The Hard Truth About Elephant Culling – by Josh Mostert

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A conservationist's perspective on an issue too often judged from a distance.

Few conservation issues provoke as much anger, grief, and misunderstanding as elephant culling. To many, the idea is immediately unacceptable: cruel, outdated, and impossible to justify. That reaction is understandable. I am both an animal lover and a conservationist, and I do not approach this subject lightly. Over the past two decades, my experience with elephants has included numerous large-scale translocations, I have also darted hundreds of elephants to fit research collars, and prior to 2010 I was closely involved with several HWCC (Human Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence) projects with the focus on elephants. Additionally, I have been honoured to present on some of these subjects at various formal conservation gatherings. Sadly, my work has also required me to come face-to-face with one of conservation's most difficult realities: wildlife culling, including large-scale elephant culling. The contrast between "animal lover" and "elephant killer" may appear irreconcilable, but it is exactly why this subject deserves more than outrage. It deserves honesty and context.

The debate is emotionally charged, as it should be. However, labels such as heartless, senseless, barbaric, hateful, selfish, baseless, and cruel, which are often used to describe culling or those involved in it, are not accurate nor are they fair incantations. The fact is that no decent person treats the death of an elephant lightly. But emotion alone cannot solve a problem that exists on the ground, in real landscapes, where too many animals in too little space can damage entire ecosystems. Action is required, and those who make or carry out these decisions often do so while facing fierce criticism from people who may never have seen the scale of the damage firsthand, nor have they understood it. Social media makes that criticism louder, but not always better informed.



A once majestic baobab, now no longer… surrounded by fallen mopane trees.

What is too often missing from the public debate is the wider ecological picture. Elephant overpopulation is not the elephants' fault, nor is climate change solely to blame. Humans have reduced habitat, restricted movement, fenced landscapes, and compressed wildlife into spaces that can no longer function as they once did. The responsibility is ours, and responsibility requires action. The list is long, but things like grasslands, forbs, young trees, ancient trees, insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, small mammals & primates, antelope, zebra, buffalo, giraffe, rhino, elephants, and the carnivores all share the same system. When one part of that system overwhelms the rest, the damage is not theoretical; it is visible, cumulative, and at times irreversible.

Most of the people involved in culling do not do it for pleasure, bravado, or profit. In my experience, it is a sombre, unsettling, and deeply uncomfortable task. Those in my position do not have the luxury of turning a blind eye and are often forced to choose between two painful outcomes: the immediate loss of animals by personally bringing about their demise, or the longer, slower destruction of habitats that support elephants and countless other species. Spare a thought for those people who implement these decisions and must live with the weight of them. It is easy to condemn their choices from afar while comfortably sitting in front of a screen. It is much harder to stand in the landscape where the consequences of inaction are already visible.

Although this opinion piece focuses on the ecological case for culling, it would be remiss at this stage not to acknowledge the human dimension, which is a whole other subject in its own right and lies beyond my area of expertise, but it cannot be ignored. These conflicts are not always caused by excessive elephant numbers; nevertheless, communities living beside elephant populations are often directly affected by the pressures discussed here. Across Africa, elephants can pose serious challenges for rural communities, threatening lives, livelihoods, and

daily security. When elephants move beyond protected areas into communal lands, conflict intensifies. Farming families may lose an entire year's food supply overnight when herds raid fields and trample crops. Elephants also damage infrastructure, breaking water pipes, pulling down fences, and damaging homes while searching for food and water. In turn, elephants often suffer terribly from wire snares, gunshot wounds, and spear injuries inflicted by people defending their crops. Most tragically, living alongside such powerful animals creates constant risk: unexpected encounters on paths to work, schools, water points, or fields can lead to injuries and deaths, leaving many rural residents across Africa in a precarious daily reality. As stated earlier, elephants are not to blame; humans have diminished their habitat. But regardless of who caused the problem, it is now directly before us, and it demands action.





Only a few short years ago, these were forests of trees... the reality is that elephants are reducing them to nothing.

