

Bull Associations Confirmed Using Tracking Data

By Robin Cook

Strong social bonds among male mammals are uncommon, usually influenced by reproductive opportunities or activity patterns. Elephant bulls generally leave their maternal herds during adolescence (12-13 years of age) and either associate in all-male herds or wander alone. But what is the science behind the formation of these all-male herds? Are the bulls associating themselves with fellow bulls of the same age and do the ages vary in these all-bull groups? Focusing on the movement patterns of our collared bulls over the past 4 months, we have seen numerous associations between various individuals. During October and November of 2014, Classic and Gower moved side by side one another, venturing only a few hundred metres apart (Figure A). Then in December 2014, Gower and Proud began to move together for a few weeks, eventually separating just before the turn of the New Year (Figure B). And then as recent as last week, a region of no more than 200m wide was occupied by Proud, Tussle, Matambu, Gower and Classic over a period of an hour (Figure C).



Therefore it is evident that associations between bulls are continuously occurring. Generally, bulls using the same area associate frequently in these all-male groups. Older bulls such as Classic serve as important information sources in bull society, providing important ecological and social knowledge to younger bulls. Research has shown that bulls aged between 20 and 29 (such as Tussle) regularly associate themselves with bulls over the age of 30. Furthermore, it is evident that bulls of similar ages tend to associate with one another, as we can see with Gower and Proud, and often form stable associations that can be seen over the years.

We are only now starting to understand the social aspects involved in elephant bull societies and the complexities surrounding their associations. We can now begin to appreciate the importance of older bulls such as Classic as information sources for their younger associates and why they are vital in a functioning elephant society.