We struggle as humans to understand our own actions. How can we begin to understand and provide possible interpretations for the actions of other species? Yet elephants have recently been acknowledged as ‘sentient’ beings in the National Norms and Standards for the Management of Elephants in South Africa according to which ‘…..interventions to manage an elephant should seek to minimise any resultant pain or trauma to the elephant’1.

‘Sentience’ refers to an ability to feel or be aware of feelings2. But how has science assisted us to arrive as such an abstract conclusion? To name but a few of the latest findings: Not only are elephants capable of engaging in effective tool-use3 but they have also passed the mirror self-recognition test as have apes and dolphins4. Elephants’ brains have a relatively large hippocampus compared to primates which may explain their long social and chemical memories5. Consequently they can keep track spatially of where other individuals are relative to themselves6 and it has even been shown that elephants can classify subgroups of humans that pose different degrees of danger7. Humans still represent the biggest threat to elephants and their stress hormone responses to particular human activities (hunting, immobilisation, translocation or tourism) have successfully been quantified8,9. Elephants are known to exhibit concern for deceased individuals or to offer assistance to conspecifics in distress10. Research has shown us that elephants show higher levels of interest in elephant skulls and ivory than in other natural objects11. We now know that the oldest individuals in a group have enhanced social discrimination and consequently function as important repositories of social knowledge12. Gradually it has become permissible to talk about elephant cognition13 or the empathy of elephants14.

Suggested reading


