

# THE REPREHENSIBLE DICTUM OF "IF IT PAYS IT STAYS": AN ELEPHANT PERSPECTIVE

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## COLONIALISM, GLOBALISATION AND THE DEMONISATION OF ELEPHANTS

South Africa is well known for its stance on the commercial exploitation of wild life and its overt utilitarian views regarding animals. So, not surprisingly, elephants are being portrayed as the new eco villains. As a species they are amorously being painted as destructive and/or simply a lucrative resource, to be used as humans see fit – where only "privatized elephants" have value — "paying their own way" through the systematic harvesting of ivory and trophies. So these intelligent and sentient beings who are capable of deep emotions and who, at the very least, deserve our respect and compassion, are being classified as goods and chattel. But I will argue that using animals as resources to serve human needs is wrong for some of the same reasons that slavery is wrong.

The African elephant (*Loxodonta Africana*) is the largest land mammal, and its commodification at a species level - as a result of its sought-after body part, ivory - has pushed it to the brink of extinction. In the global economic context of consumption and utilisation, the future of elephants as individuals and as a species, has been left up to the market to decide. As Matthew Scully has pointed out, "According to the sustainable use argument, the real problem is not the butchery of elephants, but merely the pace of butchery, and who gets to do the butchering."

Wild life utilisation debates in Africa reflect larger debates within the global environmental arena, particularly issue of development. So, not only is it necessary to understand the ways in which nature is perceived but it is also necessary to look at the way in which development discourse (within which sustainable utilisation is located) shapes environmental theory and practice.

Development discourse reflects power relations. It is a form of power and domination over people, animals and geographical areas, and it has its origins in Western economic and political theory and practice. It is also located within the global resurgence of neo-liberalism and the dominant capitalist industrialising model, as well

as the increasing transnationalisation of capitalism, symbolised by GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), the World Trade Organisation and the IMF.

Free-market ideology has increased human misery and environmental problems. To illustrate what I'm saying - statistics released by the World Resources Institute<sup>1</sup>, show that 20% of the world's population (USA, Europe and Japan) consumes 80% of the world's natural resources. And according to the UN 2 400 million people live without sanitation - much more than a decade ago; 1 200 million live without safe drinking water; 1 500 million are under-nourished. The gap between rich and poor has grown and consumption in the richer countries is spiralling out of control - according to the UN it has multiplied 6X in less than 25 years. This means that the richest 20% of the people are consuming about 6X more food, energy, transportation, water, oil and minerals than their parents did.

And this rampant consumption is exacerbating inequalities. There is a link between environmental degradation, *laissez faire* economic practices, poverty and social injustice. Industrialised countries, by supporting, encouraging and advocating policies such as economic growth, integration and globalisation of the world economy, are actively worsening poverty and environmental and habitat destruction. So, while on the one hand, the market is being proposed as a way of bringing about ecological renewal, on the other hand, economic growth generates accelerated unsustainability. Paradoxically development is being offered as the cure for the ecological crisis in the form of "sustainable" development.

It is within this context that the notion took hold that concern for conservation can only come through the market. It is this commercial exploitation of nature that serves as the cornerstone for the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development document, which was produced by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in 1980. Thus the commercial utilisation of natural resources and the "if it pays it stays" philosophy of consumptive use became entrenched within the conservation paradigm.

And it is this framework that is facilitating the abuse of wild animals at all levels. The

'culling' of elephants ritual is also firmly situated within this dominant construct of conservation ideology, language and culture and reflects the value system of anthropocentric resourcism, in which mainstream conservation is grounded.

### **THE WEAVE OF OPPRESSION AND THE OTHERING**

*"You know the issue of Basarwa [the bushmen]? Sometimes I equate it to the elephants. We once had the same problem when we wanted to cull the elephants and people said no." Botswana Minister for Local Government, Margaret Nasha in 2002.*

Globally and locally, there is an enormous level of exploitation and oppression of other animals. This exploitation and naked cruelty is deeply rooted in hierarchical human social arrangements and belief systems. It is therefore essential to locate how we view elephants within the wider context of oppression and violence - what David Nibert refers to as "entanglements of oppression".

