

From Conflict to Coexistence

KEEPING ELEPH ANTS AT BAY

CONTINUING OUR NEW SERIES ON ELEPHANT CONSERVATION IN ASSOCIATION WITH SAVE THE ELEPHANTS, JANE WYNYARD DESCRIBES HOW FOLKLORE LED TO A 'TOOLBOX' OF SOLUTIONS

There's a folklore in Kenya, that African elephants are scared of bees. The buzz of these tiny insects is enough to send the world's largest land mammals fleeing for their lives.

In 2007, zoologists and elephant experts, Dr Lucy King, Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Professor Fritz Vollrath of Save the Elephants (STE), decided to test this theory by playing recordings of angry buzzing bees to groups of elephants. The research, supported fully by Kenya Wildlife Service, revealed that not only do elephants flee but they also headshake, dust and rumble to each other to stay away. This unique research led the team to develop one of the most effective solutions to Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) – the Beehive Fence.

This ingenious yet straightforward device comprises yellow beehives and dummy hives strategically connected by a metal wire and hung around a field of crops. When an elephant tries to enter the farm, the tugging of the wire disturbs the bees prompting them to buzz and scare away the intruder. This innovative solution not only

safeguards farms from elephants but also boosts farmers' income through the sale of honey, and enhanced crop yields due to bee pollination.

The humble Beehive Fence has been so successful at stopping elephants from raiding crops that to date over 14,000 beehives have been deployed by farmers as elephant deterrents in 97 sites across Africa and Asia.

However, the Beehive Fence is just one of many coexistence solutions available. Today, keeping elephants at bay has become a full-time occupation for many conservation organisations across Africa. HEC is one of the biggest threats to elephants and turning that conflict to coexistence requires a multitude of different solutions that are usually unique to each country.

Across the continent, people are waking up to elephants trampling crops, ripping off their roofs in the middle of the night in search of food, or consuming their only source of freshwater. The elephants are not to blame – they're feeling the squeeze as wild spaces shrink due to developing infrastructure, and



School children stop for an elephant to cross a road in Lake Jipe, southern Kenya

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STE team monitoring a beehive fence
at a farm in Sagalla, Tsavo
JASPER SCOFIELD/SAVE THE ELEPHANTS

natural resources slowly dwindle due to climate change and land degradation. And Africa’s elephants require a lot of food – usually around 400kgs and up to 210 litres of water daily for an adult bull.

While Beehive Fences are a powerful tool to protect a small farm of crops, a variety of complementary tools are needed to foster true harmonious coexistence for different points of contact between elephants and humans, and to stop communities from retaliating.

Introducing the Human-Elephant Coexistence Toolbox by Save the Elephants. This comprehensive and

beautifully illustrated manual compiles a curated collection of about 80 strategies and proven techniques for fostering peaceful interaction between humans and elephants.

Developed in Kenya but with insights, research and experience from hundreds of collaborating conservationists, field partners, and rural farmers across Africa, it presents a holistic approach to mitigating conflicts and promoting elephant-friendly practices.

From chilli fences and non-palatable crops, to watch towers and noise cannons, the Toolbox provides

communities with tangible, peaceful, and cost-effective coexistence solutions. Each technique is assessed based on factors such as budget, complexity, and risk, empowering communities to choose tailored interventions that suit their specific needs and circumstances. Crucially, it also includes advice on understanding elephant behaviour and how to prevent conflict from happening in the first place – like protecting the integrity of national parks and securing wildlife corridors.

The manual comes to life through a unique “Training of Trainers” monthly

workshop conducted by the Save the Elephants team in Kenya where community representatives spend 3 days being equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to teach others how to live peacefully with elephants.

Some of the first ever Beehive Fence farmers, such as Jones Mwakima of Sagalla in Tsavo who has now adopted six methods from the Toolbox, have become dedicated advocates and passionate trainers as part of this program. Jones even has a tool named after him that made it into the manual – the Mwakima Noise Cannon

– a noisy rusty nail and tin can device that he invented to chase crop raiding elephants away.

To date, seven workshops have been held and over 100 participants from organisations across Africa have graduated from the programme. With three decades of scientific research behind it, Save the Elephants is dedicated to unravelling the intricacies of elephant behaviour. The Human-Elephant Coexistence Toolbox exemplifies how STE leverages their wealth of research and pairs it with respect to traditional wisdom, indigenous

practices, and inventive farm-based solutions to curb the escalation of human-elephant conflict.

Meanwhile, let’s give a round of applause to the pint-sized African honey bee! Without its powerful buzz scaring off elephants, and crucial role in our ecosystem health, we might never have stumbled upon the genius of the Beehive Fence and its evolution into an entire Toolbox of Coexistence methods! 🐝

JANE WYNYARD IS THE DIRECTOR OF CONTENT AND MEDIA AT SAVE THE ELEPHANTS