



Above: Problem wildlife? Elephants running free in the Caprivi.  
Left: A Caprivi resident shows the damage elephants have done to her maize crop.



# Beastly neighbours?

TAMSIN SAVAGE reports on the conflict between rural communities and wildlife in north-eastern Namibia

If recent conservation success rates continue, the Caprivi and Kunene regions will once more be teeming with wildlife. Excellent news. But for the residents of the hundreds of small villages dotted around these regions, living with wildlife is not easy. Crops have already been devastated by the drought, so when a herd of elephants tramples and eats what is left it makes life very hard indeed.

Jona Swalelo (70) lives with his 11 children in the Kwandu Conservancy in Caprivi. He doesn't own any livestock and the household relies solely on his maize and pumpkin crop for food and income. In April elephants destroyed his crops and now he doesn't know how his family will survive the year.

"My old-age pension [NS250 a month] is too little as it is used for both school fees and clinic fees so cannot be used to feed my big family."

He had reported the presence of the elephants to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) rangers who came to chase them away, but the damage had been done. He experiences this every year.

Swalelo is not alone. According to a survey carried out in the Caprivi, almost three-quarters of residents interviewed experience 'human-wildlife conflict' (HWC) every year. And it's not just damage to crops. HWC extends to water point damage, loss of livestock and even loss of human life. 'Problem animals' include species great and small, from elephants to porcupines, but elephants are the worst culprits (they caused 86 per cent of damage to crops reported to the MET in the Caprivi between 1996 and 2001). Perversely they are also top of the conservationists' save-the-species list.

Bonifacius, a resident of Linyanti Conservancy in the Caprivi, regularly suffers elephant damage to his maize crop. He described the devastating impact wildlife damage has on people's livelihoods: "The problem is even worse this year because it is also a drought ... Life depends on maize, as it is the only source of food. With the elephant damage this year people will die of hunger as they don't have money to go and buy food or maize. With no maize [to sell] this year, the children's school fees which haven't been paid until now won't be paid at all."

Living in close proximity to wildlife isn't entirely bad news though. Significant financial benefits can be derived from wildlife, principally through tourism and trophy hunting, which can offset the costs of HWC. The difficulty arises in ensuring the benefits reach the right people – those suffering from HWC.

Evidence: Elephant footprints in a crop field.

There is a glimmer of hope sparkling on the waters of the Zambezi though. Namibia's conservancy programme, begun in 1998, helps by empowering rural communities and residents to reap financial benefits from the troublesome wildlife in their area – and thus mitigate the costs it causes. Benefits can be generated through wildlife harvesting quotas (agreed by the MET); own-use hunting and meat distribution; trophy hunting; sale of live game; and community-based tourism enterprises (e.g. campsites). Conservancies have also put communities in a much stronger position to negotiate 'joint ventures' with lodges, which can generate significant revenue for the community. The programme is a success – there are now 19 conservancies in Namibia, with a further 30 'emerging'. The total population of people living in these conservancies is estimated to be around 65 000.

But, it seems, the devastating costs of living with wildlife to the average rural resident still outweigh the benefits. In fact for some the only returns so far appear to have been an increase in crop damage and dead livestock.

HWC is an age-old problem, but some local people perceive that the conservancies have made the situation worse.

"Before the conservancy, elephants were seen only once in a year but now they are around all year round," said Margaret Mwita, a Salambala Conservancy resident. The increase in wildlife (and apparent increase in HWC) is the result of numerous factors and cannot be attributed to the conservancy programme alone.

"If you take it the other way round, if there were not conservancies I am sure there would still be the conflict," says Deputy Director of the MET's Directorate of Parks and Wildlife, Ulrich Boois. And it is the conservancies which provide the means for local communities to benefit from the wildlife in their area.

The issues surrounding HWC are extremely complex. One of the difficulties is responsibility: who should be dealing with the 'problem' elephants rampaging through people's crops? This is confirmed by Caprivi resident and HWC sufferer, Maureen Mtengu: "The conservancy people say that it is not their duty to drive the animals out, but the MET's. We report incidents to the MET but nothing happens."

The confusion arises from a shift in the perception of who is responsible. Before conservancies, wildlife was clearly the MET's responsibility, now people perceive it to be the conservancy's. However, elephants, and all other animals remain state property and the MET is still the source of authority for key decisions. Clarity is also lacking among conservancy residents over what is and isn't allowed, and in what circumstances.

"Although conservancies can use armed game guards to try to scare away elephants, they are unable to take the ultimate sanction against a problem elephant and kill it," explains a recent ministry research paper on HWC.

There are exceptions to the rule though. Chief Warden in the Directorate of Parks and Wildlife, Martin Britz, clarified the regulations, saying: "An animal can be shot by the people if it is threatening ... if life is threatened." But if life is not threatened, in the case of crop damage for example, permission must still be sought from the MET before the animal can be dealt with.

Applications for authorisation – for an animal to be declared a 'problem animal' so it can be shot, for example – can result in frustrating delays, meaning that permission often comes too late and the damage has already been done.

"It can take up to a month after reporting the incident," explained Caprivi resident Bonifacius. A further problem is that the nearest MET office can be up to 100km away for a villager in the Caprivi.

According to Boois, the issue at the heart



Jona Swalelo, who experiences devastating wildlife damage to his crops every year.

of HWC is land.

"Our people are increasing in Namibia – they are even settling in migratory routes of animals ... You can't shoot the animals because they were already there." As he put it, the question is "how can we come up with a harmonious co-existence?"

"We have got to look at a wide spectrum of options to see which option would be sustainable with the lowest maintenance costs," explained Chief Warden Britz. The MET's Game Protection Trust Fund (GPTF) "tries to alleviate conflict areas between animals and humans," he continued. "For instance, in the Kunene province, the fund has been used to set up separate water points for elephants [to try and prevent them from damaging the one residents rely on]." Concrete, practical measures such as this certainly help, but according to recent ministry research, the GPTF has yet to fund any such projects in the Caprivi.

A compensation scheme soon to be on trial in four conservancies also provides hope. The scheme works much like an insurance policy; conservancy members buy into the scheme and when they suffer livestock loss they receive direct financial compensation from the self-generating fund. Residents are positive about the scheme, but many may be disappointed to learn that it doesn't include crop damage. It is people like Jona Swalelo, who don't own any livestock, who are hardest hit by HWC and yet they will receive no help from the scheme.

Human wildlife conflict is clearly a complex and difficult issue and there are no simple solutions. The successes in wildlife conservation are definitely something to be proud of, but now the costs need to be addressed. As Bonifacius puts it: "The wild animals are very nice to live with, but the problem is what they do to the fields."

Measures are underway to help tackle the problem and the conservancy programme is certainly part of the solution. But clearly more needs to be done if the benefits of living with beastly neighbours for people like Swalelo and Bonifacius are to outweigh the costs. **BI**

• Interviews with conservancy residents used with kind permission of the WILD (Wildlife Integration for Livelihood Diversification) Project. Some extracts taken from WILD Project research papers.



A community waits for a 'problem' elephant shot by a trophy hunter to be divided up.