

Elephant Slaughter in Uganda

S. K. Eltringham & R. C. Malpas

In the 1920s elephants roamed nearly three-quarters of Uganda; by 1960 the area open to them was less than one-fifth. The survivors concentrated in national parks and reserves where they were protected, and where they were soon destroying the habitat. So two thousand were shot. But numbers remained high – until 1973. Counts in 1974 showed a dramatic reduction, and rotting carcasses pointed to poaching as the cause. The destruction continued in 1975, and the authors believe that the outlook for Uganda's elephants is grim.

The history of elephants in Uganda has been turbulent. Until the late 1920s, they were believed to range over 70 per cent of the land area; thirty years later, the figure was about 17 per cent,¹ due to control operations in the face of an expanding human population. Many were shot, but the survivors retreated into protected areas – game reserves and national parks – so that, although the total number was drastically reduced, the density in those regions where they remained was greatly increased. This created a management problem, since the elephants' destructive feeding habits – uprooting and debarking of trees – leads to excessive damage to the vegetation. By the mid 1960s conditions in the Kabalega (then Murchison) Falls National Park had so deteriorated that it was feared the park would erode into a near desert. In an attempt to alleviate the problem, some 2000 elephants were shot. However, there was evidence that this was not enough and recommendations were made that a further 3900 should be taken out³.

The position in the Rwenzori (formerly Queen Elizabeth) Park was not much better. Numbers there had also increased and there were signs of excessive tree destruction². Less is known about elephants in Uganda's third national park at Kidepo, but, again, fears about over-population have been expressed.

This was the picture up to 1973. Regular aerial counts had been made in the Rwenzori Park since 1963, while the Kabalega counts dated back to 1957, although with fewer counts in recent years. In both parks there had been a build-up in numbers since the first counts and the problem remained one of too many elephants.

But in September 1974 a startling and radical change was detected when our counts revealed that, in twelve months, numbers had fallen to less than half in the Kabalega Falls Park and showed a considerable drop in the Rwenzori park although not by such a large amount. So great was the discrepancy that some gross error in our technique was suspected, but our next counts in September 1975 dismally confirmed the decline without a shadow of doubt. By then, the number of elephants in the Rwenzori park was only a third to a quarter of what it should have been, while at Kabalega the drop was of the order of 85 per cent. The dramatic nature of the decline is obvious from the table opposite.

What has happened is, unfortunately, all too clear. Everywhere in the parks there are the remains of elephants; it is obvious that most of them have been

Estimates from aerial sample counts of the number of elephants in
two Ugandan national parks

	<i>Kabalega Falls N.P.</i> (<i>Southern Sector</i>)	<i>Rwenzori N.P.</i>
Average of earlier counts	8042	2633
September, 1973	10187	2864
September, 1974	4072	1868
September, 1975	1061	931*

* A total count of elephants in Rwenzori Park in September, 1975 produced a figure of 1047 animals.

The table shows averages for wet seasons only.

poached. Often two or three carcasses are lying within a few feet of each other, suggesting that gangs of poachers have been shooting family groups. None had been taken for food – the meat had been left to rot – nor had any attempts been made to remove the valuable skin from the ears; but in every case the tusks had been cut out. It is clear that the recent spectacular rise in the price of ivory has been the incentive.

The elephant problem in Uganda has, therefore, changed dramatically. Where before there were too many elephants in the parks, there are now, perhaps, too few. It may well be that numbers are now more in line with the carrying capacity of the habitat, but it is not simply a reduction in numbers that has taken place; their distribution has also changed. Instead of being spread out over all the parks, they are now concentrated into relatively few areas where, presumably, they are safest. Moreover the indiscriminate slaughter has caused a breakdown in the normally well ordered family structure; indications of a collapse in the social order are to be seen in the clumping of family units into large amorphous herds. Normally, the family is led by the matriarch which, being the oldest in the group, has large tusks and is, therefore, the poacher's prime target. With the loss of the matriarchs, the leaderless elephants have tended to congregate together, so that locally their density remains high and damage to the vegetation continues.

On a recent visit to Uganda in March 1976 to report these findings at the Third East African Wildlife Symposium, we noticed further recently killed elephants, so it seems that the slaughter continues. Unless it can be brought under control very soon, the future for elephants in these two parks is grim indeed.

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