

Tuli Elephants

The World's Elephant Experts Speak Out

The Tuli Elephants: Many Questions, Glib Responses, No Easy Answers

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Part 1: The Tuli Block: What is the problem? What do the landowners want?

The elephant removal is styled as a population control measure. Basic population dynamics theory and a recent elephant population model simulation (K. Lindsay, 1998 unpub) indicate that the removal of 30 juveniles from a population of ca. 1000 will have a infinitesimal short term impact on the habitat and negligible long term impact on population growth, size and, therefore, vegetation offtake. In short, the removal of the young elephants from Tuli Block is defensible neither as a population control nor as a habitat management measure.

Proponents of the removal argue that the Tuli habitat is degraded due to elephant impact. But where are the data and where are the analyses to lead to these conclusions? We are shown a colourful "slide show" on the African Elephant and Rhino foundation WWW site (<http://www.ref.org.za/>) with striking pictures of damaged individual trees. This is not science; it is photo album ecology. What proportion of the tree population in which age classes are being damaged? What other agents are impacting on tree regeneration? What has the rainfall been in the region over the past few years compared to previous years? And even if particular tree species are being targeted, what difference does that make to the ecosystem dynamics per se, unless one is landscaping for a particular tree mix? We are reminded of the specious arguments in Eastern African of the 1960s and '70s that pointed to the loss of individual trees as some kind of indicator of ecological disaster. There is no scientific evidence yet published to support such conclusion. In fact, a more balanced view (B. Page, 1998 unpub) suggests that other causal factors - changes in the hydrology of the Limpopo basin, a gradual decline in rainfall since the turn of the century, and an skewed abundance of woody vegetation that emerged pre-1960 due to hunting pressure on elephants and other large herbivore - are driving the Tuli ecosystem.

It is asserted that the young elephants removed from Tuli would die anyway from drought. Removing animals "cleanly and humanely" before they die from drought is another misguided management intervention. Who can possibly say which animals are at risk and therefore candidates for removal? And what about subverting the course of natural selection, which would under extreme conditions remove the intrinsically less fit individuals and those who carried the genes of mothers that were poor dry-season strategists.

The Tuli Block landowners are legal owners of the elephants. What is their long-term land use plan? Are the elephants in conflict with other forms of land use? What are the opportunity costs arising from having elephants? These rightful landowners are being asked to bear the opportunity costs for a sector of the world population that is calling for particular attention to and protection of this large-brained, highly social, clearly self-conscious species. Can we not find a means to make it worthwhile for the Tuli Block landowners - both large and small - to put up with a high density of elephants?

Part 2: The Tuli elephant calves: Who knows what's cruel?

What is cruelty? Do we really need to belabour this question? Surely any non-psychotic adult raised in the mores of civilization can easily answer it. Although the answer may vary somewhat from culture to culture, there is a simple test. If it is hard to conceive of doing it to yourself or your children, it is likely to be cruel. Assuming we are able to stretch our minds that far, how then do we tell if cruelty to the Tuli calves has been perpetrated?

Any of us Africans or Caucasians would be very hard pressed to read the mood and divine the state of mind of a Trobriand islander or a Sioux native American, unless we happen to have lived with them for many years. The expert witnesses who have commented on the videos of the baby elephants or have seen them first hand - like Daphne Sheldrick, Joyce Poole, Randall Moore - have each spent 20 to 30 years in the close company of elephants. Cynthia Moss knows some 600 elephants by their faces alone - more than most of us know people. There is no doubt that these experts can with an unparalleled authority and accuracy judge whether an elephant is tranquil and “happy” or traumatised and “unhappy.”

From the first video footage taken by the NSPCA on 2 September, it is abundantly clear that the elephants had been and were being treated cruelly. And, if basic decency cannot be mustered to judge whether or not this is so, then let us test the footage against the five “freedoms for animals,” a good start at a kind of animals bill of rights made by Prof. David Wilson, quoted by the South African Veterinary Association in a 26 October press release.

- ***Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition.*** Experts agreed that the behaviour of the young elephants indicated they were being kept under short food and water regimes as part of their “training” programme. Close-ups of many individuals indicated sunken cheeks and temples, characteristic of malnutrition.
- ***Freedom from discomfort.*** A noisy, metallic environment; damp cement floors; hind legs stretched backward by chains; enforced standing... Most of us wouldn't subject our guard dogs to such conditions.
- ***Freedom from pain, injury and disease.*** Again, close-ups clearly revealed suppurating wounds where the legs were bound with chains, and puncture and impact wounds around the heads and faces presumably from the mahouts' tools of trade. The “choke-collar” ropes around the necks and ears had metal hooks to gouge the top sensitive edge of the ears. “Stress sores” were breaking out on the skin, and during an early visit, some of the young elephants were incongruously “too sick” to be seen by the vets.
- ***Freedom to express normal behavior.*** Quite apart from the ordinary elephant “comfort behaviours” of lying down to sleep, mud wallowing, dusting and playing, the babies were not allowed tactile contact with other elephants. And, far worse, they were separated from their mothers on whom they would ordinarily be socially dependent for up to a dozen years if they were young males and for most of the rest of their lives in the case of females.

- ***Freedom from fear and distress.*** The forward-elevated ears, the tails held high, the screams, the whites of the eyes showing... all clear signs of extreme fear and distress.

Now the baby elephants are being provided bedding, a more balanced food and water regime, time off out of chains. Does this make everything all right? Certainly not. Riccardo Ghiazza, Director of African Game Services, acknowledges that “mistakes have been made” and “everyone has to go through a learning curve.” This is akin to accused wife-beater or poacher saying that he was unaware of accepted codes of conduct and was just seeing how far he could go to test his wife's or the park's tolerance. But now that the law and the world are asking questions, he'll certainly try to do better. Of course he will: he cannot afford to lose custody of the elephants and therefore the opportunity to recoup his investment in the operation and the facility and make a ten-fold profit to boot.

Today, more than two months after the first video was taken and after Mr. Ghiazza has ostensibly learned from his mistakes, the NCPA observers report that the cruelty continues, just as viscosly but far more covertly. Even if the ponderous machinery of justice must run its course, surely a total injunction on contact between African Game Services and the elephants can be imposed. Would we even think of giving the wife-beater or the poacher the opportunity to continue on their learning curve whilst their guilt or innocence was being decided? If this is due process, then it is woefully inept.

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