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Elephant Overpopulation in South Africa (sidebar)

Since 2005, a group of American ecologists has been promoting an ambitious wildlife relocation project designed to save various African mammals from extinction. Under the proposed plan, various species would be transported from Africa to the Midwestern U.S. so that the animals could be better protected. But while the threats facing some African wildlife are real--overhunting and habitat degradation are problematic in some countries--some nations in sub-Saharan Africa have done an admirable job of protecting their native animal species, analysts say.

For example, South Africa, a country with high levels of biodiversity, is one of the continent's leaders in terms of nature conservation. In the country's famed Kruger National Park, a variety of plant species and several type of large animals (or "megafauna") thrive. Visitors from all over the world flock to the park in order to catch a glimpse of lions, elephants, rhinoceroses, buffalo and leopards in the wild. But, in recent years, the park's dedication to nature conservation has produced a troublesome side effect: too many elephants.

As recently as the 1930s and 1940s, wildlife experts say, between three million and five million elephants roamed throughout Africa. However, as the continent's human population increased during the late 20th century, the elephant population fell to fewer than 600,000 due to poaching and environmental destruction. In South Africa, wide-ranging conservation efforts during recent decades have allowed the local elephant population to rebound. Though there were only 7,000 elephants in Kruger National Park during the mid-1990s, there are now an estimated 12,000 elephants in the park, and that number is poised to grow in the coming years.

But that growth has exacted a toll on the Kruger's ecosystem, park officials say. Elephants may eat as much as 440 pounds of vegetation per day, they note. Consequently, the animals have damaged a large number of plant species in the area that serve as food sources--or even habitats--for other animals. "Our obligation is to manage and conserve biodiversity," remarks Dr. Hector Magome, conservation services director of the South African National Park system. "Increasing numbers of elephants are causing major changes to the vegetation of the park, destroying trees and reducing habitat available for other wildlife species.... At what point do you want to stop that?"

According to a growing number of South African wildlife officials, the time to curb elephant population growth is now. Some proposed solutions, such as relocating the animals to underpopulated regions in neighboring countries or creating protected "migration corridors" that would allow the animals to roam to other nature reserves, have proved dauntingly expensive. Other ideas--such as purposefully culling, or killing off, some elephants to safeguard biodiversity in the region--have outraged environmentalists in South Africa and around the world. While none of the options for reducing the South African elephant population are appealing, observers say, action of some type must be taken in the near future, or the delicate ecosystem of Kruger National Park may be permanently damaged.

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