

Managerial Nightmares- Humans, Elephants, and Different World Views

By Robin Cook

Understanding the complexity of the various relationships between humans and elephants in Africa is one of the biggest challenges facing modern conservationists. In South Africa for example, relationships between humans and elephants in a 'fenced' environment may differ from those relationships found in east Africa where elephants come into constant contact with communal lands. Furthermore, our different world views on aspects such as culling, hunting, problem animals and conservation management aid in further complicating the matter. Science tries its best to aid in these decisions but then even science can argue with science!



The increasing human population, coupled with a decline in the habitat available to elephants, is bound to result in a variety of human-elephant interactions that a conservation manager has to deal with. Firstly, there is the issue of crop raiding. Our modern paradigm of thinking leads us to understand the importance of financially stable communities surrounding reserves for the longevity of these reserves. So if elephants are taking away the livelihoods of these communities, then the communities may rightfully expect some sort of retribution. If however, this retribution involves the shooting of a 'problem' elephant, then the tourist factor can come into play. How does the manager explain their decision of shooting an elephant to an elephant-loving tourist visiting the reserve? And if the community-tourist factor is not a difficult enough issue to deal with, the manager has to handle the hunting-ecotourism debate surround elephants. Can the manager's reserve survive alone on ecotourism, or is hunting required to supplement funds? On top of this, scientists have demonstrated the strong social bonds that exist among elephants and how sensitive elephants can be towards disturbance. So does the manager risk the potential financial collapse of their reserve, or the potential collapse of its elephant society and the dangers associated with this collapse?

The final decisions involving human-elephant interactions fall primarily down to the world views of the managers and what is important to them. Are they most concerned about protecting large trees, or elephant numbers, or financial rewards, or a stable surrounding community? These decisions are never straight forward and will always be met with opposition from one role player or another. Can the continental decline in elephants affect a manager's decision that is facing a potential overpopulation of elephants in their own small reserve? Is it worth hunting big tuskers in South Africa when there are so few left elsewhere? These are just some of the decisions that a manager is faced with when dealing with humans and elephants in Africa and why there is no simple answer to finding solutions.