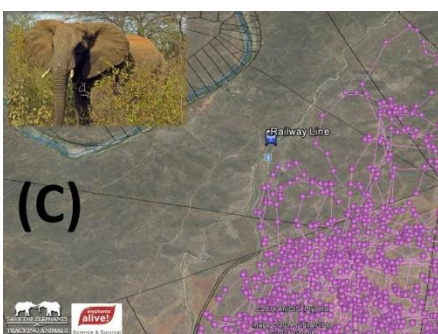
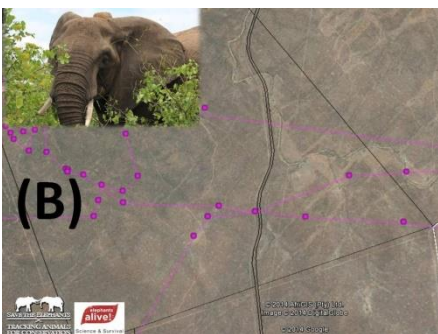
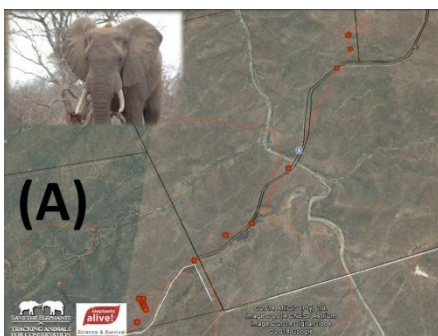


Elephants and Railway Barriers – an Acquired Taste?

Robin Cook

Barriers in the wild come in a variety of shapes and forms. Whether they are natural river systems or artificial fence lines, barriers can influence the way that an animal moves. Railway lines and elephants are often in the news for the wrong reasons, with continuous reports of run-over elephants in Africa and Asia. However, railway lines as barriers do not always have the same response on the movement patterns of elephants, as our collared elephants are showing us!



South Africa's Balule Nature Reserve is dissected by a railway line along its eastern border. However, this barrier has very little influence on Soshangane's movements. The recently re-collared Soshangane was observed following the course of the railway line through Balule showing no signs of avoidance (Figure A). Yvonne and her herd have also crossed the railway line on multiple occasions during the past year (Figure B). We are aware of the presence of young calves in Yvonne's herd, proving that they're still willing to cross railway lines when on the move! However, for Charlise and her herd, the presence of a railway line appears to indicate a 'no-go' zone (Figure C). Charlise's herd refuses to cross the railway line and only moves near the tracks during the evening to night time period on rare occasions.

Are railway lines therefore an acquired taste for some elephants and a fearful barrier for others? With the incredible knowledge and social systems within elephant societies, it may boil down to some elephants learning to adapt to the barrier and other elephants learning to avoid it!