

MZ03

Elephants: problem or opportunity?

Key Points:

- 1** The elephant population of Mozambique was displaced by the war
- 2** Scientific and local explanations for the return of elephants differ significantly
- 3** These differing explanations are used by key actors to support particular political objectives
- 4** Disputes over elephants highlight divisions within local communities, as well as with the government

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

This *Briefing* considers what has become known as 'the elephant problem' in the Forest Reserve of Moribane, in Manica Province, Mozambique. Since the success of CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe, many conservationists have seen elephants as the key to successful CBNRM schemes. Yet, in Moribane, the presence of elephants has consistently dogged attempts to build a relationship between conservationists and local people in the reserve. This *Briefing* asks why.

Elephants in Moribane

The history of the elephant population in Moribane is unclear. It is generally assumed that before Independence, elephants were common in the area. Residents say that elephants migrated through the reserve, from lowlands in the east to the Mahate plateau during the dry season. During the civil war, the elephant population of Mozambique as a whole was drastically reduced by hunting for ivory and meat by all factions. Moribane was no exception.

Since the war, some conservationists are encouraged that elephants have started returning to the reserve. However, farmers who have planted maize, bananas and yams - which are highly palatable to elephants - are less pleased. They have called on the government to carry out 'problem animal control' (PAC) shootings to keep the elephants away from fields.

Explanations of the 'elephant problem'

For officials of the government's Forest and Wildlife Service, the return of elephants since the war is not a surprise. One game scout likened their return to that of the human 'refugees' who were returning to the area as the terror of war subsided. Elephants are believed to have a keen ability to follow old migratory patterns, even after a period of many years. The problem, from the game scouts' perspective, was that new settlers had moved since the war to areas of the forest where only elephants had previously dwelled.

In contrast, for many residents in Moribane, the problem is one of government inaction

to protect them from wild animals. However, it is recognised that elephant control is not straightforward. For example, some people believe that the elephants are closely intertwined with the spiritual realm. There is believed to be one powerful spirit elephant who leads the group and cannot be killed, even by automatic weapons. Anyone wishing to kill an elephant must conduct careful rituals beforehand. The hunter's wife must observe certain procedures whilst he is away hunting, or risk placing her husband in great danger.

Proposals for a solution to the 'elephant problem'

By early 1998, the elephant problem had become a serious bone of contention between local residents and the government in Moribane. The government were reluctant to carry out PAC shootings as they felt the elephant population of Moribane needed protection after the decimation of the war-time period.

A meeting was called in May 1998 at the community's request, to resolve the problem. The meeting became very heated. Farmers living in the area affected by the elephants demanded that game scouts should shoot



the elephants. However, the Chief disagreed, saying that the basis of the elephant problem was spiritual; it was due to the absence of a young woman who had been dedicated as spiritual guardian of the forest, but had been sent away by her father. As a result, the spirits were unhappy and sent the elephants to destroy crops.

Since the problem was seen to be in the spiritual realm, the Chief argued that the solution lay there also. Ceremonies would have to be conducted. It was eventually agreed that the ceremonies would be organised jointly by the Chief and the government, with the Forest and Wildlife Service providing transport.

The politics of the elephants

One reason why the Chief took the line that he did, and effectively sided with the government, may be because he also wished to see the farmers move from the area affected by elephants. Many of these farmers had settled during and after the war without his permission, and did not respect his authority. He may have suspected, rightly as it turned out, that they would be forced to leave by the elephants. Indeed, he took no action to actually convene the ceremonies. If this interpretation is correct, it is an example of the spirits being used as a political tool by the 'spirit handlers'.

An alternative explanation, offered by one of the residents of the area affected by elephants, was that the Chief was afraid of interfering in the 'elephant problem' because of his own lack of legitimacy in the spiritual world. The Chief himself had been put in charge during the war by Renamo, after his brother, the rightful heir to the Chieftain, had

fled to a government-controlled area (see *Briefing MZ02*). The ancestral spirits, however, know who should be Chief. If the current Chief attempted to contact them during a ceremony for the elephants, his fraud would be revealed, and he would be punished.

Continued stand-off

When no action was taken following the meeting, further complaints arose. One of the farmers wrote to the government, demanding that game scouts be brought to shoot the elephants. The Forestry and Wildlife Service objected, using the CAMPFIRE experience to argue that the elephants were valuable. The residents replied that they had never considered that the elephants had any value. Also, in an interesting twist on CBNRM rhetoric, the farmers said the elephants 'belonged' to the area from which they had migrated after the war.

One resident with a large farm suggested construction of an elephant-proof fence. Sensing that external funding might be available, the Forest and Wildlife Service agreed to this, but said the farmers would have to concentrate in one area to make a fence feasible. This led to a dispute between farmers living near the main road, who wanted to stay within easy reach of services, and those deeper in the forest, who said the soils were better there. The dispute was never resolved, and the idea of a fence was shelved.

At one stage, famine relief food was mobilized by the government to assist those whose crops had been destroyed, and the dispute waned for a period. However, complaints soon resumed. Then, a

government official was held at knife-point for several hours by a group of locals, after game scouts had come ostensibly to carry out a PAC shooting, but had been warned off by the Forest and Wildlife Service.

Outcome

Eventually, after realising that the government would not take action on the elephants, and that the Chief would not support them, farmers started to move out of the affected area. They were provided with transport by the government.

Eventually the 'elephant' area became more or less vacant, except for two farmers - both of whom also had farms elsewhere. There is some speculation as to why these two farmers stayed. Some say that they were guarding arms caches, left over from the war.

Concluding comments

Far from representing a resource for CBNRM projects, elephants in Moribane have proven a serious problem for relations between the government and the local community. However, they have also served to highlight divisions within the community, and the overlapping of conservation with spiritual and political issues.

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