

## **“Tuli Elephants: A Different Perspective of a Controversial Issue”**

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When in August 1999, the media broke the news of the capture of thirty young elephants from the Northern Tuli Game Reserve in Botswana, a huge controversial wildlife battle was to take place.

Gareth Patterson, the "Lion Man of Africa" and an associate of his environmental group Sekai, voiced his concern about the emotive issue from the outset. Within a matter of days, they found themselves drawn in a massive fight that was to drain them emotionally and financially.

In August 1998, thirty young elephants were separated from their family herds by game captures in helicopters. They were sold and exported to a South African based animal broker, whose intention was to sell these elephants to various zoos and safari parks all over the world.

The issue raised a number of questions. Firstly, does financial gain justify the separation of young elephants from their family herds, and secondly, what further extremes will the doctrine of "sustainable utilization" go to in the exploitation of wild animals.

The public was first made aware of the saga on August 20, when Radio 702's anchor, Jenny Crwys-Williams, hosted a show dedicated to the issue. In the studio with her were Gareth Patterson and Dr. Andrew McKenzie of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation. Listeners of the program were horrified as Gareth explained the situation that the young elephants found themselves in since their relocation to South Africa. The animals were being kept in a warehouse type building, where they were chained and hobbled for most of the day. Some of the youngsters had been subjected to a specific type of "subduing" called Mahout training. This type of training is a method that dates back to the 14th century, its object being to break the elephant's spirits, and thus be handable by man.

Unfortunately, the issue became an extremely complicated one--one that ceased to be no longer a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with the question of alleged cruelty. The larger NGOs in the country spoke out in favor of the capture, claiming that the elephants were spared a fate of certain death due to severe drought conditions in the Tuli Block from where the babies were taken. All of the different perspectives that were brought forward regarding the issue by way of news bulletins, radio debates, animal welfare, and animal related organizations, left the public confused as to the real situation.

As the issue progressed into an international furore, international NGOs spoke out vehemently against the elephants' capture and training. Demonstrations were taking place outside of the South African and Botswanan embassies in London, New York, and Washington to name a few. Within a number of weeks, renowned Kenyan elephant experts such as Daphne Sheldrick (MBE) and Dr. Joyce Poole were brought into the country to assess the situation. These experts, after having visited the premises where the elephants were housed, went on to add their voices to strongly condemn the entire operation.

As the media reports continued, perceptions of overpopulation of elephants in the Tuli as well as reported "drought" conditions were increasingly brought forward by several South African NGOs. This prompted Gareth Patterson to undertake a journey into the vicinity of the Tuli bushlands to investigate the conditions of the area, and to get a realistic picture of the present Tuli elephant range. For some time, Gareth had known that the Tuli elephants were in fact not compressed into

the 720 km area, but rather range in and out of the reserve, moving along the Limpopo River in a westerly as well as an easterly direction. If Gareth could prove this to be the case, it would disprove the "overpopulation" theory and could open up a whole new set of conservation ideas --such as linking the elephant range outside the reserve to that of the proposed Transfrontier Conservation Peace Park initiative.

Gareth is not a novice to the Tuli area. It was here, in the Northern Tuli Game Reserve (the Botswanan side of the Tuli bushlands), that Gareth had first worked as a young game ranger between 1983-1886. In 1989, he returned to the area with three orphaned lion cubs in tow after their guardian, legendary "Born Free" lion man George Adamson, had been murdered by poachers in the Kora National Park in Kenya. Gareth relocated and rehabilitated his young lion charges into this part of Botswana with great success.

Tragically, two of his lions were killed in later years by the hands of men. Batian, the male, was lured into South Africa to be shot by a trophy hunter in 1990. Furaha, Batian's sister, was falsely accused of killing a man in 1991. However, until their untimely death, Gareth had been able to grant his lions a life that was wild and free. After these disturbing incidences, Gareth left the area, hoping that his last remaining lioness Rafiki would be left in peace to live her lion life. Today, her descendants still live in the area.

The Northern Tuli Game Reserve in Botswana is a wildlife area encompassing 77,000 ha and adjoins a further 50,000 ha on the Zimbabwean side--commonly known as the Tuli Safari Area or the Tuli Circle. The system is one of semi-desert, with extraordinarily dry, harsh winters when it seems that there is not a blade of grass or browse in sight. The area's annual rainfall is about 350mm. The animals that live in these Tuli bushlands are well adapted to survival in these difficult conditions as each year the Mopani trees turn russet and golden colored.

The Tuli elephants are particularly tough and well-adapted members of their species. One of the worst drought years of recent times, the winter of 1982-83, marked the extraordinary resilience of these formidable animals. Zebra and wildebeest died during this particular devastating year--but not a single elephant died of drought related conditions. They did succumb to an unnatural factor--poaching. Due to the illegal ivory trade, Tuli elephants were slaughtered or wounded by poachers carrying powerful AK47s.

Gareth set out during the first week of February 1999, on what was to take a 4000-km journey circumnavigating the Tuli bushlands. I joined Gareth on this "safari," and with the kind sponsorship of Tau Game Lodge, who were funding the running costs of the trip and the much appreciated use of a Toyota HiLux 4x4 vehicle, provided by Kempston car hire in Durban, we left the concrete jungle during the height of summer.

