

28 April 2008

To His Excellency Dr B.S. Ngubane,
Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa
SA Embassy, Oriken Hirakawacho Bldg, 3F and 4F,
2-1-1 Hirakawa-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0093

From Masayuki Sakamoto, Secretary General, JWCS
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Appeal

Dear Mr Ambassador,

We, the Japan Wildlife Conservation Society (JWCS) and the Defense of Green Earth Foundation DGEF, NGOs working for the conservation of wildlife, note your government's plan to cull elephants due to an increase in their number, and respectfully offer our comments.

Theme

We oppose the proposed cull of elephants.

Reasons

The ivory collected during the cull will be added to stocks for use in international trade. We see this as problematic.

We fear that the expansion of the legal trade in ivory will stimulate activity in the international ivory market and consumption in major-use countries, which will cause a similar increase in the poaching and illegal trading of ivory.

In the two years 2005 and 2006, the quantity of illegal ivory confiscated was equivalent to 40,000 head. If this situation continues or even worsens, it could be fatal to the conservation of the African elephant.

It is our belief that, from the point of view of avoiding stimulating the illegal ivory trade, alternative methods should be devised to control the elephant population.

On the arguments regarding elephant culls.

Masayuki Sakamoto, Secretary General of JWCS

1. Recent trends in the African elephant population.

The African elephant lives over 60 years, with females first giving birth at 18 to 20 years old and bearing 6 to 8 calves over a lifetime. This is not sufficient to cause a sudden increase in numbers.

The IUCN's "African elephant status report 2007" gives its estimate of the population for the whole continent of Africa as 472,269 DEFINITE and 82,704 PROBABLE. However, there is no evidence to suggest an increase.

The data available to determine an increase or decrease in each region (Eastern, West, Central and Southern Africa) are limited, but estimates have been made of changes in Eastern and Southern Africa. These show an increase of 66,302 animals between 2002 and 2005 (4% per year). However elephants are known to cover long distances on a daily and seasonal basis. Whether the change is a true increase or the result of double counting of mobile elephants cannot be determined.

2. What are the reference points for assessing change?

The total elephant population, 1,340,000 in 1979, was reduced to 620,000 by 1988. The principal cause was the massacre of elephants for ivory. Whether or not the population has increased since then is still being debated.

However, the reference points being used to determine population growth are not the numbers of the previously healthy population but those of the period 2002~2005, after the population was reduced by the ivory trade. Just before the start of the 20th Century the population was said to number 2 million. Before that there were probably even more. The changes apparent over the short term of a few years are of little relevance to elephant conservation.

3. Problems caused by high densities of elephants.

The elephant is frequently referred to as an umbrella species. Normally they migrate over a wide area, eating fruit that are edible only to elephants and spreading the seeds in their droppings to create new forests, and treading paths through thick jungle which are then utilised by other animals. In the dry season they dig water holes. Their presence enables other organisms in the area to survive and prosper. In a normal environment the elephant is the creator of the ecosystem not a destroyer.

However, in the Republic of South Africa there are reports that in national parks, high densities of elephants have destroyed vegetation by knocking down trees for food. Certainly, since elephants require a wide foraging area, in the limited environment of a national park or reserve, there may well be such localised changes in the vegetation. Also, in the areas surrounding reserves in many countries, there are human-elephant conflicts resulting in crop-damage, injuries and death. These all result either from the restriction of elephant habitat or from locating villages and crops within elephant habitat, but nevertheless require immediate action.

Such action may require the restoration of vegetation within reserves or barriers to keep elephants out of agricultural land. It is also necessary to educate the population of the areas contiguous to reserves to protect their crops without killing elephants.

Essentially, the solution to these problems lies in maintaining a system of corridors between the reserves to guarantee the elephants a wide foraging area, and hence prevent over-concentration. In India, which has a far denser human population, corridors are now being constructed to help conserve the endangered Asian elephant. There is also a need, in both Africa and Asia, to develop ways to enable elephants to cross national borders unhindered.

4. The dangers of culling

It is well appreciated that elephant populations are very vulnerable to drought and other environmental change. If such an event were to occur shortly after a cull, the effect might be irremediable.

Total control of a wild population not only incurs this risk, it is an unsuitable way to maintain the population of a species as an evolving organism. Any plan to manage the environment must maintain at its heart the principle "Keep wildlife in the wild".