

Evidence-based best-practice management for African Elephant

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African savanna elephants *Loxodonta africana* are charismatic and iconic species, that have recently been listed as Endangered. However, in southern Africa, their numbers have increased markedly, including in South Africa, where about 80 new populations have been established over the years through reintroductions. Increasing densities, especially in small reserves, raise concerns over impact on biodiversity. Elephants are critical

for ecotourism income, and can be harvested for hunting and products, including meat. However, there are many sacred values of elephants that counter economic benefits. I discuss the conservation and management approaches in South Africa, unpack the broad range of benefits elephants potentially bring, and then present the results of our work on the behavioural ecology of elephants to help us understand how to approach difficult decisions. I present information on aberrant behaviour of males, and how this can be corrected, and on the importance of leadership and age for female elephants to make correct decisions. Our work on stress hormones highlights the long-term effects that anthropogenic disturbance has on acute and chronic stress in elephants, the importance of refugia to reduce stress, and of safe corridors for elephants to move between refugia. I show that tourists can have on negative effects on elephants through poor behaviour, and how elephants react to communities around reserves. I then discuss issues of deliberate disruptive management interventions that are planned at the incorrect spatial scale. Towards the end, I summarise what we have learned from our studies on their behaviour, and interpret what this means for management of elephants. Finally, I draw on a number of recent court judgements in South Africa that emphasise the importance of animal welfare, and conclude with the critical need to consider the wellbeing of animals as fundamental, and not secondary or separate, to the rights and interests of people if we are successfully conserve such sentient animals for future generations.