

The National Elephant Conservation and Management Strategy (2012–2021) at a Glance

Patrick Omondi and Shadrack Ngene

Introduction

THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN ELEPHANTS IS OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE to the government of Kenya for several reasons. First, elephants are a species of conservation concern, with numbers having reduced dramatically over the last 100 years, mainly as a consequence of trade in ivory. In Kenya alone the elephant population declined from around 167,000 in 1973 to just 20,000 in 1990. Second, elephants are a flagship species, a highly charismatic animal that can serve as a rallying point for conservation, capturing the attention of people from all over the world and generating significant returns from wildlife-based tourism. Third, elephants are an umbrella species since their conservation depends on large areas of the ecosystems being protected, and therefore serves the objective of wider biodiversity conservation. Fourth, outside of protected areas, the conflict between elephants and people is intense, especially because of crop raiding. This, and related risks to life and livelihoods, have major implications for public support for conservation. Fifth, elephants are keystone species with significant roles in ecological dynamics, and therefore their persistence is important to the conservation of other elements of biodiversity.

The need for a new strategy

The existing framework for the conservation and management of elephants is covered in an annex in the 1991–1996 Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) policy framework and development program. This largely focused on addressing the high levels of elephant poaching occurring at the time. However, enhanced capacity of the KWS anti-poaching unit and the international ban on trade in ivory has reduced elephant poaching to a reasonable level, enabling population recovery. Kenya's elephant population as of 2010 was estimated at about 35,000 animals, and increasing. Elephants have returned, and continue to return, to parts of their former range where they haven't been seen for nearly 30 years. However, the human population has also grown dramatically over this period, and the challenge of conserving elephants in Kenya today is quite different from what it was 20–30 years ago. Human settlement and cultivation within elephant range areas, human–elephant conflicts, elephants in isolated habitats, and climate change are some of the key problems that threaten the future of elephants in Kenya. These problems are not easy to solve. In addition, recent reports from the field suggest that there is an upsurge in elephant poaching, most probably driven by the demand for

The George Wright Forum, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 90–92 (2012).

© 2012 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.

ivory in Asia. A recent seizure of over 2 tons of ivory at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport by KWS serves to illustrate the scale of the problem. It is for these reasons that KWS has developed a strategy for elephant conservation and management.

How the strategy was formulated

The formulation of this strategy involved the following process:

- Review of KWS 1991–1996 Elephant Conservation and Management Program and other background documentation.
- A series of consultative workshops in all eight KWS conservation areas/regions, with stakeholders invited from a range of backgrounds to assess opinions and priorities.
- A questionnaire circulated to key individuals, conservation nongovernmental organizations, the African Elephant Specialist Group, and other groups with interests in elephant management in Kenya to provide input into the development of the strategy.
- Collation of stakeholder views and review of documents, combined in a draft strategy.
- Presentation of the draft document to the KWS board of trustees.
- Holding of the final national Stakeholder workshop held at Mpala Research Centre to complete the strategy. The stakeholders included neighboring countries who participated in order to discuss transfrontier issues.
- Distribution of the draft strategy document for written comments to stakeholders, including those who could not attend the workshops.
- Finalization and printing of the final strategy document.

An overview of the strategy (2012–2021)

The Elephant Conservation and Management Strategy provides a new framework that will guide elephant conservation and management in Kenya for the next 10 years. The long-term vision for the strategy is “a secure future for elephants and their habitats, based on peaceful and beneficial co-existence with people, now and for generations yet to come.” The overall goal is to “maintain and expand elephant distribution and numbers in suitable areas, enhance security of the elephants, reduce human–elephant conflict and increase value of elephants to people and habitat.” This will be achieved by focusing efforts and resources on seven broad strategic objectives, each associated with a set of specific actions and measurable targets to gauge performance: protection, population expansion and habitat maintenance, research and monitoring for management, human–elephant conflict, incentives, capacity, and coordination and support. The strategy recognizes that KWS cannot achieve what is set out in this strategy on its own because of the following reasons:

- Much of Kenya's current and future elephant range occurs outside nationally gazetted protected areas and the future of elephants in these places will depend on whether or not they are tolerated by local landowners and communities (Figure 1). Therefore, the strategy seeks to engage and devolve responsibility to these groups in elephant conservation and management, particularly in key strategic locations, such as dispersal areas, corridors, human–elephant conflict hotspots, and places where land use is compatible



Figure 1. A woman expresses her delight as an elephant involved in conflicts with local people is translocated away from her community.

with elephant conservation, such as across the more arid and semi-arid parts of Kenya.

- There are several elephant populations that range beyond Kenya into neighboring countries, requiring close collaboration with Kenya's neighbors.
- Land use planning, a key component of this strategy, requires close collaboration with other government sectors and development partners, whose own plans and priorities may impinge on elephant conservation.
- There is still a lot that needs to be known about elephants for their effective conservation and management, and therefore more focused research and monitoring in partnership with research organizations and individual researchers is important.
- Much of what this strategy sets out to achieve requires resources and capacity that KWS does not have. Thus, this strategy will only be successful if key stakeholders and partners invest in its implementation.

The strategy is bold, ambitious, and forward-looking. It tackles problems far more complex than just the poaching issue, involves different sectors, and proposes interdisciplinary initiatives that take into consideration the potential role of climate change, new and emerging funding opportunities, local livelihoods, and the sensitive balance that is needed in an emerging economy.

Patrick Omondi, Kenya Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 40241-00100, Nairobi, Kenya; pomondi@kws.go.ke

Shadrack Ngene, Kenya Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 40241-00100, Nairobi, Kenya; sngene@kws.go.ke