That and the ecological issue point to a problem, but it does not mean that culling is necessary everywhere, and it should never be the first option. Although, in some places, and under extreme circumstances, it becomes one of the few, and sometimes the only, remaining tools available. Alternatives such as translocation, contraception, wildlife corridors, and habitat expansion are often discussed, considered, and sometimes attempted. In some cases, however, they are impractical, inhumane, too slow, already exhausted, or introduced too late. Regrettably, many alternatives are no longer viable in certain areas because action has been delayed for too long. Allowing nature to take its course, or choosing to do nothing, is also a decision, but it can cause severe ecological damage and raises a difficult question: can nature still follow its proper course after being so radically altered by humans? Sadly, this could lead to the collapse or sharp decline of many species, including elephants themselves. Those that do not survive may endure slow, painful deaths from starvation or disease, while little, if any, viable habitat remains.



AI generated image of what the landscape may look like if nothing is done… and then the elephant will be gone too.

That is the part rarely understood from afar. But it does not mean that culling should be careless or unchanged by modern knowledge. Quite the opposite. Those of us who have been involved in it know how important it is to keep improving methods, reduce stress, avoid wounded animals, and ensure the process is as quick, controlled, and

humane as possible. Consideration for animal welfare has led to major improvements in culling methods, and these operations are carried out very differently today. In better-managed projects, research is conducted to help inform future decisions and increase our overall knowledge, in the hopes that something useful can emerge from an otherwise painful necessity. None of this makes culling easy. It simply recognises that if it must happen, it must be done with seriousness, skill, and restraint.

Among the many questions raised by this issue, there is a complicated but essential matter that requires consideration here: “carrying capacity”. What does it mean, and what does it look like? At what point do elephant numbers become excessive? Who determines how many elephants are too many and why, and when should it be defined as overpopulation? Could sex ratios also be a relevant factor? Although the idea of a specific “carrying capacity” is increasingly regarded as outdated, the questions behind it remain complex and widely debated among experts. Perhaps, instead of focusing on a fixed numerical threshold alone, decisions should rather be guided by local evidence and the specific circumstances of each area, including the management objectives for that particular landscape.

A possible warning sign of an excessive burden is sustained ecological pressure: accumulated, ongoing damage rather than short-term changes over a few seasons. When long-established trees, older than several generations of elephants, are being steadily destroyed, the situation warrants serious attention. Other warning signs may include water sources being dominated by elephants, other animals being displaced or adversely affected, or bird populations declining because the trees they depend on for nesting are being lost. If overall declining rainfall in a particular area is a contributing factor, then we need to ask ourselves if that area is still suitable or viable to hold the populations it once did or currently does. These points may be oversimplifying a very complex issue, however, when these and other impacts occur, and research indicates that elephant pressure is the cause, intervention should be considered and if necessary, an appropriate response identified and executed. If culling is that response and it has been correctly motivated and checked, then emotion and politics alone should not be allowed to prevent it.

Before ending, one more distinction is important: poaching, hunting, and culling are not the same. They are often lumped together, but they differ fundamentally. Poaching is criminal exploitation. It is indiscriminate, illegal, motivated by financial gain, and does nothing to manage excessive wildlife numbers. Trophy hunting is a separate debate with its own ethical questions. It generates an income, is selective, and by itself, does not meaningfully control population numbers either. Culling, when properly justified is not selfishly motivated and has little to no financial benefits. It is a sanctioned conservation management action taken in response to ecological pressure when all other options have been exhausted. It should be scrutinised, but it should not be misrepresented.

That said, this article only begins to address a uniquely complex subject. We must be careful not to oversimplify the challenges, while also avoiding overcomplicating them to the point of inaction. In conclusion, culling should never be celebrated, normalised, or used as a convenient shortcut. It should remain a last resort, backed by science, carried out humanely, and considered only when better alternatives are not available in time. But if we are serious about conservation, we must be willing to confront and pursue uncomfortable realities as well as noble ideals. Elephants inspire awe and deserve our respect, and rightly so. Precisely because we value them, we must also protect the ecosystems that sustain them, for the elephants that remain and for everything else that depends on those systems. Before condemning those on the ground, ask what choices we have, what damage is already unfolding, and what responsibility truly demands. Compassion matters. So does knowledge. Conservation requires both.



About the Author

Born in 1980 and raised on a South African farm, Josh Mostert is a conservationist with extensive experience in large-scale wildlife management. He is passionate about protecting the environment and the creatures that depend on it, from the smallest species to the largest. His perspective is shaped by years of practical fieldwork, a long family connection to conservation in Southern Africa, and the belief that difficult ecological decisions must be guided by compassion, science, and responsibility.
