

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessing the evidence for the existence of habitual problem elephants

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The idea that problem elephant activity might be due to only certain individual animals in any population is a hypothesis that has been considered by researchers working on both African and Asian elephants. These workers propose that, with closer investigation, certain individual elephants might be identified as 'habitual' problem animals. They suspect many cases of habitual raiding will mainly involve male elephants. If this hypothesis could be supported, it would clearly have implications for easier management of the widespread problem of human-elephant conflict: concentrating scarce management resources on a small number of elephants might be very cost-effective. .

This study gathered and evaluated evidence on the possible existence of habitual problem elephants from literature and from personal communications with researchers, wildlife managers and affected local people in a wide range of human-elephant conflict situations across the African continent. Site visits and remote communications were used to investigate some 22 sites in eight countries. The sites were spread across a representative sample of both the forest and savanna elephant ranges.

The balance of the available evidence across these many conflict sites suggested that the hypothesis could not be strongly supported. Only at two sites of particularly longstanding and severe conflict, one in Kenya and one in Zimbabwe, was there a sentiment of support for the idea. The overall conclusion generally acknowledged, however, that evidence can be sketchy and may be biased due to a number of factors. Among these are: the great difficulty of recognizing individual elephants, especially on night raids and in forests; the likely more rapid elimination of 'repeat offenders' by management authorities; research projects being concentrated in high conflict sites; and promotion of the habitual raider idea by local people in the course of their exerting social pressure on wildlife authorities to destroy a problem animal.

The present study therefore proposes an alternative, cautious explanation for problem elephant activity. This is that a segment of any elephant population is involved in problem incidents, but that at any one time raids are conducted by a variable number of individuals belonging to that segment. The failure of any control shooting regime to eliminate problem elephants entirely is the strongest evidence for the existence of 'replacements' entering this problem sub-population. It seems most elephant populations, however small, will contain some animals which can be a problem.

Traditionally wildlife control agencies have responded to recalcitrant problem elephants by using control shooting. This is cheap and easy to carry out and popular with affected people. Latterly in some countries there has been some public pressure to opt for immobilization and translocation of live problem elephants as a more acceptable solution. Notwithstanding the practical merits and disadvantages of each option, this study recommends that destruction or removal of a problem elephant should not necessarily be seen as an enduring solution. It is recommended that destruction or translocation of a problem elephant should be carefully evaluated at each conflict site on a case-by-case basis because of the high probability of its replacement by other problem individuals.

Summary of findings

- The phenomenon is difficult to verify since (a) a lot of evidence in the field is circumstantial and (b) research approaches and management practices to some extent may bias the evidence.
- The balance of evidence presently available does not support the relative importance of habitual problem elephant across a representative sample of HEC sites in the continental elephant range.
- Habitual problem elephants may be a segment of a population but recombinations of individual animals involved in problem incidents are variable in composition.
- The failure of any control shooting regime to eliminate problem elephants entirely provides strong evidence for the existence of 'replacements' entering the problem sub-population .

Summary of recommendations

- Removal of perceived habitual problem elephants should not necessarily be seen as an enduring solution.
- The destruction or removal of a problem elephant should be carefully evaluated at each conflict site on a case-by-case basis because of the high probability of its replacement by other problem individuals.