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Disney vet performs elephant vasectomies in Africa

posted by Daphne Sashin on Aug 5, 2009 7:15:05 PM

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Dr. Mark Stetter with Disney's Animal Programs recently returned from Swaziland, Africa, where he and an international team of veterinarians helped to surgically sterilize seven bull elephants.

Elephant overpopulation in wildlife parks and reserves in Swaziland and other southern Africa countries is a huge problem because they devour trees, consume farmers' crops and devastate the habitats of other wildlife. According to this [Washington Post article](#) from 2008, thousands of elephants in South Africa eat more than 300 pounds of vegetation a piece daily.

Wildlife officials in several countries are considering killing elephants to control the burgeoning population, according to Disney officials, but surgical vasectomies can help save habitat without harming the animals.

According to Disney, elephants are unique among most mammals since their testes are internal and require abdominal surgery to perform a vasectomy, making the relatively simple procedure much more complex to conduct on elephants in the wild. The team used laparoscopic medical equipment specifically developed for this project and scaled from human to elephant proportions.

In July 2004, the international coalition of experts led by Disney's Animal Programs performed the first ever sterilization of free-ranging elephants. In 2005, the group began its work with bull elephants and started developing laparoscopic vasectomy techniques for sterilizing males in the wild. During the last four years, the team has sterilized 24 bull elephants at a variety of locations including Welgevonden Wildlife Reserve, Songimvelo Wildlife Reserve, Pongola Game Reserve and Swaziland's Big Game Parks.

This coalition, along with Swazi elephant behavioral researchers, will monitor the elephant populations over the next several years as part of a long term behavioral study investigating potential changes in elephant behavior associated with this population management plan.

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