

The Botswana Elephant Paradox

By: CBNRM Support Programme, Botswana¹
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Imagine you are a successful farmer who after a good rainy season and having applied good management hauls in a record harvest. The day after, while you are about to enjoy the fruits of your labour, the police forbid the sale of your harvest for fear of flooding the market and potential damage to the national economy. You would be justifiably upset, if not outraged.



The same comparison applies to elephant management in Botswana, and illustrates the surprise people felt when they learnt of the proposal of Kenya and India to place all populations of the African Elephant on Appendix 1 of the “Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora” (CITES). Adoption of this proposal would seriously threaten the current utilisation of the elephant and its products in Botswana.

Is this a real problem? Aren't elephants endangered and shouldn't we be happy with adoption of the Kenyan proposal?

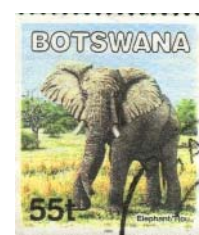
This article will give the background to the elephant management practices in Botswana. It will show that the Kenyan proposal is totally misplaced in the context of this southern African country and if adopted, will not lead to a greater protection of the species, as “the elephant lobby” wants us to believe, but, to the contrary, is likely to affect the Botswana elephant population in a very negative sense.

Conservation practices in Botswana

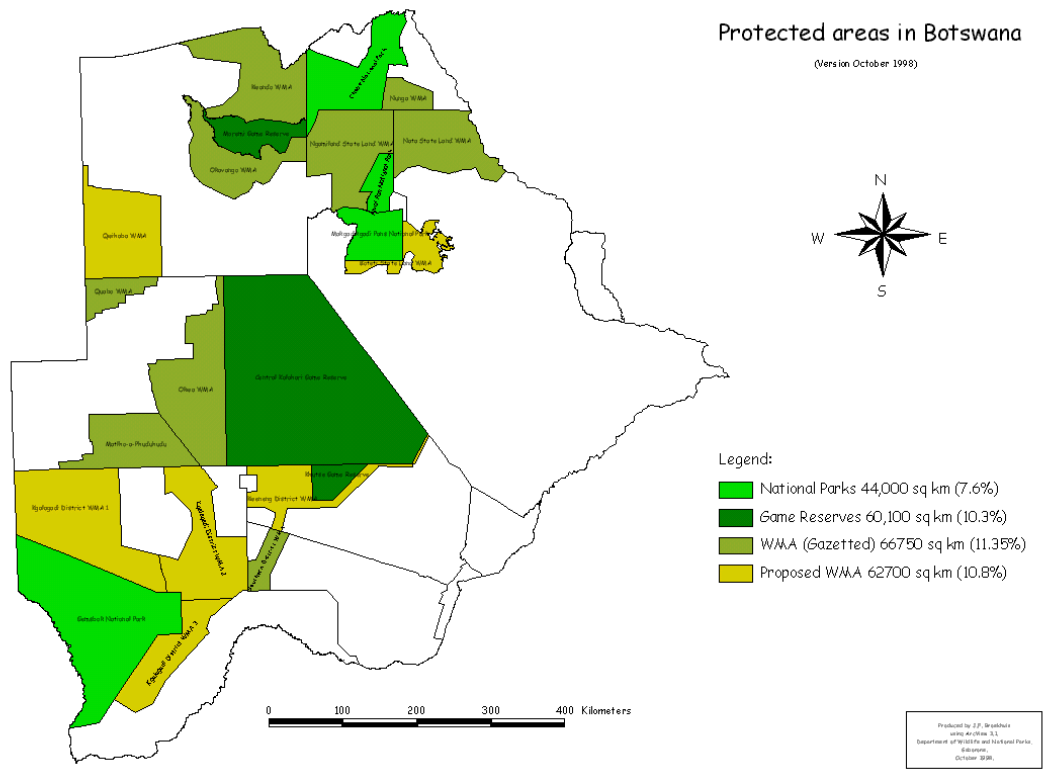
The Republic of Botswana (1.8 million inhabitants and the size of France) is often heralded as the socially stable and economic showpiece of Africa. The country, which economy is largely based on diamond exports, is generally judged to apply “good governance”. One of the results of the combination of relative prosperity and wise leadership has been a long-standing policy supportive to wildlife and ecosystem conservation. Today Botswana reaps the fruits of this policy: the country boasts prime and unspoilt wildlife habitat and rapidly develops into a major wildlife-based tourist destination.