And the way humans relate to animals acts as a metaphor for human society and directly reflects social systems of domination and control. Essentially, wild animals have been incorporated into two human-created spaces:

- ❑ The space of aesthetics - where they are viewed as the primitive "Other". They are only of value if they contribute to landscape aesthetics and income – hence you have marketing jargon such as "visit the world-famous Kruger National Park with its abundance of wildlife" or "come and experience one of Africa's pristine ecosystems". This kind of Othering is crucial in constructing human identity. Here pristine nature is also defended against the bad elephant.
- ❑ Another space is 'the space of the commodity', where, through extractive use, beings are turned merely into an economic asset. In this space we don't care about the elephant's ordeal and we behave nonchalantly and indifferently in the face of the suffering and death of the 'Other'. Within this framework animals are viewed as tools and objects and as unworthy and unfeeling brutes.

It is also important to point out that in terms of both these concepts –humans and other animals have been mutually exploited and oppressed.

### **ANIMAL NATIONS, KITH AND KIN VS. THEM-VERSUS-US**

*Animals often are used to define who we humans are in the great chain of being, and that chain is then presented as a hierarchy of beings in which humans place themselves separate from and above other animals. We declare that we are special and better and more valuable than our animal kin and go on to*

*close the door on the lives of other animals. We shut down our senses and our hearts to the idea that we should take them seriously for who they are and not for what we want them to be in our narrow anthropocentric view of the world. (Bekoff Marc, Animal Passions And Beastly Virtues: Cognitive Ethology As The Unifying Science For Understanding The Subjective, Emotional, Empathic, And Moral Lives Of Animal, p25)*

Some humans claim 'human uniqueness' and believe that *homo sapiens* must be placed above all other animals on the grounds that only THEY speak, reason, imagine, love, fear, anticipate, and so on. The victim in this paradigm is also blamed for their own existence. So, when elephants are "culled," they are being killed not because of their identities as individuals but because they are members of an "outgroup" selected for such treatment. A kind of Cartesian mindset - where 'rational humans' are seen to be at the top of the pile, disconnected from any other animals. This erecting of an absolute barrier between those who are "us" and those who are "them," to which the rules of morality do not apply, has historically also been effected rather easily to separate off certain groupings of the human species and thus facilitate their destruction.

Maintaining the species barrier has everything to do with maintaining distance and domination. The way humans relate to animals acts as a metaphor for human society and directly reflects social systems of domination and control - humans over nonhumans, masculine over feminine, the wealthy and powerful over the poor. This notion of human uniqueness cannot be defended and "human exceptionalism"<sup>1</sup> is negated by overwhelming evidence from ethological studies. Humans are, of course, animals and our similarities with other animals are greater than our differences. Overall, the evolutionary connection between humans and animals on a number of levels reinforces this idea of animals as kin rather than animals as other and that we are rather, as Bekoff argues, a Community of Equals.

The deep and rich emotional lives of animals, including their feelings of altruism and friendship – aggression and fear – cannot be ignored. The fact is that all individuals count and that other animals live lives that are valuable to themselves, without any interpretation from humans - animal rights philosopher Tom Regan argues that – like

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1 MacNaghten & Urry

humans they are also "subjects-of-a-life". And what we learn and know about animals has ethical implications.

Conservationists and government agencies who persist in viewing elephants as things, as property, as a mere 'resource', can no longer evade the truth that humans are not the only animals on the planet. And contemptuously vilifying and turning their backs on those who put these arguments forward, or portraying them as misguided and sentimental kooks, is unacceptable, deplorable and ridiculous. Author Alice Walker's comment about those who dismiss the concern with animal exploitation as "sentimental", is that – quote - "these are people who have destroyed great tracts of feeling in themselves."

