



23 April 2010

SUPPORT FOR THE ELEPHANT VASECTOMY PROJECT

Big Game Parks introduced elephants onto Mkhaya Game Reserve and Hlane Royal National Park during the 1980's and 90's, as orphans from the Kruger National Park culls. At this time the equipment and techniques had not been developed for the translocation of family groups.

Since then our populations have matured and continued to breed very well, with their numbers increasing accordingly.

It soon became necessary to control elephant numbers on our parks, which are small and fenced to prevent these animals roaming into human habitation and agricultural areas.

The fencing has resulted in restricted elephant range and in increased population density. In turn the impact on the habitat occupied by the elephants became intense and profound habitat modification has occurred in some areas, not only resulting in changes in the vegetation, but also on other rare and endangered species, which share the habitat with elephants such as tree-nesting raptors and Black Rhino's along with many others.

This presents wildlife and conservation managers with a dilemma – and a choice – are we managing for biodiversity or are we managing for elephants at the expense of other species of fauna and flora!!?

BGP manages for biodiversity, and in the past we have moved elephants alive out of the parks, which was a temporary solution in 2003. By 2009, the population had bred back to their 2003 numbers, and culling looked like the only sustainable method of population control in the absence of acceptable destinations for relocation. It must be remembered that very few areas in Southern Africa that have elephants are not facing population problems as we are and that very few new areas are available for re-introduction.

When the opportunity for population control using vasectomy presented itself, with much of the expenses being covered by the American Zoo and University veterinary team, led by Dr Mark Stetter, we saw this as a potentially workable alternative. During 2009, vasectomies were successfully conducted on all our dominant elephant bulls, with the anticipation that the recruitment rate will be substantially reduced, while subordinate bulls may still “sneak” occasional calves which we believe to be an important component for maintaining the social health of the breeding herds. Importantly this will also allow for limited recruitment, which, in the absence of poaching, should maintain the populations into the future. None of the animals have shown any attributable long-term physical or psychological problems as a result of the operations.

We believe that this approach is probably highly suited to many Southern African populations where many fenced and fragmented populations of less than 100 elephants occur. Supporting this is the fact that it is a once-off invasive procedure on a small percentage of the population as opposed to immuno-contraception, which requires periodic boosters, and to a larger proportion of the population, which spreads the disturbance factor among the animals. Importantly the capture and release of the bulls must be done in a manner so as to reduce/eliminate the association of the procedure to vehicles and humans.

Importantly, also this approach is likely to replace the need for culling in some smaller populations. Failing this, it should reduce the numbers as well as the frequency with which one would need to control populations by culling/live removals.

Also, if one needs to increase the recruitment rate again, this can be achieved by simply introducing one or more breeding bulls to the population again!

Big Game Parks also supports the initiative of the American team to actively train Southern African vets into the techniques used for elephant vasectomy, which shows commitment to the long term implementation of this method and to capacity building at a local level. During the Swaziland operation, at least 5 Southern African vets received training/experience on the procedures. We see no reason why these vets will not be able to form the nucleus of local professionals who will be able to conduct such operations in the future.

Finally, Big game Parks would like to record our sincere gratitude to the USA/SA veterinary team who, not only absorbed much of the costs of the operation thereby making the exercise economically possible for us to conduct, but also for the extremely efficient and professional manner in which the entire operation was approached and conducted.

The development of this technique is likely to contribute significantly to elephant management and welfare in the future. Although this is a new ground being covered, which is still to be tested, it is nevertheless likely to be a significant milestone in the development of elephant population control and should be recognized as such!

Yours Sincerely

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