

**KILLING ELEPHANTS:
BRIEF COMMENTS ON PROFESSOR HENNIE LOTTER'S PAPER, "SHOULD
ELEPHANTS BE CULLED".
TPARI SEMINAR, 18 MARCH 2004**

Although there are a few areas of agreement with Professor Lotter, from the animal rights perspective, there are several criticisms as well as a number of issues that I feel could be included in his paper. I would like to highlight nine key points:

1. **THE LARGER GLOBAL CONTEXT**

It is essential to locate this question in of oppression and violence - what David Nibert refers to as "entanglements of oppression" – as well as social movement struggles that critique the current global system, recognize the interconnectedness of all things and are working towards a more compassionate world where we tread more lightly and we leave a smaller human footprint.

It is also important to make the point that the way humans relate to animals acts as a metaphor for human society and directly reflects social systems of domination and control.

2. **THE RESOURCISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC PARADIGM**

Ultimately, Prof Lotter's paper reflects the value system in which mainstream conservation is grounded, namely anthropocentric resourcism, which is itself a western concept that has its roots in colonialism. As such it operates within dominant constructs of conservation ideology, language and culture in which the practice of "culling" is firmly situated and the killing of elephants sanctioned.

In this view, individuality is denied. As long as the species is 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 of wildlife; 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. This obscures the cruelty, which such management actually entails, and this surely is a question of environmental justice for animals and human communities.

The victim in this paradigm is also blamed for his/her own existence. 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 is reflected - 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.

Ecofeminists, for example, have taken issue with this rationalist tradition and the dualistic structures it has generated, "fractures" such as mind/body, reason/nature, human/nonhuman, male/female and colonizer/colonized, draw attention to the way in which carving up the world into such differentially valued, mutually exclusive pairs serves to uphold multiple forms of oppression.

3. **INCORPORATING THE LANGUAGE OF OPPRESSION**

The use of certain language in the paper, in some senses, obfuscates the truth. Words such as 'harvest' or "cull" are preferred, making the act of killing subliminally more acceptable and palatable and inferring and concurring that there are a 'surplus' of animals, i.e. that there are simply too many elephants.

4. **IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATIONS**

Prof Lotter does not sufficiently interrogate the different ideological positions within which sustainable utilisation and conservation take place. Contestations are not adequately reflected – such as those between resourcism, animal rights and deep ecology, for example. Nor does he vigorously examine the arguments and positions in opposition to mainstream conservation.

5. **A VERY NARROW UNDERSTANDING OF THE NUANCED ANIMAL RIGHTS POSITION**

In some cases Prof Lotter misrepresents the AR position and in others merely skirts over it. Apart from authors, like Regan and Singer, Prof Lotter should also look at the arguments advanced by others such as Gary Francione, Steven Best and David Nibert.

Like all human rights causes the animal liberation/rights cause has at its core issues of justice and equality. The animal rights movement calls for the circle of moral sympathy and concern to be widened and it argues that the moral significance of animals necessitates that we reject the current reality, which is shaped by the concept of animals as property and the treatment of animals as resources. Its call to end animal exploitation raises structural, political and economic questions.

However imperfectly the discourse of rights, its dissident logic is challenging, racism, sexism, and colonialism, but also anthropocentrism and speciesism.

Moreover, it has clearly been through the actions and campaigns of animal organizations, that has drawn attention to the unethical and inhumane practices used by conservation authorities in South Africa – where for decades the ethical treatment of elephants has not been a concern.

6. **THE PORTRAYAL OF THE NORTH/SOUTH CLEAVAGE**

Prof Lotter assigns a stereotypical portrayal which gives the paternalistic and erroneous impression that concern for animals is only something the North can teach the South and that concern for animals is at odds with practices in the

South. This negates the notion that people in the South are sensitised to suffering. It also creates a linear, monolithic view of Africans. Finally, it fails to take into account African mythology with regard to elephants or notions of respect towards elephants embedded within African culture.

