

Elephants' Response to Game Reserve Expansion

By Robin Cook

Many conservation areas across southern Africa are implementing expansion programs whereby neighbouring reserves drop their fence-lines to allow wildlife to move over greater

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areas. These programs may occur at larger transfrontier scales (e.g. Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park) or smaller regional scales (e.g. Phinda Private Game Reserve). However, the movements of wildlife into the expanded areas may not be a straightforward process.

Heleen Druce and her colleagues studied the movement patterns of African elephants in Phinda Private Game Reserve, focussing on elephant movements into expanded farms in 2004. The researchers found that older bulls in musth were the first elephants to move into the expanded area, followed by younger resident bulls and breeding herds. Interestingly, breeding herds at first only entered the expanded area at night, staying for short periods of time before moving back into the original reserve. It also took the breeding herds 5-8 months to enter the expanded region.

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This research suggests that elephants are cautious when entering new areas and that exploration time can vary between bulls and breeding herds. We have shown in previous reports that elephants move around areas of potential danger (villages, farms, railways) at night, and this is another example of the cautious behaviour shown by elephants when their

environment is altered.