



Science

The Worst Jobs in Science 2007

Our annual bottom-10 list, in which we salute the men and women who do what no salary can adequately reward

By Jason Daley | June 2007

Number 3: Elephant Vasectomist

When your patient is Earth's largest land animal, sterilization is a big job

What's one foot across and sits behind two inches of skin, four inches of fat and 10 inches of muscle? That's right: an elephant's testicle. Which means veterinarian Mark Stetter's newest invention—a four-foot-long fiber-optic laparoscope attached to a video monitor—has to be a heavy-duty piece of equipment to sterilize a randy bull pachyderm. Stetter, the head doc at Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida, created the device to help control elephants in African wildlife parks, where the jumbos have been breeding too quickly and eating up more than their share of the surrounding habitat. The snipping began last summer when Stetter and his team field-tested the device on four unsuspecting bulls at the Welgevonden Private Game Reserve in South Africa. After a pachyderm was sedated with a dart from a helicopter, the team used a crane truck to pull the sleeping beast upright. Four-inch incisions were made, and the laparoscope was inserted into the abdomen near the reproductive organs (an elephant's testicles are on the inside, like ovaries). When he located the centimeter-thick vas deferens—the tube that carries semen from the testicles to the penis—Stetter inserted a long pair of scissors through the scope and cut out a two- or three-inch section. So far, the method seems to be working. The first four test subjects survived the ordeal with no complications (except the possibility of bruised pride). If things go the way Stetter plans, elephants throughout southern Africa will soon be crossing their legs in fear: He has begun training other field vets to perform the procedure, and hopes to have multinational trials up and running soon.