

Moving elephants



Elephants are wonderful creatures, and the more we learn about them, the more we find that humans and jumbos share much in common: intelligence, deep emotions, strong family ties, the ability to communicate over long distances and a good memory. We also share another trait—the power to destroy.

In the 1970s and 1980s elephant herds all over Africa were being slaughtered for their ivory. Kenya led the global campaign to ban the international sale of the commodity in 1989 through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES). Reduced poaching for ivory, coupled with improving wildlife management in many African countries, has resulted in some elephant populations growing enormously. When the number of elephants becomes too numerous for their habitat to support, they end up raiding surrounding farms to find food. Some researchers claim that many elephants are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after years of abuse by

humans and are out for revenge. Whatever the reasons, in many places in Kenya today jumbos are increasingly killing and injuring people and destroying crops and property.

Because of our recent appreciation of the qualities of elephants, and also for ethical and economic considerations related to tourism, Kenya has chosen not to shoot elephants to control their numbers, as was commonly done in the past. So, if one can't shoot elephants, what can one do to reduce the human-elephant conflict? Until effective contraception methods can be developed, about the only other option is to move elephants from overpopulated habitats to areas with more space and fewer people. Called translocation, this was done in late 2005 by Kenya Wildlife Service

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for the Shimba Hills-Mwaluganje Forest area. This population had grown from about 300 in 1977 to over 650 in 2005.

The protected area of the Shimba Hills National Reserve and Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary is only 250 km², an area that Moses Litoroh, Research Scientist for KWS, says can comfortably support fewer than 300 elephants. Moses had documented more than 100 human deaths and injuries from jumbos over a 20-year period, with vast acreages of crops destroyed. Farmers were crying for help. Not only that, but the pachyderms were damaging the precious tropical rain forest. The Shimba Hills has one of the last remaining significant patches of indigenous coastal forest, and forms part of the Eastern Arc biodiversity hotspot. Its over 1,300 plant species, with 282 of them being endemics and 57 classified as 'rare', makes the area a global Centre of Plant Diversity. Something had to be done.

The Kenyan government, to its credit, decided to shoulder the considerable financial burden on its own and voted a KSh 250 million (USD 3.4 million) budget to translocate up to 400 elephants from Shimba to a remote corner of Tsavo East National Park. Elephant numbers are still well below their 1980s population size in this area. The decision was not without controversy, as various politicians complained about the cost for the cash-strapped country, and about increasing elephant problems for people near the reception area. Many thought it would never get off the ground without outside help, but in late August 2005 KWS surprised many by launching the operation with much fanfare.

The venture was one hundred per cent Kenyan, from the helicopter pilot through capture teams, veterinarians, transport and management. Patrick Omondi led the operation, with assistance from Moses Litoroh (elephant spotter), John Kanyingi (head of capture teams) and Elizabeth Mwanzia (head of vet teams). There were a few minor glitches in the beginning, but after a few days of practice the KWS crew worked with military precision to translocate 151 elephants. Monitoring has shown that they are doing well in their new home. The following photos will show the reader a little of what is involved in capturing and moving tonnes of elephants.



1. Moses Litoroh and David Kimutai spent months identifying bulls and family groups led by matriarchs. From these, Moses selected those to be moved and spotted their location from a helicopter. Here, the chopper is herding a family towards the capture teams. The objective is to capture and transport the whole family and release them together in order to reduce stress. The jumbos are darted with tranquilizer by a vet from the helicopter.



2. When the tranquilizer drug starts to take effect the elephants scatter in every direction, and eventually fall unconscious. Moses directs the capture and vet teams to the spots where they lie. Moses, on left of picture, and Patrick Omondi to his right, the translocation director, oversee the work on one matriarch.



3. The feet of the jumbos are tightly bound to prevent injury to man or beast during the operation.



4. The elephant is manhandled onto a rubber mat for loading.



5. A crane lifts the jumbo onto a field transport vehicle.



6. The elephants are taken to the translocation vehicle.



7. The translocation vehicle, called the Prime Mover, is made up of three containers. The first is used to place the captured pachyderm and stimulate it to wake up. It is then driven into the second container and the sliding door is shut to make way for the next elephant. The trumpeting inside what is effectively a huge tin can after arousal is extraordinary.



8. Here a juvenile is loaded into the wake-up container.



9. Each tranquilized elephant was numbered in the field for identification to carry out follow-up work. Number 55 is bundled into the can.



10. These two siblings will wake up together.



11. This matriarch was fitted with a satellite transmitter necklace so that the family group can be tracked after release in Tsavo East. The majority of released elephants remained in the park, though two bulls that had strayed to the Arabuko-Sokoke forest area had to be put down after causing trouble.



12. Dr Zahoor Kashmiri, a veterinarian who assists KWS and is familiar with translocation exercises, said that the Shimba-Tsavo East operation was carried out professionally and with an admirably low loss rate. In the rough terrain and harsh climatic conditions of Shimba-Mwaluganje, a 10% loss would be acceptable. Out of 151 elephants captured, only six died—about a 4% loss. Well done, KWS.



13. The author and photographer Dan Stiles. Dan began his Kenya experience in 1971 as an archeological assistant on the Koobi Fora digs at Lake Turkana. After completing graduate school at Berkeley, USA, he taught archaeology at the University of Nairobi, and later worked at UNEP. Since 1999 he has been carrying out ivory trade investigations around the world. He is currently chairman of the Shimba Support Group, which aims to conserve the biodiversity of the Shimba Hills.