

# Hardship and progress for elephant conservation, new report shows

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EHRA releases 2024 annual report

An NGO warns that growing pressure from tourists on a declining free-roaming elephant population has reached unsustainable levels.

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In its 2024 annual report, the Elephant-Human Relations Aid (EHRA) organisation says last year was marked by both hardship and meaningful progress in desert-adapted elephant conservation. "It was a year of learning and growth that reinforced our motivation to create lasting impact for elephants and communities we work with," EHRA's managing director, Rachel Harris, notes in the foreword of the report.

She added that the prolonged drought brought new challenges for EHRA: "In response to the drought, the government announced a controversial wildlife cull. While the desert herds were spared, elephants in our extended project area were not, marking another difficult chapter in our conservation journey."

EHRA has been dedicated to implementing holistic solutions to human-elephant conflict in north-western Namibia since 2003.

EHRA assesses the diverse ways in which free-roaming elephants negatively affect people's lives and livelihoods and tests and applies effective measures to promote peaceful coexistence. The organisation's ultimate goal is to protect elephant survival beyond national park boundaries by using strategies focused on habitat conservation and ensuring that elephants and communities can live together in harmony.

EHRA supports elephant conservation across an area of more than two million hectares.

## **Populations at risk**

The report notes that the Ugab desert-dwelling elephant population has declined from 32 elephants in 2016 to just 20 in 2024.

"It is concerning that only one calf born during this period has survived. While human-caused and natural deaths remain high, it is a small success that no elephants in this population were shot due to conflict in 2024," the report states.

However, since no population growth has been recorded since 2012, EHRA says the long-term viability of these elephants is becoming increasingly uncertain.

"EHRA is working closely with various stakeholders to investigate and address the many potential threats to their survival – in addition to drought and conflict – including health, reproduction, and broader environmental pressures."

Fortunately, EHRA noted that the elephant population in the Huab River West area remains stable, with a slight increase recorded in 2024.

In 2024, EHRA once again collaborated with the environment ministry to equip four elephants in its project area with GPS tracking collars – three funded by the ministry and one by EHRA.

"One of the most fascinating insights we've gained since collaring elephants is how far adult bulls travel. One bull, collared near Omatjete in 2023, travelled more than 170 km north-west to just below the southern boundary of Etosha National Park."

## **Human and environmental pressures**

Human-elephant conflict remains the primary driver of the decline in elephant populations, according to EHRA.

"Therefore, preventing conflict and responding swiftly to any damage can ensure the long-term survival of free-roaming elephants," the report states, noting that elephant guards play a key role.

According to the report, elephants cause the most damage to water tanks and pipelines, accounting for 34.2% of all incidents. This is followed by damage to fences, mainly on commercial farms.

During extreme droughts, such as the one in 2024, elephants become increasingly desperate in their search for water and food, EHRA notes.

“As a result, damage increases, with most incidents still occurring on communal land, followed by conflict on private land.”

While 56.9% of recorded conflict incidents took place in communal areas, 39.2% occurred on commercial farms, marking a 31% increase from 2023.

According to the report, conflict peaked in January and May, just before and after the rains, when elephants migrate in search of food and water.

“Conflict-related deaths – including the four elephants killed as part of the national drought-relief culling programme – don’t always align with periods of high conflict,” the report points out.

According to EHRA, a total of six elephants died due to conflict in 2024.

### **Tourism attraction**

The report also highlighted tourism-related concerns.

“While tourism increases the monetary value of elephants, the growing pressure from tourists on a declining elephant population has reached unsustainable levels. Just seven years ago, sightings of other vehicles were rare; now, up to 15 vehicles may surround a single herd,” EHRA reports.

“This constant presence – along with unethical behaviour such as feeding elephants – has caused some animals to lose their natural fear of humans.

“In certain areas, elephants have become so habituated that they have begun raiding campsites and damaging infrastructure, posing serious risks to visitors and rural communities. When similar incidents occurred in 2017, three bulls were shot after raiding rural homes and being classified as problem animals.”

This concerning trend has prompted EHRA and stakeholders to act urgently.