We entered Botswana south of the Tuli bushlands, at the Stockport/Parr's Halt border post, wanting to make sure that, if indeed the Tuli elephants ventured that far, we would encounter signs of the outer most limits of their range. Camp for the first night was on communal land, in the middle of the green bushy vegetation.

Contrary to what we were expecting, we awoke the following morning to a damp, misty morning--nighttime having thrown a blanket of moisture over the land and our camping belongings. After a quick cup of strong coffee to get us going, we packed up our belongings and made plans for the day that lay ahead. After an hour or so, we were geared up to continue on our way--following the swerves and corners of the road that runs parallel with the "great, green, greasy" Limpopo River.

It was only well after 9 o'clock that the mist finally lifted somewhat, and I could actually make out some of the Tuli Block's beautiful scenery. Elephant spoor eluded us in that particular area, but there was more than ample sign of very healthy looking, fat, domestic livestock. I wondered to myself, Surely, if there had been drought, the cattle would have been the first to die?

We drove into Moletji village, close to Zanzibar border post, and stopped to talk to the local village people about the movements of the Tuli elephants. The village chief came out to discuss the elephants with us, and with the aid of an interpreter, we were able to ascertain that indeed, the elephants had passed through the vicinity of the village the year before. The chief told us that he had never actually seen the elephants, but had encountered their spoor on several occasions. He proceeded to tell us that, to much mirth of the other village inhabitants who had gathered round, although he did not fancy having the elephants in his backyards, he would love to see them!

The following morning we continued on the "elephant trail." Sure enough, only a few kilometers from the Zanzibar border post, we came across the first sign of elephants. From this moment on, we witnessed droppings and "elephant damage" to trees fairly often. Gareth made it a point to take every opportunity to speak to people along the way, thus acquiring first-hand information.

Over the next few days, we gathered a lot of information. We traveled extensively around the Tuli Block, passing the town of Bobonong north into an area where allegedly a "rogue elephant population" existed according to a report on "Botswana's Elephant Population" by Mr. Clive Spinage (published by Pachyderm, 1990). Driving through this range, we were astounded at just how extensive the range of these Tuli elephants appeared to be.

Following in their proverbial footsteps, the elephants always seemed to be a few paces ahead of us. Past the remote village of Lepokole, we came across a small water hole where we encountered further evidence of the elephants such as spoor and broken branches. The bush was thick and the mopane trees were a sparkling green color. Finally we reached the Shashe River, bordering Zimbabwe. We heard from the people living at the small cattle post that the elephants had been through the area just two days previously. We decided to camp near the river for the evening before heading on. That night the sky was roaring with thunder. Our small A-frame tent quietly stood its ground as the bolts of lightning lashed at the soil. At around midnight, the rumbling thunder rolled onwards, leaving our two trembling bodies to fall into a restless sleep.

We continued our travels northwards. Sadly, we were unable to follow the river road due to extensive rain, having turned the mud into treacherous territory. Instead, we then drove inland and even got as far as Nata. As we traveled north, we became unsure as to what elephants we were dealing with. Where did Hwange elephants begin and Tuli elephants end? Later we discovered that in fact there were most likely overlapping movement areas of both populations.

Within the next few days, we crossed over into Zimbabwe at Ramogkwebana. We stopped at the town of Plumtree to speak to Kenneth Mangena, the senior ranger of Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife. Kenneth informed us that in his opinion, both Hwange and Tuli elephants range north and southwards and that at Plumtree, their territories could possibly overlap.

We finally reached the Tuli Safari Area and the flowing Shashe River on February 15th. It proved to be a most interesting conclusion to our journey. The Zimbabwean Tuli area is only a mere 13 to 14km distance from the Northern Tuli Game Reserve's boundary. The vegetation was, again as we had experienced throughout our travels, green and lush. The most surprising fact that we came away with though, was the shock and disbelief that the resident rangers at Tuli Safari Headquarters expressed upon hearing that the term "drought" had been used at all. Without exception, all of the

rangers agreed that the winter of 1998 had been a normal dry year; that there was no severe drought and that there was no die off at all of any species due to shortage of food. As for the fact of overpopulation, it was most interesting to hear that the senior warden, who had only been posted in the area since September 1998, had only seen one lone elephant bull in that entire time.

Later, we traveled southwards down the Shashe River, learning more about the increased movements of Tuli elephants. Travelling via Beitbridge, we received further information from personnel at Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife office at Beitbridge, who told us that the elephants walk parallel the Limpopo River past the bridge. The elephants are utilizing the river up and downstream for the past two years or so and are now seen year round to the delight of the local residents who are keen to be told as to when they could view the elephants going by.

Concluding our journey, Gareth and I stopped at the Kruger National Park for three nights, and although we did not expect any more "evidence" of the trails of our main subjects, we were advised by Kruger Park's staff that each year approximately 150 elephants travel in and out of the Kruger from Gona-Re-Zhou National Park in Zimbabwe.

Two questions at the end of the journey beg for answers. First, surely long-term formal research should be undertaken on the movements of the Tuli elephants and secondly, should such research not have taken place *before* decisions concerning the fate of young elephants were made?