### **THE EMOTIONAL LIVES OF ELEPHANTS**

*"In the carnage and terror they have endured, elephants have already "paid their own way" — with a security deposit for decades to come. And the ones left have plenty of value just as they are, without need of men with guns and machetes to give it to them." (Scully)*

No-one can deny that elephants are highly intelligent and emotional beings. They share a paralleled lifespan with humans and like us they have life-long loyalties, friendships and close-family ties. They also attach a special significance to death and they mourn an individual, often returning to a body and touching it. When an elephant is shot there is immediate distress on the part of the family.

The one factor that has moved decisively in the elephant's favour particularly in the last two decades is the work of field biologists, psychologists, philosophers and ethologists – as their research has revealed that elephants are even more complex and remarkable than initially thought. This has given rise to public affection and recognition. As a result there is a growing understanding that as their world is diminished so is our own.

Elephants can act out of compassion. There are various documented accounts of elephants aiding humans. For example, Martin Meredith describes how a charging matriarch, knocked a Kenyan herdsman to the ground, breaking his leg. The next day a search party was sent out to find him and they found him propped up against a tree guarded by a lone female elephant. When they tried to chase her away she charged

them. Assuming she was dangerous the ranch manager raised his rifle to shoot her. But the injured herdsman shouted out for him to stop. When she was finally driven off by gunfire, the herdsman described how the elephant, using her trunk and forefeet, had gently moved him several yards into the shade of a tree. Even when her own family had moved on, she stood guard over him throughout the night and into the next day, driving away a passing herd of buffalo.

Ethologist Marc Bekoff tells the story of while he was watching a group of elephants living in the Samburu Reserve in Northern Kenya, he noticed that one of them, Babyl, walked very slowly, and he saw that she was crippled. It was obvious that the elephants in Babyl's group waited for her because she could not travel as fast as they could. When he asked Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who has been studying elephants for almost four decades, about this, he learned that these elephants always waited for Babyl and had been doing so for years. They would walk, stop and look around, see where Babyl was and wait or proceed depending on where she was. There seemed to be no reason for them to do this, as Babyl could do little for them. They obviously cared enough about Babyl to change their behaviour and allow her to continue to be a group member.

Elephants live in a complex society bound together by different layers of social bonding and communication. They exhibit skills and qualities such as: good leadership, good communication, clear roles, co-operation, consensus building, respect for one another and reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> For example, the complex way in which elephants use sound to communicate demonstrates their intellectual and emotional complexity and understanding.

The stark reality is that if our government is deliberately silent on recognizing WHO elephants are, that they are our kin and that killing individuals and families because they believe there are simply too many of them then they will be guilty of murder and ultimately genocide.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Poole, zoologist and director of the Savanna Elephant Vocalization Project.

<sup>3</sup> Article 2 of the First Geneva Convention defines "genocide" as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical [sic], racial, or religious group, as such: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members

## **SAVE ELEPHANTS: BUY IVORY?**

*"One day we will realise that elephants cannot be reduced to the value of their teeth.*

*Elephants are and will always be synonymous with the greatness of Africa. We as a global community must accept a responsibility for the future of elephants. Perhaps economists and those involved in policy development should re-examine the concept of 'value'.... As a species perhaps we should begin to think about the ethics of trading in elephant teeth to satisfy a demand for trinkets in countries far removed from the source. Ivory is not essential to anyone, it does not provide a cure for any disease, nor does it satisfy starving people."*  
*(Dr Paula Kahumbu, CITES Co-Ordinator in the Kenya Wildlife Service)*

In the past, killing elephants in Kruger fell solely in the domain of the Kruger scientists. And it played itself out around so-called biodiversity issues – that is, the notions of 'too many elephants' and of 'fixed carrying capacity'. There were no debates – there was no consultation. Elephants were being killed in great numbers probably because of the revenue they could make. And uninterrogated and unopposed science was being used to justify this. But, thankfully, since 1994, this discussion has been removed from the exclusive domain of the creationist and interventionist views of the Kruger scientists, who, under the influence of apartheid thinking, not only continued with colonial conservation but did this within the context of reinforcing Afrikaner nationalist landscapes. Landscapes that produced both human and other animals as victims. Now the voices of other scientists' are making themselves known. And these voices– which are in opposition to killing elephants in Kruger - cannot be ignored – they are loud and their arguments compelling.

