



Humane Society International/Africa: Response to the killing of nine elephants at Mawana Game Reserve

Humane Society International/Africa is deeply shocked and disheartened by the killing on 31st August 2024 of nine elephants - one of whom was pregnant, and whose unborn calf also died. These elephants were part of the main herd of an estimated 38 animals at Mawana Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The relevant authority, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW), claims the elephants were killed because of conflict with local communities. In light of this tragic event, HSI/Africa has written to EKZNW seeking further information on the incident. We have also written to the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, requesting urgent intervention and assistance.

HSI/Africa has had a long history of engagement with EKZNW about the Mawana herd. These free-roaming elephants are currently not contained within an adequately fenced reserve, and since late 2023 HSI/Africa and our partners have proposed and presented EKZNW with several non-lethal strategies for the protection of the Mawana elephants and the surrounding communities. In particular, from January – June 2024 HSI/Africa and our partners entered into multiple discussions with EKZNW about a humane way forward but disappointingly, feedback was not received before the incident.

Since 2020, HSI/Africa has funded and successfully conducted an elephant fertility control program on the Mawana herd using immunocontraception vaccine to humanely manage population growth. Over this period, we have also fitted three satellite tracking collars to individuals in the Mawana herd to help monitor elephant behaviour. The immunocontraception of the Mawana elephants is part of a wider immunocontraception program facilitated by University of Pretoria's Veterinary Population Management Laboratory (VPML) for more than two decades on 50 private, provincial and national reserves, with nearly 1,700 elephant cows treated. The vaccine is produced locally by a specialized team at the VPML under applicable permits and regulations.

Immunocontraception of elephants is a proven humane alternative to managing population densities. One female elephant can produce eight to 10 calves in her lifetime; immunocontraception can thus have a major impact on herd growth by preventing births, thereby controlling local elephant densities in participating reserves. Elephant cows are treated with the contraception vaccine after they have given birth to at least one calf (estimated from the cow's age), to safeguard the social well-being of the cows and the herd. Allo-mothering, where female elephants other than the biological mother help care for and raise the young, plays a crucial role in teaching mothering skills within elephant herds and the Immunocontraceptive Protocol does not promote blanket contraception within herds. As the population is made up of females of differing ages, calving will occur at a reduced or stabilised rate, which is why some pregnant females and young calves will still be seen.

Where there is no immediate threat to a person's life or livelihood as determined by the regulatory provisions, the killing of even a single elephant is a tragedy, so the deaths of so many elephants with whom we have worked for several years is devastating. For humane solutions to human-wildlife conflict to be effective, all parties need to be engaged, transparent and committed to this as a sustained effort. Resorting to killing elephants without exhausting all possible humane routes, is a deeply regrettable moral failure.

ENDS