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Elephants, bees and trees

Michelle Henley

GREATER KRUGER - In South Africa, conservationists and tourists alike are concerned that our expanding elephant population will negatively affect iconic tree species such as the marula (*Sclerocarya birrea*). Elephants Alive (www.ElephantsAlive.org) were approached by SANParks in 2012 to discuss methods for keeping elephants out of particular areas where tall trees needed to be preserved as part of SANParks' biodiversity objectives. Elephants Alive have been studying the accumulated impact of elephants on large trees since 2004, and looked at possible means for the trees' protection, including wire-net protection around the stem of the tree to prevent bark-stripping by elephants.

The next logical step was to partner up with Dr Lucy King from the Elephants and Bees Project (elephantsandbees.com) to test the efficacy of African honeybees as a deterrent mechanism. In 2015 Elephants Alive asked Robin Cook from the University of the Witwatersrand to take on as his MSc. degree project the study of how effective African honeybees are at protecting trees when compared to the tried and tested methods of wire-net protection.

Robin is conducting his study within Jejane Private Nature Reserve, part of the Greater Kruger National Park, where he assesses elephant impact

on marula trees with beehives hung from the branches. The Elephants Alive team helped with the making of 115 beehives for this research, of which 100 have been placed in Jejane and the remaining at Mica Village, the research base of Elephants Alive, for honey production. In December 2015, 50 live swarms were transferred into the beehives in Jejane within a single night. Each study tree with beehives has next to it a control tree (with no beehives) and another study tree with wire-net protection. Robin monitors which mitigation method is most effective, and whether the elephants avoid both methods by simply going for the unprotected (control) trees.

When dealing with nature one has to contend with many unexpected variables, and the study has had to be adapted to the prevailing drought in South Africa which has been hard for the bees. To date, elephants have been frequenting the study plot on a weekly basis, with bulls being the most prevalent visitors. Current results look encouraging with far more control trees receiving elephant impact in comparison to wire-netted and beehive trees.

The significance of this work in the South African context is as alleviation of the Human-Elephant-Conflict (HEC). The elephants' negative impact on iconic trees such as the marula can be viewed as a milder form of HEC, but the marula is an important fruit bearing tree of cultural significance

and economic importance and some people would rather see elephant numbers reduced by legal methods than have iconic tree structures altered. Subsistence farmers, and managers of protected areas dependent on tourism income, need tools to protect their assets. Using bees has the potential to alleviate potential conflict by peaceful means. Bees have the added benefit of providing honey and functioning as important pollinators. Studies such as these not only contribute towards science but also broaden local community expertise as people are trained to manufacture beehives and develop beekeeping skills.

We would like to thank Woolworths and Relate for their ongoing support. Numerous private donors have also 'adopted' a beehive by sponsoring the manufacturing, upkeep and monitoring costs.

Anyone wishing to donate towards the continuation and upkeep of this project can do so using PayPal.

For electronic transfers, please contact info@elephantsalive.org. www.elephantsalive.org

Above right: Robin Cook seen out in the bush checking on bee activity, to ensure the hives are still active.

Right: Nocy Mzimba (a Black Mamba) is filling up a feeding station for the bees with nectar solution. The cage is to protect the station from rodents (and other creatures) who may wish to feed on the nectar solution.



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