

JEMA

Journal of the
Elephant Managers Association

the
CONSERVATION
ISSUE



NOVEMBER 2022

**ELEPHANT
MANAGERS
ASSOCIATION**



VOLUME 33, NO. 3



PHOTO: TINA CHIARELLI

Conservation Challenges in the Wake of a Global Pandemic

Tina L. Chiarelli, Ph.D.

University of Central Florida, and EMA Conservation Committee

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This would be the first time in more than a decade we would encounter a world-wide health crisis. In the 18 months to follow, our lives as we knew them would be forever changed. Not since the 1918 Spanish Flu would we experience a pathogen of this magnitude with, at the time of writing, worldwide infections nearing 590 million and deaths exceeding 6.4 million. In response,

the World Bank released a statement claiming COVID-19 had the potential to force the global economy into the worst recession since World War II.

With the “State of Emergency” declaration, countries around the world entered lockdown, implementing interstate travel restrictions and closing national borders to transnational visitors. With literally thousands of wildlife conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based internationally, many were now faced with the dif-

difficult task of how best to respond as they entered uncharted territory. How would they keep workers safe? What limitations would be imposed on their day-to-day operations? What supplies were readily available, and would the future supply chain be affected? Would funding continue, and how long would current funds last? How would this ultimately effect wildlife?

In the realm of wildlife conservation, many countries rely heavily on NGOs to develop *in-situ* conservation initiatives and collaboratively support governmental groups. Supplies and training for antipoaching units equip qualified professionals for the prevention, protection against, and rapid response to poaching. Data collection from field research help define population dynamics and determine animal numbers, better understand resource usage by wildlife and humans, and create mitigation techniques to promote peaceful coexistence via compensatory programs, public awareness, and education campaigns. Lastly, but certainly not least, fundraising through private donors, educational institutions, grants, and tourism, to name but a few, to ensure there will be money to finance all the work.

It has now been almost three years since a cluster of patients in Wuhan, Hubei Providence, China first started showing symptoms that would later be collected called COVID-19. Almost 48 months of trials and tribulations and hoping that normalcy would soon be reestablished. But what does the new normal look like, particularly in wildlife conservation? I recently had the opportunity to

ask several established groups working in African range countries how their individual conservation organizations responded to the increasing pressures caused by the pandemic, how they sustained operations, and what they learned in the process.

Beginning in Zambia, the Zambezi River stretches 2,574 km traveling through eastern Angola, near the eastern border of Namibia and northern border of Botswana, between the borders of Zambia and Zimbabwe, before crossing into Mozambique and reaching its destination, the Indian Ocean. Along its meandering path, the Zambezi is the lifeblood to some of the most unique wildlife habitats on Earth including Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley, critical elephant range for tens of thousands of elephants.

The Zambezi Elephant Fund (ZEF) was established in 2015 as part of a collaborative enterprise to bring awareness to and address increased poaching and habitat loss in the Zambezi Valley (ZV) in Zimbabwe. Currently, ZEF supports multiple conservation initiatives. Flying for Wildlife conducts annual aerial surveys across the entire ZV, documenting living elephants, carcasses, and the location for each. Working with the Zambezi Society, ZEF funds much needed supplies and training programs for rangers within two protected areas of the ZV and, along with My Trees Trust, pilot funding for a Human-Wildlife Coexistence program. The Kariba Animal Welfare Trust



PHOTO: ZAMBEZI ELEPHANT FUND

completes daily snare sweeps in the semi-urban landscape of Kariba, an area that is used as a significant wildlife corridor and works to develop human-wildlife conflict (HWC) mitigation techniques, all of which are backed by ZEF. The Zambezi Valley Conservation Network has identified a need for a resource and information-sharing repository to facilitate better collaboration with stakeholders through the ZV; ZEF is incubating the organization through staff funding. Similarly, ZEF provides monetary support to My Trees Trust, a community-driven tree planting initiative that has been a huge success as a large-scale habitat stewarding program.