Indeed, some scientists<sup>4</sup> have not only brought into serious question the assertion by the southern African range states that elephants have an irreversible adverse effect on habitat and other species but they also argue that holding elephant densities at constant levels through "culling" is not only detrimental to ecosystem diversity but would maximize the rate of increase of an elephant population – this means that the practice of "culling" is essentially an ivory harvesting programme operating at maximum sustainable yield.

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of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

<sup>7</sup>Lindsey Gillson and Keith Lindsey

Moreover, when one looks at threats to biodiversity in Kruger attention should be turned away from elephants and should also focus on humans who are causing damage through unabated commercialisation policies, the promotion of extractive utilisation<sup>5</sup> and questionable management styles and strategies. Indeed, human activities are the biggest negative transformers of the natural world, accelerating species loss and causing between 10,000 and 40,000 species to become extinct each year.

But, despite the overwhelming ecological and ethical evidence our Minister of Environmental Affairs and his staff continue to advocate killing elephants. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) and SANParks, particularly in the last few years has been creating a skewed and negative view of elephants and are trying to get a mandate for the down-listing of elephants at CITES, the unbanning of the ivory trade<sup>6</sup> and a lifting of the moratorium on culling. In September 2005, Minister Van Schalkwyk said, "We need to control elephant populations in some areas", and that "this would be overseen by an animal ethics committee, and that where possible animal products would be used to the benefit of local communities." Consequently, a one-sided view continues to be presented: a view which is devoid of compassion and respect; is only wedded to conservation for profit; and aims to prepare the public once again for the killing of elephants.<sup>7</sup>

Why does this pro-killing position persist? 'Implicit in the activity of 'culling' is seemingly the greater importance ascribed to those who stand to gain, compared with the perceived lesser importance of those who are sacrificed for their 'benefit'. In this view, individuality is denied. As long as the species is perceived to be sustained it does not matter what that might involve, or what the plight might be of individual animals or groups of animals. In some respects this is a very zoo-like definition; where the animal represents the gene pool of its species and that is what defines it as an elephant or whatever, rather than the animal being defined by contextual elements such as family grouping; place or community.

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5 Extractive utilisation and exploitation poses threats both to the target species and to ecosystem more generally. It could also spread disease, induce genetic changes, cause social or ecological disruption due to selective killing.

6 In 2002 SA had 32 tonnes of ivory stockpiled (Botha to Parliament in 2002)

7 Over 16 000 elephants were culled or removed from Kruger between 1966 and 2002. (Van Aarde & Pimm)

And then of course there is the ivory issue. Since Europeans arrived in Africa with their guns, elephant numbers have significantly diminished. And it is in fact the wealthy industrialised countries in the North that consume wildlife products excessively. The majority of African nations, have seen the elephants in their countries depleted, even extirpated, by the rapacious demand for ivory. In fact between 1979 and 1989 alone an estimated 700 000 elephants were slaughtered.

A sustainable ivory trade is a fanciful notion because, in reality, it is not good for elephants and not good for the development of elephant range states. There is also no evidence to support the claim that the money made from the legal international ivory trade has been crucial to the conservation and survival of elephants. Nor is there any validity to the argument that the international ivory trade is essential to control perceived "burgeoning populations of elephants". Also, claims of local community benefit from ivory sales are unsubstantiated. The legal trade serves as a vehicle for the illegal trade. In my opinion there is just one way forward and that is to kill the Ivory Trade.

Whatever the arguments put forward to legitimise the ivory trade (however limited), ultimately killing elephants is still about – what it was always about – money. Southern Africa, far from supporting the other African elephant range states, is spearheading the lobby for the voracious and ruthless ivory trade. And South Africa is playing a kingpin role here by pushing for the sale of ivory stockpiles. Even though this will mean that an enormous burden will be put on the more than three quarters of the 50 elephant range countries who have much fewer resources for law enforcement and would not be able to control the increased poaching and smuggling which such sales provoke. Very unethical, particularly in the African Renaissance context, don't you think?