Botswana offers the ultimate wilderness experience in and around the renowned Okavango Delta, along the Chobe River, at the edge of the Makgadikgadi salt pans and deep down in the Kalahari. An extraordinary 17% of the country is designated National Park or Game Reserve but what is equally important in the Botswana approach to nature conservation are the buffer zones around the protected areas called Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs).

¹ The CBNRM Support Programme is an initiative of IUCN – International Union for the Conservation of Nature and SNV – Netherlands Development Organisation to assist in the further development and implementation of community-based natural resources management in Botswana. With thanks for elephant data provided by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Gaborone, Botswana. To contact via Nico Rozemeijer, P.O. Box 611, Gaborone, Botswana or email: information@cbnrm.bw and web site: <http://www.cbnrm.bw>



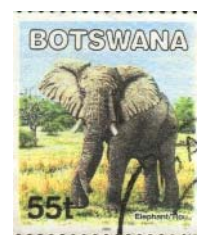
The prime objective of Wildlife Management Areas (a further 20% of the country) is the sustainable utilisation of wildlife and other natural resources. This virtually means that in total 37% of Botswana is devoted to wildlife and natural resources management! In this respect it is important to note that Botswana has adopted one of the world's most innovative decentralised natural resource management models that bestows natural resource user rights to community organisations. This model, called Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM), has been in place for over a decade, and allows the communities living with wildlife to benefit from its utilisation which is regarded as an incentive to conserve the very resource that benefits their development. The thinking behind this strategy is simple: "if you own something valuable, you take care of it".



People and wildlife

The Botswana approach to nature conservation has paid off. The large protected areas “feed” the WMAs with surplus wildlife (migrating species, “spill-over” of surplus animals, etc.) that can be used by the communities. The community use of wildlife is not something that is left to the market, but is controlled and monitored by Government Departments and a comprehensive body of legislation, policies and guidelines. Part of the use is consumptive (some commercial hunting, but also subsistence hunting by traditional hunters/gatherers e.g. Bushmen/Basarwa), part of the use is non-consumptive (increasing investments in commercial and community-based tourism). The WMAs provide substantial income opportunities to the rural poor in the remote parts of Botswana.

The WMAs in their turn provide a buffer between the “no-use” protected areas and human habitation, minimising animal/human conflicts. The areas are further vital animal migration routes and generously



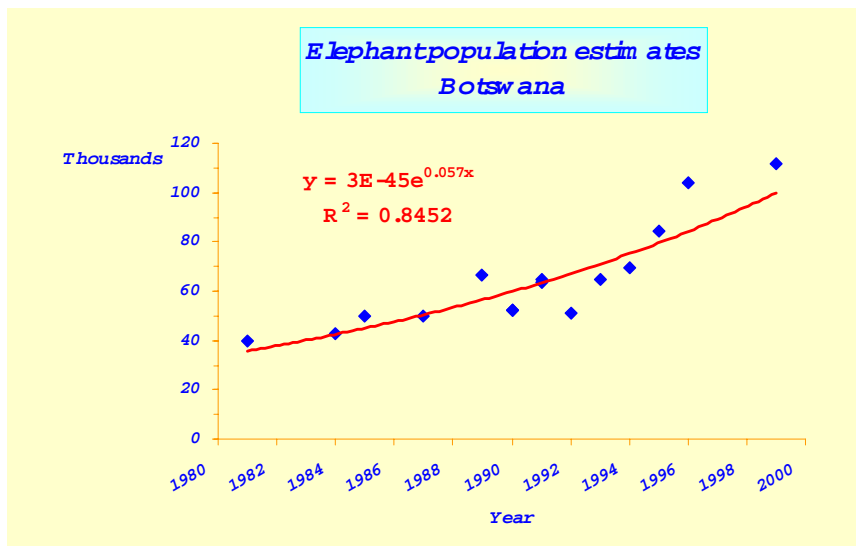
add to the living space of the growing herds in the parks and reserves. But there is a more important function. The use of the natural resources in the Wildlife Management Areas makes the designation of 39% of Botswana for wildlife purposes politically acceptable.

