

The African Elephant Database

As the members of the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group's (AfESG) Data Review Task Force and co-authors of the African Elephant Database (AED) reviewed by Sharp (2000), we would like to address Mr Sharp's two main criticisms.

The aim of the AED is to present objective information on the status of the African elephant at the continental level with an indication of the quality of this information. Estimates of elephant numbers are contributed by a wide range of individuals, government management authorities and non-governmental organizations. In practice, it proved difficult to put this information together into a meaningful overall result and Mr Sharp criticises our seemingly idiosyncratic way of reporting the estimates.

The quality of population estimates reported in the AED varies widely; a high proportion of the estimates are simply guesses and many come without an estimate of statistical error. Combining them to obtain a mean and combined error estimate is neither possible nor valid. It is because of this that we categorize estimates into the classes that Mr Sharp dislikes. The system that we adopted, after much discussion, still makes a useful statement about the range of possible values for the elephant populations without attempting to 'fudge' a confidence interval. It also focuses attention on a minimum known population, the 'definites', rather than a central value, which is a sum of the estimates. To have estimated otherwise would imply that the different types of estimates are of equal reliability. This would have been absurd given the differing biases of the estimates, the guesses, and the gaps in coverage.

Mr Sharp's second criticism is that we have not reported on trends in African elephant populations. Like many readers he expects that, in addition to merely collecting and reporting the available information, the AED should provide further interpretation. In order to detect trends, data must be collected repeatedly and in a comparable manner each time. However, there are only a few populations of African elephants that satisfy these conditions. These can tell us little about continental trends because the well-surveyed populations are mainly from the savannah areas of southern and eastern Africa. There are still relatively unknown, and possibly large, populations of elephants in the forests of western and central Africa. Trends in these forest populations

will not necessarily mirror those in the savannah populations. While trends in individual populations may be interesting, the goal of the AED remains to provide a continental overview.

The compilation of all the available information on the status of the best-studied mammal on the continent shows that there are still great gaps in our knowledge. This is perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from the AED. The lack of good information should, through the medium of the AED, be a catalyst for the improvement of survey standards. Consequently we are working, through the AfESG membership, government agencies, NGOs and individuals involved in survey work, to improve the standards of elephant counting across the range of the African elephant, to stimulate the counting of elephant populations that have never been surveyed, and the recounting of those that have not been surveyed for many years. Under this stimulus, methods, data quality and coverage are improving. With such improvements we may indeed soon be able to use the AED to tackle the issue of trends.

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A reply to the response by Holt, Papastavrou & Phillips to CITES Conference of Parties 11: an FFI perspective

Holt *et al.* (2000) criticise the reference, in my news report of the recent CITES Conference of Parties (CoP) 11 in Nairobi (Sharp, 2000), to minke whale populations having recovered and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) having declined to follow the advice of its Scientific Committee on the matter. They challenge me to produce references.

Manifestly I was not writing a scientific peer-reviewed article on whaling, but giving an overview of the meeting from an FFI perspective. It would not be practicable to discuss all the distinct minke whale

populations, but here is information available for two of them. Lars Walløe (personal communication) writes 'The most important reference is T. Schweder & R. Volden (1994), Relative abundance series for minke whales in the Barents Sea 1952–1983, *Report to the International Whaling Commission* 44, 433–436. Their conclusion was that population size in 1983 was about 70 per cent of the population size in 1952, but with a 95 per cent confidence interval of 52–94 per cent. When looking closer at their graphs, one can imagine a drop in the fifties (explained by the relatively high number of animals taken those years, up to 2000 annually) followed by a small increase after that period. We don't know much about what has happened since 1983, but there are indications of further increase.' For the north-east Atlantic stock the IUCN/SSC analysis of the Norwegian proposal to the CITES CoP 11 (IUCN/SSC & TRAFFIC Network, 2000) says 'Based on data collected in 1995, IWC estimated the size of this stock as 112,000 whales In 1989 the population was estimated at 65,000 whales.' I understand that these figures are based on different survey techniques and should not be directly compared, although an innocent participant in the CoP might have inferred an increase. If, as my critics assert, some other populations have not recovered because they never declined, so be it. The overall picture is one of stability and/or recovery in the context of relative abundance.

Moreover, the IUCN/SSC view of the Norwegian proposal was that the minke whale populations in question did not appear to meet the biological criteria for inclusion in Appendix I of CITES. For this reason, the provisional recommendation of the CITES Secretariat was to approve the proposal. However, the SSC took the view that if transfer to Appendix II was agreed there was no mechanism for applying to any other Parties the strict controls the Norwegians were ready to accept, and for this reason both the Secretariat and SSC advised against such a transfer.

There are two views as to whether the IWC member states are genuinely trying hard (as argued by Holt *et al.*, 2000) to put in place a Revised Management Scheme, following the adoption of the Revised Management Procedure put forward by the Scientific Committee in

1993. I quote from the IUCN statement to the July 2000 meeting of the IWC in Adelaide (IUCN, 2000): 'IUCN... views the condition of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) with increasing concern.The apparent unwillingness of the IWC to resume its statutory duties undermines the effectiveness and credibility of the organization, to the long-term detriment of whale conservation.' The Secretary-General of CITES, writing on 4 July to the Chairman of the IWC before the Adelaide meeting (CITES Secretariat, 2000), said 'The apparent lack of progress – even the alleged obstruction of progress – at the IWC on certain issues are equally of concern to many Parties to CITES as it has caused the transfer of the IWC debate to CITES forums.' To suggest that delays are principally down to foot-dragging by whaling nations is scarcely credible, as it is they who have been wanting the IWC to sanction limited commercial harvesting since 1993.

While not advocating whaling, I suggest that intelligent decisions for conservation must be based on good science and that marginal uncertainties should not be used to argue that no decisions can be taken until knowledge is perfect, because it never will be.

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