So for me the worrying issue could be attempts by our government to justify culling, despite rational scientific and ethical arguments to the contrary, under the guise of development, income generation and poverty alleviation. So it is a case of ivory=culling=poverly alleviation. My response to this is that surely we need to focus on and foster other, more sustainable and humane forms of income generation. It is a fallacious premise to argue that the only way rural communities can benefit from conservation is if the animals pay with their lives. This is not a long-term option for

poverty relief or for sustainable livelihoods. Poverty alleviation programmes need to be designed that avoid animal suffering and take into account respect for other species. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the mantra of development is an effective conservation tool. It rests on largely untested tenets and needs to be seriously questioned by countries in the South.

Ethical conservation needs to be practiced. We have to ethically work out how to accommodate humans and elephants. What we need to do is to develop compassionate human/elephant conflict resolution measures, assist local communities in ways which bring real, lasting benefits to people without killing elephants, and place ivory stockpiles permanently beyond use, so there is no more incentive to trade. Neither will killing elephants create conditions for sustainable tourism. The knock-on affect of killing elephants will be against DEAT's strategic plan to increase the annual volume of international tourists visiting South Africa. Elephants are one of the key reasons why tourists visit our country each year, creating jobs and prosperity. The global public does not want to see elephants being murdered, for whatever reason SANParks might present in justification. So DEAT will be taking a precarious route if they decide to kill elephants

### **REJOICE, REJOICE, WE HAVE NO CHOICE!: THE ELEPHANT BACK SAFARI INDUSTRY**

*The elephants at EFAF choose to remain with their grooms and return to their stables every evening voluntarily. They choose to do what they do. (Howard Blight)*

There is also a rapidly growing 'elephant' industry in South Africa, with increasing numbers of elephants being captured, 'tamed' and 'trained'. These elephants are then supplied to local and international zoos; circuses and elephant back safari operators. This industry – which I believe is essentially driven by greed and money - has used the opportunity presented by the issue of 'culling' to jump on the bandwagon and promote the growing elephant industry as an alternative to culling. Essentially there are three basic reasons why this industry should not be supported: its outspoken and disingenuous defence of 'culling'; it is not acting in the interests of elephant communities or individual elephants and; importantly elephants do not have a choice in the matter.

It is naïve to believe that elephant back safaris are any better or different to zoos or

circuses. The taming process is horrific and usually involves immobilizing the elephant by tethering them to a tree or another elephant and hobbling all four legs; and then beating them into submission. People who claim that this doesn't happen in South Africa are naïve. For example, animal protection groups received complaints about a large male elephant being hobbled diagonally and falling repeatedly.

What took place within the Selati Game Reserve recently – where young elephants were snatched from their families to be trained at EFAF - is nothing short of shocking – an example of how **not** to treat elephants especially in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century when so much is known about them. As I've said before, elephants are renowned for their memories, intelligence, and sociality. Similar to humans, these traits also make them particularly vulnerable to stress and trauma and their long-term consequences (Bradshaw et al., 2005). Human society would definitely not condone the snatching of children from their parents for a life of bondage simply for personal gain, and I don't think most of human society would condone what has taken place in the Selati Game Reserve. Being orphaned through the death of a mother is bad enough, but to subject elephants to this kind of cruelty brutality is nothing short of shameful.

This event clearly shows what goes on behind the scenes in the name of "sustainable utilisation" in South Africa. It also points to an endemic problem where so-called 'conservation management practices' are clearly driven by economics rather than scientific evidence. It is a well-documented and widely accepted fact that elephant family units should not be separated or hunted and internationally renowned elephant experts view it as unethical and cruel to forcibly remove young elephants from their families. Complex biological and emotional responses of calves (and their mothers) to separation have evolved for a reason. Every elephant calf is biologically extremely important to its mother because she must invest so much time, energy and effort in producing and rearing a calf to adulthood: 22 months of gestation, four years of lactation, at least 12 years of rearing and protection. As a consequence elephants have evolved extraordinarily developed behaviours of caring and bonding with their calves.<sup>8</sup> If a calf is to survive to adulthood it too must form intense close bonds with its mother and other family members. These bonds involve extreme emotional attachment, which if broken cause individuals extreme suffering.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lee & Moss, 1986

<sup>9</sup> Moss, 2000; Poole, 2000.