For the ordinary Motswana these “wildlife areas” mean no grazing of cattle and no agriculture. The ordinary Motswana living adjacent to the wildlife areas is suffering wildlife-related damage regularly. Predators such as lion and hyena take livestock; fields of crops are raided by warthogs and antelopes but worst of all, fields (with fences and all) are completely destroyed by herds of elephant. Apart from being farmers, Batswana are also voters. Until now the voters have always been convinced by the governing political parties to assign a sizeable territory to wildlife, for reasons being that this land use generates investment opportunities, incomes and employment and access to new industries and skills, such as tourism. Local people directly benefiting from the controlled use of wildlife is considered an important impetus for sustaining the “unspoilt African wilderness” in Botswana. What would happen when local people are no longer allowed to benefit from the wildlife resources of which they are bearing the costs of living with?

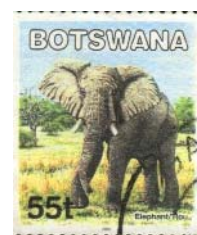
People and elephants

Do you know what it means to live with elephants? Can you imagine a herd of elephants moving through your back yard? People in the northern part of Botswana know all about it. They have first hand experience with what is usually called the “human/wildlife conflict”. Rural subsistence farmers are losing crops, while damage to infrastructure such as boreholes and water pipes, fences and houses are common events. Elephants in and around villages in northern Botswana killed at least 12 people in the last 6 years. The frequency of incidences is increasing due to the growth of both human and elephant populations.

Aerial survey estimates show that Botswana’s elephant population is currently around 120.000 (from 40.000 in 1980) and is growing at a rate of 5.7% (at present 6000 animals) per annum. As the population increases in number, localised densities are increasing and the population is expanding into new ranges. Over the last 10 years, much of this expansion has been to the north-west and south into community areas, increasing the competition over space with mankind.



As a result it is not surprising that human attitudes towards elephants are becoming increasingly more negative. Even though Botswana Government has a relatively generous policy on compensating farmers for the damage caused by wildlife it is considered of paramount importance to counteract the growing perception amongst Batswana that wildlife conservation is more important than human welfare. A positive attitude of communities



living in wildlife areas and financial benefits of natural resources for communities are the most powerful conservation tools available in Africa. These must be enhanced if elephant populations and protected areas in general are to survive in the future.

Elephants and environment

Dry season elephant densities are increasing annually around the limited permanent water sources in northern Botswana and concentrations in excess of 12 elephants/km² occur along the Linyanti and Chobe Rivers. The vegetation structure is changing with the loss of trees and other woody species, especially Acacia's and other soft trunk trees such as Baobabs and Star Chestnut. Forage for other water dependent antelopes is quickly depleted and there are cascading effects, many of which have uncertain outcomes, throughout the ecosystem. Erosion along the riverbanks and sedimentation of the rivers is increasing.

Positive impact of elephants

Elephants are not just wildlife. Elephants have grown to mythical proportions as the universal symbol of endangered wildlife. People from all over the world visit the Botswana National Parks and Game Reserves to watch this majestic animal in its natural habitat. The herds can move freely over the whole northern part of Botswana (more than 80.000 km²) and beyond (into for example Zimbabwe) and this sense of the "vast and unspoilt wilderness" greatly adds to the attraction. The direct economic impact of this non-consumptive use of the elephant is substantial:

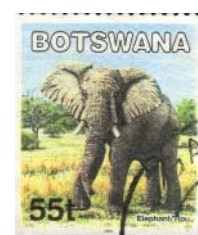
- Private and public investments in tourism related industries runs in tens of millions of Pula² per annum;
- Botswana Park fees flowing into State coffers amounted to 19.5 million Pula in 2000;
- The Botswana tourism sector has grown to become the second national income earner after diamonds; and
- Direct employment in the tourism sector has reached the 10.000 mark.

