



Conservation, crime and communities:

The Ruvuma Elephant Project, Tanzania

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At a glance

COUNTRY	Tanzania
LOCATION	Five Wildlife Management Areas (community land) in the Selous-Niassa Wildlife Corridor
SPECIES	Elephant (<i>Loxodonta africana</i>)
ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE CONTEXT	Extremely high levels of elephant poaching
TYPE OF POACHERS	Mostly local, but financed and organised by outsiders
TYPE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TACKLING IWT	Community rangers/eco-guards Community intelligence-gathering
CONSERVATION INCENTIVE MECHANISM	Enterprise development Human-elephant conflict mitigation

The story so far

Remarkable results in reducing elephant poaching

in the Selous–Niassa wildlife corridor are attributed to a strategy that is built on extensive community participation, intelligence-led and involves multiple-agencies.

The Ruvuma Elephant Project (REP) covers a 2,500,000 ha area of Tanzania between two protected areas: the Selous Game Reserve, in the south of the country and the Niassa National Reserve, just across the border, in Mozambique.

It includes an important wildlife corridor, dominated by miombo woodland, supporting a range of different land uses and rubbing up against an international border; factors which have contributed to it being one of the most notorious areas for elephant poaching in Africa.

Yet, in spite of the recent resurgence in poaching for ivory in Tanzania and Mozambique – and especially in the Niassa area and the Selous ecosystem – results show that the REP has managed to curb elephant poaching in the area. If current anti-poaching activities can be maintained, elephant populations in the REP should remain stable.

The REP explains its success by having a strong focus on working closely with communities to achieve reciprocal support and participation, joint patrols and operations, and intelligence-led activities both in and outside the protected areas.

The area in question is a mosaic of administrative zones, falling within three local government districts, and including five Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) – managed by community-based organisations that have Authorised Association status to protect and sustainably manage the natural resources.

There are also five forest reserves, managed by District Forest Officers; a game reserve managed by the Wildlife Division; and village land managed by local village governments and the Districts.



Ruvuma Elephant Project scouts
(PAMS Foundation)

A reliable picture of elephant status and threat

The Ruvuma Elephant Project was established in 2011, organised by the not for profit organisation PAMS Foundation. Its goals are to establish a reliable picture of elephant status and threat in the area, to understand seasonal movements, control poaching, to ensure law enforcement and prosecution is a real deterrent, and to reduce elephant mortality due to human-elephant conflict.

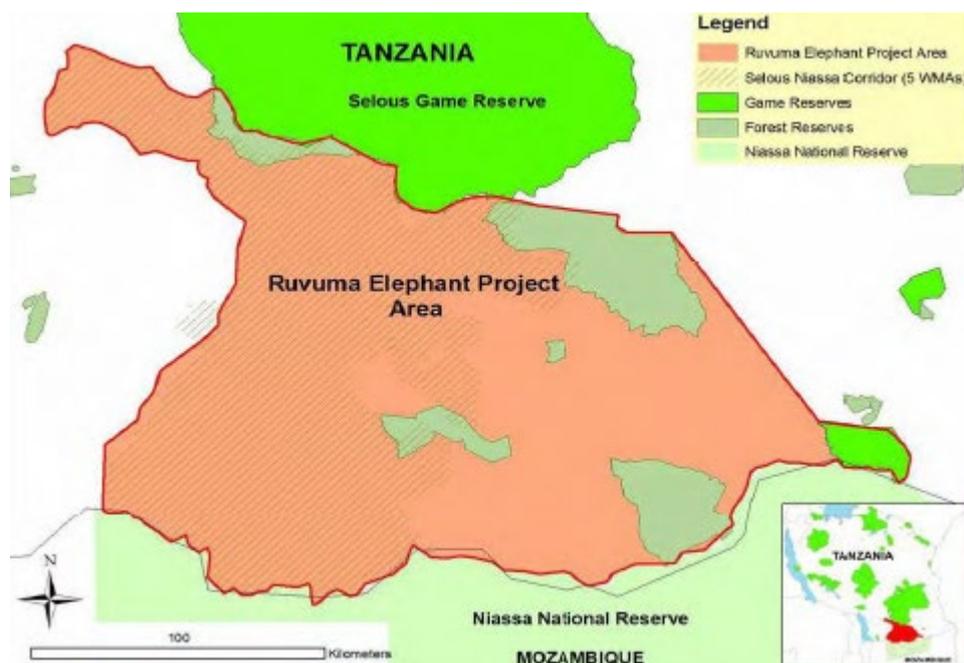
To achieve these aims, the project implementers have been pursuing a range of activities:

