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Questions and Answers from The Elephant Symposium, 1979

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Questions and Answers from The Elephant Symposium, 1979
Transcribed by M. Pamela Bedore

1. Q: When cropping* elephants, is there a desired age structure you might maintain in a population?

A: The cropping of elephants can be done in several ways, either put it out on contract to hunters and assign a certain number of elephants to an elephant party, or turn it over to officials of the park. This was done in Kruger -- they shot whole family units, cows and offspring. The most successful way is to kill the whole family (those left would be at a great disadvantage). The occurrence of bulls is limited -- only when a female is in estrus. Hunters would kill only the largest tuskers. Park officials don't have to collect big tuskers -- their purpose is to reduce or manage the population.

2. Q: Doesn't this produce an excess of females?

A: You can collect young bulls without collecting big bulls.

3. Q: When and where was domestication of African elephants begun?

A: No evidence in tropical Africa. Domestication of elephants in Sudan (Nubia) is known from 500-600 B.C., no documentation. Domestication was a tradition in Asia, later in Africa. The mahouts imported the techniques to the Carthaginians who, in turn, trained the African elephants.

4. Q: Is there an affinity of elephants to geothermally heated water?

A: No. I didn't observe any differences in the different water holes.

5. Q: Is there a peck order in which elephants enter the water?

A: They are ordered in the way they proceed to the water; not a peck order. Occurs in several phases: there is a gathering in an open area; an indecisive moment prior to emerging from the forest. Leadership phenomenon is demonstrated as they move from the forest to the water -- is ordering; proceed to the water and then there is no special order but social preference. Buss -- in African elephant, the same is demonstrated, on a dusty dry day they assume the same regimen as in the Asian elephant.

*"There are three terms commonly used for the killing of wild animals in contexts other than hunting or poaching. . . '**Controlling**' (or 'shooting on control') usually means killing animals that are interfering with humans; '**culling**' is most often used to mean the killing of a certain percent of the population in order to reduce the numbers and/or change the age or sex structure of the population; '**cropping**' generally implies the systematic killing of animals for the utilization of meat, skins and trophies." (From Moss, Cynthia, 1975. Portraits in the wild: behavior studies of East African mammals. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, page 2.)

When emerging from the forest, there is order in the family unit. The largest cow controls the movement; they start to emerge and are usually in the lead; the younger calves are usually bunched in the middle with the older bulls in the rear. The film "The African Elephant" showed hierarchy in the water among young bulls.

6. Q: What is the frequency of visits to water holes and bathing?

A: Asians drink at least once a day, usually in two sessions in a 24-hour period. Feeding, drinking and bathing are sometimes combined -- not complete distinct activities (a plain water hole doesn't exist in Asia). The difference between Africans and Asians: Asians are dependent on cover from direct sunlight; overall they don't expose themselves unless it's windy.

7. Q: There is a great deal of unpigmented pink skin at the base of the trunk in Asian elephants. Is this related to susceptibility to sundrying or is this a natural occurrence in the wild?

A: There is a certain amount of depigmentation in certain subpopulations -- most likely it is genetically controlled. This condition may also result from continuous abrasion, especially on ear tips and in bending areas on the skin. In work elephants, exaggeration of areas of depigmentation is observed.

8. Q: Is the absence of tusks common in the wild?

A: Only 5% of the males are tusked in the wild in Sri Lanka. All males in Sri Lanka have tushes (small tusks) -- these don't extend more than a couple inches beyond the lip.

9. Q: In captivity, elephants are said to stash food -- have you seen anything like that?

A: They take as much hay as they can and store it out of reach of other elephants.

10. Q: The logarithmic growth curve implies they are regulating their carrying capacity. If this is true, why is cropping necessary?

A: At a certain point there is negative growth in the population -- if you start harvesting, you set back to a point with higher reproductive rate. As the population density increases, the reproduction rate declines. Another speaker tries to aid the answer: The real question is, if the logarithmic growth begins to decline, they are regulating themselves, so why crop? A: If population exhibits a negative rate of change, some environmental resource is in short supply. The population doesn't come asymptotic at carrying capacity but probably past it. Since the carrying capacity is hard to measure, this point is still argued. They are cropped when they are in the middle to hold them in that phase -- try to retain the maximum reproductive rate.

11. Q: How are elephant numbers regulated? How are they associated with migration?
- A: Douglas-Hamilton's study in Manyara suggests that some self-regulation occurs. It is true that they will travel long distances during inopportune times. They are capable of fooling us. Parks confine them from natural movements -- lakes, rivers, roads. There is some success in restricting their movements and thereby avoiding crop destruction and subsequent killing of elephants. Today they undergo aggregations in numbers in some areas but cannot migrate.
13. Q: In reference to avoidance behavior, who are the elephant's predators?
- A: The situation discussed was in regard to elephants in protected areas. In an enclosed region they avoid man (their only real predator) by hiding during the daytime and being active during darkness. Young, old and sick elephants may be preyed upon by large carnivores such as lions, tigers and crocodiles.
14. Q: Do elephants pass on their experience to the next generation?
- A: Yes they do. Long calf-hood provides sustained environment within which the calves learn from the examples of the behavior which is set by the adults.