But, as mentioned above, elephants do not permanently stay in the protected areas. They move into the surrounding Wildlife Management Areas or even into the settled areas. These huge areas are generally not very attractive landscapes and do not have major tourism features. They are largely flat and dull Mophane shrub lands. The use of these areas is mainly "consumptive": hunting by commercial companies or for subsistence purposes by local communities.

The Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) model applied in Botswana whereby communities *de facto* own most of the hunting areas offers great opportunities for the development of these remote villages. Elephant hunting is the biggest attraction and as such makes a positive change to the livelihood of the poor in rural Botswana. Extremely poor villages like /Xai-/Xai, Mababe, Khwai, Sankuyo, just to mention a few, have elephants on the hunting quota. Of the 210 elephants that are hunted in Botswana annually (only 3,5% of the annual population increase!) about 50% are hunted in community areas and contribute directly to community development.

The hunting industry and its spin-offs generate essential employment and a direct income of 6.2 million Pula in 9 joint ventures between private companies and communities in 2001. An additional 3 million Pula became available for community development in the elephant range after Botswana was allowed to sell part of its ivory stock in 1999.

² The Pula is the currency of Botswana. At the time of writing 1 US\$ equalled 6.2 Pula.



The elephant being the most important trophy animal increases the value of the entire quota (antelopes, birds, etc.) dramatically. In other words, without the elephant on the quota, safari companies will be much less interested to buy the “plains game” and make the enormous investments in local skill development, marketing and infrastructure. The elephant makes “management of the natural resources” worthwhile. Elephant revenues offset the costs of building up community organisations, reporting on animal numbers, community anti-poaching control and chasing wildlife out of maize fields. The elephant on the hunting quota in the marginal areas of Botswana is the difference between wildlife as an asset and wildlife as a pest!

A hidden tragedy

Botswana is hard-hit by HIV/AIDS. The last UNDP figures show an infection rate of 36% of the sexually active population. The drama is slowly unfolding in the rural areas of the country, where with the men working in the urban centres, the burden falls mainly on women. Some villages in rural northern Botswana count 70% female-headed households having to take care of the sick, elderly and growing numbers of orphans. These women depend largely on arable agriculture and suffer most from elephant damage. They would probably be the most outspoken anti-wildlife activists, were it not for their traditional role not to speak out.

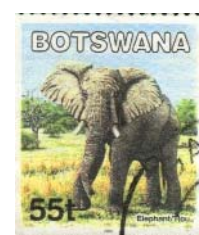
Attempts are made in the Botswana CBNRM programme and projects to alleviate their plight by ensuring that hunting revenue is channelled into ventures that generate (temporary) employment and offer markets for crafts and other products that are produced by women. In some cases (e.g. Sankuyo village) hunting revenue was distributed in cash to all community households to supplement subsistence incomes.

What is CITES in November 2002 about?

The “Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora” (CITES) Conference of Parties (COP) will meet in Santiago, Chile, from the 3rd to the 15th of November 2002. For some a regular professional event, for others an excellent occasion to lobby and generate financial assistance, for the rural communities in Botswana a potential threat to their livelihood. Kenya and India will propose to transfer to “Appendix I” those populations of the African Elephant that are currently included in “Appendix II”. This requires some explanation. During the COP in Harare in 1997 it was agreed that for those countries with healthy elephant populations (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe) the elephant was “down listed” from Appendix 1 (no use of the animal nor trade in its product allowed) to Appendix II. Appendix II allows for example trade in live animals to acceptable destinations.

