

Project Update: January 2001

Happy New Year to all!

For Ishasha the New Year was the start of the dry season. It is now mid January and the long grass is becoming very dry once more. It is only time before fire sweeps through the park. For the elephants it means time is being focused along the riverine forests of the Ishasha, Ntungwe and Nchwera rivers, as well as around the seasonal tributaries of the Maramagambo Forest rivers and streams. This has also drawn the elephants directly alongside the border subsistence farms where the nightly beating of drums now occurs in a desperate attempt to deter the elephants from the crops. There is currently no other means to deter the elephants. The success of the beating of drums in deterring elephants is extremely limited.

On reflection the past year has been testing for Elephants, Crops and People, Uganda (ECP) due to circumstances out of our control. However, it is to the credit of the ECP team that we have still managed to achieve so much and to have kept going. In terms of the research we have made good in-roads into the recognition of the Ishasha elephant population as individuals, family groups and in their seasonal dynamics. We have begun to understand aspects of stimuli to the elephant movement and feeding patterns as well as for the severe crop raiding that occurs along the Kikarara and Kihhi border areas.

The ECP team has also made good relations with the local communities and is currently in the process of planning the Elephant – Human Interaction (E-HI) monitoring system with the local communities. This system will not only provide management and ECP with critical data but will also standardise the information so we can make direct comparisons with the African Elephant Specialist Groups (AfESG) – Human / Elephant Interaction Task Force. This is further to Uganda's advantage when together with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) we help to develop realistic strategies to mitigate the growing E-HI problem – with the aide of other countries experiences. ECP's training and efforts in Ishasha can be used as a pilot for the development of Uganda's own E-HI management / field task force.

Over the Christmas break the project donated twenty treated mosquito nets to all of the patrol rangers. The project and Michael Keigwin can not afford to supply mosquito nets to the wardens, porters and tour guides as well. This leaves ten nets to be covered, hopefully by the UWA – Ishasha budget. There were too many cases of malaria within the rangers or their families resulting in rangers being unable to join patrols and therefore causing the cancellation of the patrol due to not enough rangers.

ECP also donated a volleyball to the Ishasha camp to encourage exercise, a break from routine and team work. Weekly runs have been happening from Ishasha camp to Katoke. They are well attended and enjoyed by the rangers and porters alike – again to take exercise and to break the daily routine.

As well as this, Protector condoms agreed to provide a large box full of condoms (over 1000) to the Southern Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area – Ugandan Wildlife Authority employees and those involved in the protection and enhancement of the areas future.

ECP has also been saving newspapers to provide reading materials for those in Ishasha. All of the above has helped to raise the very low ranger morale.

Tuesday Talks.

On Tuesday or Wednesday afternoons, ECP is hosting informative talks at the ECP camp. It is free to attend and so far the rangers, tour guides and their wives or husbands have attended on a regular basis. The talks are designed to pass on useful and interesting information. It is an informal training programme to build knowledge and capacity within the Ishasha Sector.

So far we have had a number of talks including:

- Ranger: The roles of a ranger working for UWA.
- Ranger: Community Conservation.
- ECP: The Ecology of the Ugandan Kob.
- ECP: Common Plants of the park.
- Debbie Cox: Chimpanzee Ecology – the future of Uganda’s chimpanzee’s
- Debbie Cox: UWEC and the Chimpanzee Orphanage.
- Debbie Cox: Primates – the Great Apes.
- GNC Tours: Tourism in Uganda and how to be more professional in Ishasha.

There are many more planned including about the elephants of QECA. ECP recognises that morale must be raised amongst the Ishasha community and has opted to support to help this process through some of the above activities and efforts.

Kampala Office.

Over the past eight months it has become increasingly necessary to open a small office facility in Kampala. The computer, books and files are now available everyday and this will help us to keep up-to date with reports, applications, correspondence and research. This also provides an invaluable facility to the MSc Research Students who have found it extremely difficult to gain access to computer facilities or research files. ECP has gathered a comprehensive and ever growing library of papers and information on elephant ecology worldwide, but of course focusing on Uganda.

We now have a new computer, electricity stabilizer and UPS power surge box from Computer Facilities Ltd (Uganda). They provided us with one of their companies own computers for an extremely low price. We now require a printer to replace the broken HP Desk Jet 340.

We have also been painting the floor, buying desks, chairs, pin boards and shelves. The hope is that by the end of January the office will be fully functional and available to the team to produce as much output as required.

UWA Headquarters – Crop Raiding.

