

Too Many Elephants

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By Richard Miniter

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK, Zimbabwe -- Several hours northeast of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, the road turns to sand and you arrive in elephant country. This park is home to one of Africa's largest elephant herds -- and to scenes of elephantine destruction.

Inside the park, hungry elephants busily strip trees of their low-hanging leaves, then push them down and devour their tops. Nearby lies a water hole drained by elephants and befouled by heaps of their dung. Antelopes and other wildlife wander across the muddy hole, hoping to find a small puddle to drink from. Today they are disappointed.

A single elephant knocks down 1,500 trees per year and drinks 13 gallons of water per day. Soon smaller animals, deprived of shade and water, will be forced to flee the park as elephants trample Zimbabwe's distinctive grasslands into deserts. For years environmentalists have asked us to imagine a world without elephants; in Hwange we see the dire effect of too many.

Half a world away, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D., Calif.), who hopes to end elephant hunting, is leading an effort to cut off U.S. funds for Campfire, an innovative Zimbabwean program that shares hunting revenues with villagers and wildlife officials. Ms. Boxer's effort is misguided:

Overpopulation, not overhunting, is a serious problem. The Kalahari Desert can feed one elephant per square kilometer; it now supports twice that. And overcrowding will surely worsen: Zimbabwe's elephant population (currently estimated at 66,500) is growing by 5% per year.

Elephant overpopulation is a threat to other species and to the environment. "If the elephant population is not controlled, there will be no grazing for other animals, and those animals will die," explains Matusadona National Park warden Zephania Muketiwa, as he approaches one of the world's few remaining black rhinos.

Elephant overpopulation also threatens human lives and livelihoods. Villagers in Tsholotsho's Rural District No. 7 are still talking about Ndwandwe Ndlovu, who was trampled to death by elephants in 1995. (Ironically, his surname means "elephant.") Further north, more than 100 people have been killed by elephants in the Zambezi valley since 1980.

More common is elephant destruction of crops, fences and buildings, especially granaries. Jack Mthembo, Tsholotsho's Rural District Council chairman, points at a map that shows that more than 200 cornfields have been devoured by elephants in the past year. One elephant herd consumes nearly 10 acres of cropland in an evening -- often the annual food supply for an entire family.

Without hunting, wildlife managers have two alternatives: do nothing and allow elephants to die from starvation (as they did in Gonarezhou National Park in 1992), or employ park rangers to kill selected elephants, an unpleasant and expensive task that takes money from other wildlife

protection measures. Either way, elephants will die. A better alternative, as the World Wildlife Fund and the African Wildlife Foundation both acknowledge, is for the government to sell hunting licenses to support conservation and development.

The good hunting can do is evident in Tsholotsho, where villages receive 60% of hunting license fees through Campfire. They use the funds to build elephant-proof electric fences or to compensate the victims of elephants. Hunting revenues have changed the attitudes of villagers. "Since the introduction of Campfire, people have grown to like the animals. When people see an elephant, they see money," explains Jack Nhiliziyo, Tsholotsho's district manager.

Hunting also pays for conservation. The National Parks and Wildlife Department, which gets 20% of hunting fees, uses the funds to pump water for elephants in the Hwange National Park and to pay for antipoaching patrols along the shores on Lake Kariba, a favorite raiding ground for Zambia-based poachers. Without hunting, concludes a recent report by the National Parks and Wildlife Department, "it is surely not possible for the government, which is battling with inflation, human poverty and escalating foreign debt, to meet all of these costs for all parks."

The Campfire program is not perfect -- but the way to fix much of what is wrong with it is to allow more hunting. The villages decide how the money is spent by majority vote. The minority who lost crops are often outvoted by the many who want a concrete well or meeting hall with a metal roof. "If we continued the compensation [to victims]," declares Tsholotsho council Chairman Mthembo, "we will have no projects." More hunting revenue could spare these poor villages from such cruel choices.

Zimbabwe is using hunting to check the surging elephant population, enhance wildlife habitat and enable villagers and elephants to live in harmony. If Sen. Boxer saw Campfire at work, she might buy a hunting license.

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(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Don't Blame The Elephants" -- WSJ July 25, 1997)

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