During the last COP in Nairobi, both Kenya and India also proposed but failed to “up-list” the Southern African elephant populations. The reason for the proposal is unclear - as if the successful elephant management models applied in the south of Africa have a negative impact on elephant populations in India. The argument that illegally obtained ivory from for example Kenya can find its way to the market disguised as legally harvested ivory in, let's say Botswana, is not valid anymore as an acceptable system of registration of raw ivory has been developed. If anything the argument underlines the lack of faith both Kenya and India have in their own ability to stem illegal off-take of elephant.

A more obvious reason for the Kenya/India proposal could be an anticipated financial gain. Cash-strapped wildlife agencies, driven by powerful international environmental NGOs have an interest in the African Elephant being on the verge of extinction. As said before, the elephant is the symbol of African wildlife conservation and is instrumental in mobilising huge financial resources. To accept trade in elephant products and as such acknowledge an overpopulation of elephants in Botswana and its surrounding countries does not go very well with Kenyan international fundraising strategies.



Botswana's elephant proposal to CITES 2002

In accordance with its “wildlife AND people” approach, Botswana has submitted a proposal to CITES to trade in elephant products at a scale appropriate to its healthy elephant stock. More specifically it seeks permission to trade in hides and leather goods. It also wants to trade in ivory carvings and hunting trophies for non-commercial purposes. What the latter means is that safari hunters or tourists are allowed to take trophies and souvenirs home to add to their private collections. Further, Botswana would like to trade in live animals to acceptable destinations as determined by CITES and in line with the national legislation of the importing country.

Lastly, Botswana would like to sell - to CITES approved trading partners - its registered stocks of raw ivory of elephants that died naturally or as a result of problem animal control. The proposed initial sale is 20 tons with a subsequent annual quota of 4 tons.

Proceeds of these monies, in line with the prevailing community-based natural resources management practices, will greatly benefit the rural communities in the elephant range in Northern Botswana.

The impact of “up-listing” of the elephant for Botswana

What would happen in Botswana if the Kenya/India proposal to CITES is adopted is obviously not certain but the scenario below is not unlikely.

The impact of a ban on using the elephant as more than a “camera object” will be mostly felt in Botswana in the Wildlife Management Areas around the National Parks and especially by community members living in or adjacent to these WMAs. With no benefits directly derived from the elephant, the animal will be turned overnight into a pest. The popular call for sweeping measures to curtail the growing herds will become louder. People will not be keen to live with the animals anymore but preferably be separated by (electric) fences. Where will those protecting barriers be erected? If the wildlife areas lose much of their economic value, and let's say it becomes more economically viable to utilise these areas for livestock and arable production then the land use map of Botswana – and the elephant range - will change drastically. Economic and popular vote might opt to build the fences on the boundaries of the protected areas, hereby separating wildlife from mankind and halving elephant and other wildlife habitat.

Some people consider this a worst case scenario, some are waiting for the day. But whatever opinion will prevail, adopting the Kenya/India proposal will very negatively affect the attitude of people in Botswana towards wildlife with yet unclear but likely negative environmental consequences.

The Greater Elephant Paradox

The elephant management policy and practice in Botswana focussing on the sustainable utilisation within the context of transparent governance and economic rationale has borne fruits. However, success does not always pay. The healthy Botswana elephant population grew from 40.000 in 1980 to 120.000 today but is threatening the interests of others. Instead of reaping the benefits of hard labour, the harvest will rot on the fields of international politics. If the November CITES meeting decides to choose for the Kenyan opinion regarding the current state of the African elephant, the Botswana conservation efforts are getting a pitiful reward indeed. In fact the consequences of such decision will go beyond this paradox. In case Botswana – in fact the Southern African Region as a whole - is not allowed to utilise its elephants in the sustainable manner it deems fit, an even greater paradox looms on the horizon. Negative popular attitudes towards wildlife and elephants in particular might result in decreasing land areas available to wildlife and instead of supporting the growth of the African elephant population, CITES in Chile might well be responsible for its decline.

