



Africa Business

# Is elephant contraception an option for Zimbabwe?

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By Luckmore Safuli

CONSERVATIONISTS have warned the country against adopting elephant contraception as a population management strategy given the negative social and ecological consequences.

The ballooning elephant population estimated at over 80 000, rampant human wildlife conflict case, sophisticated poaching syndicates and the existing ban on ivory trade have become a major headache for Zimbabwe wildlife authorities.

Given the sensitivity of elephant population control debate, Zimbabwe has been pondering on which best option to take, with some quarters suggesting birth control pills for the giant creatures.

In its recent report to Parliament based on the assessment tour of Hwange National Park the Concilia Chinanzvavana-chaired Portfolio Committee on Environment and Tourism did acknowledge the complexity in dealing with the ever-increasing elephant population.

“The Committee observed the destruction of vegetation by elephants. Secondary vegetation was growing in certain areas where elephants had continuously destroyed the primary vegetation,” reads part of the report.

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While the Committee strongly recommended free trade in hunting products, Johannesburg based Environment Journalist Emmanuel Koro says the talk of elephant contraception should not be entertained not only in Zimbabwe but Southern Africa.

“The elephant contraception programme was attempted at South Africa’s Kruger National Park in the late 1990s and it failed. It failed because today South Africa still has an elephant over-population problem, so it will not work in Zimbabwe,” noted Koro.

Some ecologists have in the past suggested that contraception programme can only be effective when applied to smaller elephant sanctuaries and not major game reserves as Hwange National Park which is home to more than 40 000 elephants.

South African based elephant Management Specialist and former Hwange National Park Chief Warden Ron Thomson also argues that elephant contraception must not be considered as an option.

“With 50 000 elephants in Hwange which is twenty times more than the carrying capacity of the habitat it has been suggested that contraception can be used to solve the problem. But contraception deals with the number of calves which are born every season and it does not deal with the fact that there are too many elephants,” said Thomson. The elephant management expert also stressed that, “Contraception besides its other drawbacks, is very expensive and it also has to be applied to individual cows every six months, and there are something like 10 thousand breeding cows in Hwange which makes the task of applying the contraceptives impossible. The contraception does not tackle the problem. If you can manage something, you must manage towards resolving a problem and the problem in Hwange is that there are too many elephants and the only way to solve is to reduce the numbers to a level that the habitat can support.”

Southern Africa elephant range states which include Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have in the past applied to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) for the to have a ban on the commercial trade of their registered stockpiles of ivory from the African elephant lifted without positive response from the global watchdog for endangered animal species.

For Koro the only feasible option for Africa is sustainable utilization of the abundant wildlife resources.

“What Africa needs to do now is to just manage its wildlife populations which include elephants and rhinos is by harvesting its wildlife. That is the best way to control it. It will really be unfortunate if we bring the numbers of our rich wildlife population without harvesting their products,” he said.

“Elephant over population is a good indicator of conservation success in Southern Africa. We must limit it by harvesting and not putting it under contraception. When you look at Africa it is high time it stops being at the receiving end, being told by the West what to do, being limited by the West on in what African thinks is right for itself” Koro stressed

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conservation expert on the resource-rich continent are worried over the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on wildlife and adverse effects on tourism. Without revenue from tourists and hunting, it has become increasingly difficult for Southern Africa to fund conservation programme.

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