Luckily for ZEF, 2019 was an incredible year for philanthropy. Owing in part to their in-person fundraising roadshow in the United States and annual Saving the Elephants walk/run 10k through Central Park, New York, funds raised allowed them to maintain most operations during the pandemic. Furthermore, due to the growth and maturation of projects, neither they nor their collaborative partners suffered job loss. In fact, there was an increase in job creation since 2020. Jazzy Middleton, Head of Donor Engagement, stated that while unrestricted funding income was down 40% through 2020-2021, buffer funds from previous years allowed them to continue conservation efforts. Although they weathered the storm, for 2021, revenue was still 20% less than 2019. While this is not an optimal outcome, it has given ZEF the opportunity to explore new innovative solutions for future long-

term funding such as funding investments, carbon-related impact funding, and endowment funds.

Sadly, due to preexisting economic hardship in areas surrounding ZV, there was a huge surge in bushmeat poaching during 2020. Jazzy shared that although a slight drop in incidences was observed in early 2021, there has since been an increasing trend once again in 2022. Pre-pandemic, Zimbabwe suffered from one of the world's highest national unemployment rates at 90%. Regardless, it is still hard to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on that index.

Dr. Kate Evans began studying elephants in the early 2000s in Botswana's Okavango Delta. She is the Founder and Director of Elephants for Africa (EFA), a non-profit NGO working in areas around the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park in Botswana. The aims of EFA are to gain a better understanding of male elephant behaviour and resource usage within their environment, work with local villages to increase tolerance for wildlife, and to empower and inspire future conservation leaders. Within neighboring communities, EFA hosts workshops for conservation agriculture, alternative income, mitigation, and living with elephants, and environmental education classes within schools. Pre-pandemic, a large portion of their work was funded by corporate funding from local tourism companies, zoological societies, and grants.

In response to the pandemic, all work halted due



PHOTO: DR. KATE EVANS, ELEPHANTS FOR AFRICA

to mandatory lockdowns. One staff member returned to their home country to be close to family, while others experienced a decrease in working hours and a freeze in annual pay raises. Understandably so, EFA staff experienced high stress and anxiety due to fear of uncertainty. Luckily, a few donors created emergency funds to support communities with necessities such as COVID-related materials like masks and soap. As with similar organizations, their importance within the public was highlighted during this great time of need. Communities relied on EFA to provide them with information and materials to keep them safe. The connection between wildlife and human needs are truly one in the same.

Post-pandemic, EFA are yet to see a rebound in funding. A concern that is only exacerbated with the current global economic predicament causing a significant rise in fuel cost and supplies needed for community projects. Although there has not been any reported increase in poaching or change in elephant behaviour in the area, there has been more incidences of human–elephant conflict (HEC) observed. Recognizing that the job loss in the tourism industry was hit the hardest, forcing more people to rely on subsistence farming, it cannot be ignored that current weather conditions are also playing a key role.

Moving forward, Dr. Evans has identified several crucial items that need to be addressed in the near future: “filling funding gaps when a lot of our funders immediately withdrew funding during COVID, maintaining staff moral and welfare, and regaining staff time to fulltime. Our services are in increasing demand, but we are resource limited in terms of staff time.” In addition, there are also additional resources needed for NGOs working in remote places. As we have learned to embrace an innovative digital office space, satellite internet to enable video meetings and calls, as well as remote team management is a new necessity.

With an area covering 1.6 million acres of wilderness in the Amboseli-Tsavo-Kilimanjaro ecosystem of East Africa, the Big Life Foundation (BLF) is the first organization in East African to establish a coordinated cross-border anti-poaching operation. Founded as a nonprofit in 2010, BLF collaborates with local communities, partner NGOs, national parks, and governmental agencies to protect nature for the benefit of all stakeholders. To date, BLF has trained 343 local Maasai rangers, established more than 30 permanent outposts, created 42 ranger units, seven mobile units, and one rapid deployment unit that utilize their 14 patrol vehicles, two tracker dogs, and two planes for ground and aerial surveillance.