7. **MAKING ASSUMPTIONS THAT THE CONSERVATION STRATEGIES OF PARKS MANAGERS – HISTORICALLY AND CURRENTLY – WERE/ARE EFFECTIVE**

In fact these decisions have been flawed and have been disputed. Although there are scientists that offer evidence against “culling”, I don’t think their arguments were adequately reflected in the paper – in the same way that conservation authorities in South Africa have also not taken these arguments seriously enough. At the same time Prof Lotter does not really question the disputed assumption that there are ‘too many’ elephants. Others argue that this is not so. They also believe that their numbers surge and fall over time. A rhythm that has been lost through management practices. Perhaps Prof Lotter could also have gone into more detail about the difficulties with the concept and definition of so-called ‘carrying capacity’ and critically unpacked why the use of negative interpretations of habitat change is preferred by southern African range states.

8. **THE PAPER DOES NOT ADEQUATELY LINK THE MASSIVE KILLING OF ELEPHANTS THROUGH “CULLING” TO THE IVORY TRADE – WHERE ELEPHANTS ARE SEEN AS A SOURCE OF REVENUE:**

And this is where nations in Southern Africa have tried to use scientifically contested claims to influence CITES to downlist elephants so that ivory can be traded. However, other ecologists and conservation biologists have opposed this view. For example, Lindsey Gillson and Keith Lindsey, have brought into serious question the assertion by the southern African range states that elephants have an irreversible adverse effect on habitat and other species. They go on to 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.

9. **ETHICALLY JUSTIFYING “CULLING”**

On the one hand Prof Lotter argues that ethics guides our choices – which eventually end up as guidelines for management practices – and that killing elephants en masse is an ethically flawed procedure – which, for me, implies it can never be ethically justified – but then on the other hand he goes on to try and present conditions for this mass killing to take place. Ethics serve as moral restraints on action; if we decide an action is wrong, we must not do it.

One cannot help but draw analogies between the perceived justification of the “culling” of elephants and planned mass extermination of human beings such as those conceived, justified and perpetrated by the Third Reich.

The practice of “culling” can never be a humane process. As the gas chambers where, it may be efficient, but it can never be a kindly or instant death. Because it can now not be denied that elephants have complex social lives and emotions, conservationists are bizarrely beginning to argue that entire herds and families should be ‘removed’ so as to spare the remaining members of those families stress. This they fallaciously argue will make it ethically acceptable.

The point is that the premeditated and systematic killing of 1000s 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’.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Human beings, not elephants, are the biggest negative transformers of the natural world. We cannot look at issue of elephants without looking at human-based issues such as global levels of consumption (particularly in the North and within the North in the South), Global Corporate Capitalism, and the flow of resources from the South to the North.

So-called ‘conservation’ does not have a set of ethics that is removed from other forms of ethics. Indeed, our moral sensibility is not exclusive to our group alone and our ethical choices are the same in relation to both humans and other animals. There should be equal consideration of interests and a principle of justice. We need to achieve an intergroup justice and improve the situations of both humans and other animals.

Globally there is increased questioning of the ‘human exceptionalism’ paradigm (MacNaghten & Urry), which maintains the species barrier. There is also awareness that other species are sentient beings, which have their own intrinsic value and are not mere commodities or ‘resources’ for humans to exploit.

Concern for humans and concern for other animals are not as divergent as some would think and these concerns do not take place in a social or economic vacuum or outside of political ideology 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, including how natural resources are used.

Finally, in relation to the notion of benefits to rural communities through the practice of “culling”, animal rightists are strongly opposed to the position taken by organisations such as ResourceAfrica (previouslyART) who argue that controlling population growth of elephants will preclude their use as a ‘renewable resource’ by local communities.

Ethical conservation needs to be practiced. We have to ethically work out how to accommodate humans and elephants. Individual and complex social processes must be taken into account. 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. Moreover, claims of local community benefit from ivory sales are generally unsubstantiated. I believe 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 sustainable livelihoods. We also need to understand and unpack the reasons that create poverty.

I'd like to end off with a quote by Marjorie Spiegel, author of **The Dreaded**

Comparison:

"By eliminating the oppression of animals from the fabric of our culture, we begin to undermine some of the psychological structures inherent in a society which seems to create and foster 'masters.' With a philosophy of universal respect for others' lives, treating anyone—human or non-human—in a cruel manner begins to be unthinkable."

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