and parks.
- **No (or less) fencing** of national parks and conservation areas. Therefore animals distribute in wider areas and the vegetation is not much affected by elephants. However, there is **more human/wildlife conflict** which elephants always lose.
- The **population explosion** has substantial effect in these areas – there are too many people who **occupy more and more land which had been elephant country** before. (Although this is valid for all over Africa, it has more impact in countries where nature parks are not fenced.)
- **Land with water has been taken away from the wildlife, and more and more productive livestock occupies water sources** which formerly belonged to wildlife only.