- Patrolling has been strengthened through training game scouts and rangers in anti-poaching skills and case reporting. The project has also been implementing joint field patrols where village game scouts accompany wildlife officials and rangers from the District or Wildlife division.
- Monitoring and data collection has improved through regular air surveillance, carried out over set routes. This provides geographical positioning system (GPS) data for elephant count, carcasses and illegal activity.
- Establishing incentives and giving rewards to individuals for good performance and information. The resulting intelligence is then fed into special intelligence-led operations.
- Setting up a human-elephant conflict (HEC) mitigation programme – including putting up chili pepper fences and beehive fences to deter elephants from crops.
- Supporting income generating activities for WMA communities.

In essence, community engagement in combating ivory poaching boils down to three types of action on the part of local people: they act as informants, they act as guards, and they change their own behaviour.

The project actively facilitates all three. In return, the people get paid for information, and for carrying out tasks. They get help to protect crops and sell the chilli peppers which are used for crop protection. They are also rewarded for good performance in law enforcement.

Their involvement is not without risk. Community guards have been shot and had their homes destroyed by fire. The project, however, is quick to provide compensation and to rebuild morale among those who are committed to wildlife protection. The commitment levels suggest that overall, the rewards outweigh the risks.



Ruvuma Elephant Project Area. Copyright: PAMS Foundation

What works and why?

In the three and a half years since the project got underway, the impact on poaching has been greater than any other unit or project in Tanzania, with one exception. The Friedkin Conservation Fund (FCF) project, which operates in the north and western parts of the country, and which adopts a very similar approach to REP, has comparable levels of effectiveness.

REP project patrols and aerial surveillance show a substantial drop in elephant carcasses seen during the first three years of operations (216 were spotted in year one compared to only 68 in year two and less than half of that in year three) – a decline that is not explained by a decline in the elephant population over all. Indeed the population of live elephants has remained stable or marginally increased over the same period. In the last five months of 2014, only one illegally killed elephant carcass was found.

Interventions have led to the seizure of 1,582 snares, 25,586 pieces of illegal timber, 175 elephant tusks, 805 firearms, 1,531 rounds of ammunition, 6 vehicles and 15 motorbikes. So far, law enforcement activities have led to the arrest of 562 people.

Those involved in the REP believe that the project works because the area is protected by multiple agencies, rather than a single authority. These include community-based organisations, and a non-government organisation which is a specialist in protected area management support

(PAMS Foundation) assisting them and the relevant government authorities. Multiple agency involvement increases transparency which hinders corruption.

Another key factor is the high levels of community engagement, which is integrated into and supported by formal law enforcement. This aspect of REP strategy is based on the premise that local involvement in commercial poaching is a manifestation of other problems: the need for cash, lack of viable alternatives, lack of understanding of the importance and value of conservation, and lack of good relationships. All these causes need to be recognised and addressed before there can be any long term progress.



Scouts in training (PAMS Foundation)

Challenges

- The proximity of the project area to a long, porous national boundary.
- Working within funding and capacity constraints.
- The sheer scale of the opposition; the poachers' weaponry and tactics.
- Limited resources and weaponry available for the community scouts.

Lessons learnt

- Don't raise expectations of communities and then be unable to deliver on those expectations. Promising less and delivering more has proved to be an effective approach to win the support of communities.
- It is important to be sincere, reliable and timely (e.g. with payments) in all dealings.
- Sometimes the path of least resistance is not the path that is right. It is critical not to compromise on principles or do anything that could be legally used against you in the future – even when this might provide a short term fix.
- Don't limit your friends and allies to a single source – successful projects require support from a wide variety of sources if they are to be sustainable in the long term.
- While financial resources are essential, an integrated strategy, commitment and determination affect success more than just funding.
- Adaptive management is essential. Projects need to be prepared to change course and change tactics if what was originally planned is not working.

COULD THIS WORK ELSEWHERE?

The REP model could be widely replicated elsewhere, but only by NGOs who have the expertise and who are prepared to do everything it takes to implement a full, holistic approach. As noted earlier, there is a similar project in the north and west of Tanzania which uses similar strategies and has also proved to be effective.