In addition to their anti-poaching, anti-trafficking,

and wildlife crime prevention work, BLF has ongoing projects on several conservation-related fronts within local areas. HWC mitigation is necessary to ensure the peaceful and safe coexistence of humans and wildlife. The construction of protective fences around farms help alleviate crop-raiding and predation on livestock, the establishment of a crop and predator compensation program aids to offset damages caused during HWC incidences, and deployed rapid response ranger teams help drive elephants away from farms. The Greater Amboseli ecosystem is home to some of the world’s most diverse habitat and iconic species, including the highest concentration of African “big tuskers.” Working with local pastoralists, BLF developed a conservancy to limit the destructive development of wildlife habitat and protect areas that have been designated as wildlife corridors. Rangelands management has helped create a sustainable farming program that helps to continually improve existing pasture and ecosystem health and maintain waterholes for wildlife and limit the illegal extraction within communities. To support forest conservation, BLF has partnered with local communities, NGOs, and government to implement a carbon credit initiative. Following the BLF vision of “if conservation supports people, then people will support conservation,” they provide educational and healthcare-related services throughout local communities. Additionally, they host the Maasai Olympics to promote traditional Maasai warrior skills and preserve their cultural heritage while preventing the killing of lions.

Pre-pandemic, the main revenue of funding for BLF was individual donors. Of those donations, approximately 90% funded most of the previously mentioned conservation initiatives, including employment of more than 500 individuals. Speaking to Nikki Best, the Head of Reporting and Conservation Education, during 2020-2021 fundraising efforts were impacted the most. This resulted in BLF reducing their budget and subsequent operations by 40%. Non-essential programs, new equipment purchases, and planned program expansions were placed on hold. Essential operations were scaled down significantly. As of late 2021 into early 2022, they were still operating on a reduced budget to prioritizing programs based on need and community benefit. Although BLF had emergency funds, it was still difficult to sustain fundraising throughout the pandemic to keep day-to-day operations going. As we are now experiencing global economic challenges, the effects of the last three years continue to be felt.

Luckily, the team has not observed any negative change in elephant behavior, or an increase in HEC or poaching, as a direct result of the pandemic. Due in part to well-implemented HWC/HEC mitigation techniques, being able to maintain well-established anti-poaching

programs, and strong partnerships with local communities, even working with budget constraints, BLF continued their mission to support and protect the Greater Amboseli and surrounding areas. Regarding the new post-pandemic normal, Nikki shared, “it’s the same as it was pre-pandemic, the pandemic simply slowed the pace of change.”

Currently, Uganda is home to approximately 5,000 elephants. Despite heavy poaching and political instability in the 1980s, elephant numbers have increased significantly in the decades following. The Uganda Conservation Fund (UCF) is a non-profit organization active on multiple fronts of elephant conservation. Working with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, UCF has played key supportive roles in the recovery of habitat in the Murchison Falls Conservation Area (MFCA) and creating wildlife corridors connecting Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area (QECA) to Kibale Forest National Park. They have constructed ranger posts and veterinary labs throughout the parks and marine ranger stations in the QECA as part of the Waterways Project. In addition, they work with neighboring communities bordering the parks promoting the peaceful and safe coexistence of humans and wildlife. According to Michael Keigwin, a founding Trustee, during the pandemic UCF was the only organization in the MFCA and QECA helping supply rangers with essentials, carrying out anti-poaching patrols, and continual mitigation of HEC by pushing elephants back into protected park areas. Compounded by natural disasters such as flooding of the Nile River and locusts, Uganda was

faced with, and continues to face, tough times. Thanks to the support of conservation partners like Disney Conservation Fund and Utah’s Hogle Zoo, both members of the Elephant Managers Association, UCF operations persisted.

Along with the recent COVID-19 pandemic came a number of unanticipated challenges to wildlife conservation. Lockdown restrictions and loss of funding significantly impacted daily operations to combat poaching, mitigate HEC, and support established programs within local communities. Yet conservation organizations, like those in this article, soldiered on. Budget cuts and refocusing priority initiatives allowed groups to continue to help where it was needed most. This was also a time of great innovation. Developing new ideas for community engagement and global connectivity in the new face of wildlife conservation.

I would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for taking the time to share their thoughts and experiences they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. I welcome you all to visit their websites to get a better understanding of the terrific work they do to support elephant conservation, habitat preservation, and local communities.

- Michael Keigwin, MBE, [Uganda Conservation Foundation](#)
- Dr. Kate Evans, [Elephants for Africa](#)
- Jazzy Middleton, [Zambezi Elephant Fund](#)
- Tracy Walter and Nikki Best, [Big Life Foundation](#)