The timing of the ECP Land Rover crash was appalling. It happened when local communities were experiencing severe elephant related crop raiding troubles. The problem had not gone unnoticed by the Ugandan press and articles of serious crop raiding incidents were flooding in. The Executive Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority recognised the growing problem in the form a personal letter released to the press. For the communities this was vital communication – recognising that their voices were being heard, right up to the top of the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

Between October to Mid January the crop raiding situation along the Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area was very bad. Some elephants had entered into Southern QECA from the DR Congo’s Parc National

des Virunga's. The elephants had entered QECA due to normal seasonal movement patterns and human 'pressure' in the Congo. This caused an over night population density rise in the region. There was then a subsequent rise in crop raiding. However, there are a number of serious misconceptions relating to the increase in the elephant population and crop raiding incidents.

- The publicised crop raiding of Kitchwamba and Kyambura is unrelated to the influx of elephants to QECA from the DRC. The elephants carrying out this raiding are highly unlikely to have home ranges extending out of QECA – at any point. The incoming elephants are not going to push or pressure the resident elephants out of their home ranges and into the crop raiding zones.
- Population size or density has not been shown to be the cause of crop raiding in Africa or Asia especially if resources are readily available. An increase of bull elephants in a particular area from ten to twenty or even to one hundred does not cause crop raiding – especially if there is adequate food. However, should there be a food shortage or the resource availability that brings elephants close to crops then that could be classed as a variable causing the negative interaction.
- Encroachment by humans has targeted the same resources required and used by the elephants. This can and has caused the long term raiding situation, because the humans and elephants are now forced to cohabit and compete for the same land area and resources, every wet season.
- Crop raiding was not just in Kitchwamba and Kyambura. The raiding in these areas should not be allowed to overshadow the problem in less popular or visible parts of the park. Raiding is also very present in Kikarara as well as in the Kihihi border areas. These areas receive regular raiding – by the elephants coming from the DR Congo.
- Elephants entering Southern QECA must cross the Ishasha River. A large number of crossing points have been recorded and some areas have been identified as the major transmigration routes between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, these points change depending on the river height, the direction of movement of the elephants (to and from) and the ever-changing course of the Ishasha River. Two of the points can be located North of the Ishasha Customs point. Here, two aggregations of elephants have been identified comprising of over 100 elephants in each. They cross into the thinnest section of the park and are immediately alongside the subsistence crops around Kihihi. (Both groups are currently back in the DRC – only small-localised movements of bulls and family groups remain (as of 10th January).
- The two groups mentioned above DO NOT have abnormal family group structures and are not unduly aggressive. ECP believes that these elephants are NOT being harassed in their home ranges in the DR Congo.
- In the feasibility study an old ranger had described one of the two aggregations movement patterns. It proved to be correct.
- Another crossing point is on the Lake Edward Flats. These elephants are nervous and tend to push through to the other side of the Ntungwe River. These elephants have irregular family group structures and are aggressive to humans.

- There is a more resident Northern Circuit / River track elephant aggregation whose ranges do go into the Congo. In the wet season they go into the Ntungwe River Forest and down towards the Kazinga farming area.
- The Kikarara region has a large number of elephants that are not often seen due to being under the forest canopy in the daytime. However, come the wet season it is thought that these elephants are attracted to the Kikarara region due to the readily available but seasonal water in the streams and areas food resources. This brings them close to the border region where even right now (18th Jan, 2001) ECP is receiving word that crop raiding is still unbearable and uncontrolled.
- Gunfire will have prompted elephants to move out of the DR Congo, especially along the more North Western regions of the Parc des Virunga's.
- The fishing villages have little if anything to do with the elephant movements. Elephants are commonly seen near Rwenshama, Kisenyi and Kazinga. There is only park vegetation available there.
- Poaching is rife and is often connected by community members who have lost their crops due to elephants and thus are unable to or finding it more difficult to feed and subsequently look after and school their families. However, elephant poaching is currently not evident – but we have not been able to go into the most likely areas where this could possibly be happening. It is unknown whether poaching is done by individuals or through syndicates.
- Communities have no means to deter elephants – only shouting or banging together pans. The only available alternative is for one shot to be fired over the head of an elephant (but that requires an available ranger who happens to be in the region – which is highly unlikely). That method will only work in the very short term as elephants soon learn that the threat of the gun is just bluff.
- Communities are unhappy and have threatened to spear, poach and poison. All of which has happened in the past with devastating consequences.

