

Commentary

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In an influential and still widely-cited article, “An Elephant Crackup?”, published in the *New York Times Magazine* in October 2006, Charles Siebert reports on work by Gay Bradshaw and several of her colleagues and argues that elephant populations are “suffering from a form of chronic stress”, “that what we are now witnessing [is] a precipitous collapse of elephant culture”, and that elephants are seeking revenge on humans as a result. He writes, “[all] across Africa, India and parts of Southeast Asia, from within and around whatever patches and corridors of their natural habitat remain, elephants have been striking out, destroying villages and crops, attacking and killing human beings” and “it is not only the increasing number of these incidents that is causing alarm but also the singular perversity — for want of a less anthropocentric term — of recent elephant aggression.”

Siebert goes on to write, “[the] fabric of elephant society [in parts of Africa], Bradshaw and her colleagues concluded, had effectively been frayed by years of habitat loss and poaching, along with systematic culling by government agencies to control elephant numbers and translocations of herds to different habitats. The number of older matriarchs and female caregivers (or ‘allomothers’) had drastically fallen, as had the number of elder bulls, who play a significant role in keeping younger males in line. In parts of Zambia and Tanzania, a number of the elephant groups studied contained no adult females whatsoever. In Uganda, herds were often found to be ‘semipermanent aggregations,’ as a paper written by Bradshaw describes them, with many females between the ages of 15 and 25 having no familial associations.” These are real and pressing problems, and should be acknowledged as such by those concerned about elephants, but I think Siebert goes astray when he tries to generalize from such findings

to suggest that elephants are exhibiting “a kind of species-wide trauma” (although he does not say which species he is referring to here the article implies all elephant taxa are affected) and that human–elephant conflict can largely be attributed to this phenomenon.

To support this contention, Siebert suggests that human–elephant conflict is a relatively new problem, or at least that it has only recently become significant; take, for example, his comments, “these attacks have become so commonplace that a whole new statistical category [sic], known as Human-Elephant Conflict, or HEC, was created by elephant researchers in the mid-1990’s to monitor the problem” and “[everybody] pretty much agrees that the relationship between elephants and people has dramatically changed,” Bradshaw told me recently. ‘What we are seeing today is extraordinary. Where, for centuries humans and elephants lived in relative peaceful coexistence, there is now hostility and violence’”. However, human–elephant conflict is not a recent phenomenon: crop depredations by elephants have long been widespread in both Africa and Asia. In Africa, pre-colonial and early nineteenth century historians describe areas where elephant crop depredations caused food shortages or forced people to relocate their settlements, and some authorities believe human–elephant conflict has been a problem since the beginning of agriculture (Bell 1987; Naughton *et al.* 1999; Naughton-Treves 1999; but see Martyn 1991). In Asia, ancient Indian sources refer to conflict between elephants and agriculturalists as early as the fifth or sixth century B.C., and again both the pre-colonial and colonial era literature refer to crop depredations by Asian Elephants (Sukumar 2003). Records of extensive killing of elephants also go back for centuries (Sukumar 2003), yet there is no evidence to suggest these have played any role in increasing elephant attacks on humans or their property in the long term. The pattern that emerges consistently is

one of competition for resources, particularly space, food, and water.

Nevertheless, human–elephant conflict is apparently intensifying, and it is now identified as one of the most serious threats to elephants in both Asia and Africa despite the fact that habitat loss and hunting have reduced the geographical range and numbers of Asian and African elephants alike (Hoare 1995, 2000a; Kangwana 1995; Barnes 1996; Kemf & Santiapillai 2000). A partial explanation of this seemingly paradoxical situation is that where elephants persist they are often forced into close contact with people, and contemporary social conditions often lower people’s tolerance of elephants (Naughton *et al.* 1999). Siebert’s article seems to downplay this—to my mind—important human dimension to the problem. It is not just to elephant psychology that we should be looking when seeking to understand and reduce human–elephant conflict: human psychological, sociological, and economic factors need to be considered too.

It is clear to many of us, therefore, that conservationists need to increase local people’s tolerance of elephants. This will require reducing crop depredations, which in turn will often require a better understanding of why elephants are raiding crops in the areas affected (e.g. Naughton *et al.* 1999; Hoare 2000b; Sukumar 2003). It is also important to recognize that no single factor will explain human–elephant conflict across Africa or Asia. As Richard Hoare notes, elephants and agriculture meet and mix in many different ways with varying consequences (Hoare 1995). As a result, the development of data collection systems that describe site-specific characteristics but which also contribute to a general understanding of human–elephant conflict has been identified as a priority need (Parker & Osborn 2001). The African Elephant Specialist Group’s development of practical tools, including a standard Data Collection Protocol, is helping meet this need (Hoare 1995, 2000b; Dublin 2003) both in Africa and in Asia where the AfESG’s tools have been modified for use in Asian conditions (e.g. Hedges 2004). Other standardized protocols have also been developed (e.g. WWF 2005).

Nevertheless, much uncertainty still exists about the actual magnitude of human–elephant conflict. Those of us who work in this field know that rural people’s memory of when incidents occur is often faulty, and that something which occurred, say six years ago, is repeatedly reported as having happened last year. Siebert actually gives examples of this in his *New York Times Magazine* article. In addition, farmers often exaggerate crop losses caused by elephants in the hope of receiving compensation or other assistance towards reducing the problem (Bell 1984; Naughton *et al.* 1999; Hill *et al.* 2002; Hedges *et al.* 2005). Furthermore, the damage caused by other species, especially rodents, primates, birds, or insects, is often greater than that caused by elephants (Naughton *et al.* 1999; Hill *et al.* 2002; Hedges *et al.* 2005) but because elephants are large dangerous animals that often injure or kill people during crop raiding incidents, the reactions they inspire are far stronger than those generated by smaller and less dangerous animals. As a consequence people living in central African forests “fear and detest” elephants (Barnes 1996). Many similar examples could be listed for other parts of Africa and Asia. As Naughton *et al.* (1999, page 6) note “This animosity is an ominous sign for future elephant survival, particularly given the trend toward decentralized wildlife management throughout Africa. Under current conditions, most local farmers would eliminate elephants from their environment if given the choice.” Even when such extreme reactions are not the case, people affected by elephant depredations typically demand protection or compensation from government authorities, and if this is not forthcoming they will often retaliate by killing elephants themselves or by facilitating access to the area by poachers. More generally, people can express their frustrations by sabotaging conservation and development projects (Hill *et al.* 2002).

For all these reasons it is imperative that the conservation community continues to address human–elephant conflict as a matter of urgency but I do not believe it is accurate to suggest that elephants are undergoing a taxa-wide stress-induced “breakdown” and are will fully targeting humans as a result. While few would

doubt that stress can result from the disruption of elephant social structures, portraying human–elephant conflict as a vendetta issue is not so much missing the point as actively misleading. It also belittles the complexity and importance of the problem and diverts attention away from its real causes and potential solutions.

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Elephant in China
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