Even, the Kruger National Park has, since 1999, taken the decision that the translocation of juvenile animals is “inhumane and therefore undesirable” and that only intact family units will be transferred live out of the Park. Limpopo nature conservation authorities are clearly out of step with current conservation practices. South Africa is currently faced with the challenges of trying to reign in the canned and trophy hunting industries - is the Minister going to wait until the elephant industry does the same before questioning the validity and ethics of the ‘tamed and trained’ elephant industry? The lack of a consistent humane and compassionate national policy in relation to elephants means that government is – excuse the pun - shooting itself in the foot.

### **CONCLUSION: MAKING WAR ON OURSELVES**

*[Humans] By misjudging animals they misjudged themselves. (Mary Midgley, in Crace 2005)*

The use of language obfuscates the truth. Killing elephants is called ‘culling’, supposedly making the act of killing subliminally more acceptable and palatable and inferring that there are simply ‘too many’ elephants. But ‘culling’ is a euphemistic word for killing elephants *en masse*. As such it can never be justified and it can never be a humane process. It has everything to do with making money and very little to do with conservation and although it may, in some instances, be economically profitable but it is never ethically justifiable. What if we were to apply this way of thinking to products such as landmines or narcotics? And it may be efficient, but it can never be a kindly or instant death. One cannot help but to draw analogies between the “culling” of elephants and the mass extermination of human beings such as those conceived, justified and perpetrated by the Third Reich.

The point is that the premeditated and systematic killing of elephants is abhorrent, should never be considered and can never be ethically justified -as would be the extermination of certain human beings who were posing an environmental threat or were perceived to be simply ‘too many’.

Scientific ecology cannot be applied in any direct way to ethics in relation to elephants because socially and ethically there is a boundary that ecology cannot cross. And so-

called 'conservation' does not have a set of ethics that is removed from other forms of ethics. There should be equal consideration of interests and a principle of justice.

Concern for humans and concern for other animals is not as divergent as some would think and these concerns do not take place in a social or economic vacuum, but are cast in terms of social justice and rights discourse. This isn't simply an endless philosophical debate but a gathering global force with broad implications for our planet's future.

Just as society is challenged to apply our minds and hearts to other issues of moral complexity relating to our treatment of our fellow human beings, so too are we challenged, and we are obligated to meet this challenge, when it comes to the proposed killing of elephants as an integral part of any proposed 'elephant management plan'. A so-called management plan that involves killing elephants is both unjust and morally indefensible, for the same reasons as it would be wrong to kill humans who are perceived to be 'too many'.

There is a need to re-imagine the issue of our relationship with elephants and move away from our historic culture of killing – where pulling out a gun is seen as the easiest solution. The recent parliamentary discussions around animal rights at the Joint Constitutional Review Committee in October 2005 clearly show that the issue of animal rights is one DEAT will have to grapple with in the future.

If the government's consultative process is truly consultative then it will have to take the issues I have very briefly outlined here on board and its policy documents will have to reflect the ethical arguments and accommodate the victim's perspective. But if DEAT decide to initiate the killing of elephants despite the cogent arguments against it, they will, in essence, be declaring war on elephants. Surely, they cannot afford to behave as George Bush has – making war based on a fallacious and deceptive suspicion. And, as in any unjust war, the victims will be defended. Culling will threaten our country's tourism potential. And, since the most profitable source of income for SANParks is definitely tourism,<sup>10</sup> it would, in a very real sense, then, be making war on itself.

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<sup>10</sup> SANParks get almost 2 million visitors a year

