

Elephants over the Cliff: Explaining Wildlife Killings in Tanzania



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ABSTRACT

Many incidents of elephant killings have recently taken place in Tanzania as well as in other African countries. Such events are usually presented as results of the rising global demand for ivory. As we show in this case study, however, not all violence against elephants is driven by the ivory trade. This article presents an event that occurred in West Kilimanjaro in 2009 when numerous villagers chased a herd of elephants over a cliff, killing six of them. Using a 'web of relations' approach, we seek to uncover the underlying as well as the immediate factors that led to this incident. A severe drought sparked off the event as elephants increasingly raided crops and destroyed water pipes. There are growing elephant and human populations in the area, which must be understood in the context of land use changes. Large areas have in various ways been turned into different types of protected areas during the last few decades as results of efforts by conservation NGOs and governmental agencies. In between these areas, people try to sustain a living on the remaining land, while encountering increased problems with wildlife. Conservation in the study area takes place without local communities having any real influence on decision-making. This leads to a feeling of being marginalized and disempowered, which again causes resistance to conservation, as in this case.

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Introduction

After two decades of increasing elephant populations in Tanzania, a decline has recently been recorded in some areas (Niskanen, 2010; TAWIRI, 2010; Douglas-Hamilton and Poole, 2010). This decline is due to a resurgence of elephant killings mainly associated with the growing illegal trade in ivory to supply the demand for artefacts and alternative medicines in China and other East Asian countries (Milliken and Sangalakula, 2009; Martin and Vigne, 2011; CAI, 2012).

Some of the violence against elephants is, however, not driven by the ivory trade. In this article, we use a 'web of relations' approach to analyse an incident that took place an evening in May 2009 on the western side of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. In this particular incident, a large crowd of villagers surrounded a herd of elephants and chased them, with the aid of torches, motorcycles, fire, and noise, towards a cliff, killing six of them. This event

happened near the centre of Engare Nairobi village (Fig. 1). During fieldwork in 2009–2011, we also learned about several other incidents in which elephants had been speared or found dead without indications of ivory poaching.

While we recognize that poaching for ivory constitutes a significant driver for the on-going elephant killings in Africa, we ask whether there are more of these cases that might be mistaken as ivory poaching, and which in reality are caused by a resistance to conservation practice. One key distinction between elephant killings for ivory or for resistance would, in addition to what people state in interviews, be whether the tusks are removed immediately or not. In poaching, the tusks will be quickly removed after the killing in order not to attract attention. In Engare Nairobi, numerous villagers were being photographed with the carcasses the day after the killings (we are in possession of some of these photographs), while the tusks were not removed. In addition, what separates poaching from resistance might also be what Scott (1992) calls 'hidden transcripts', which refer to the narratives that subaltern groups use to interpret their own experience of domination or oppression. Furthermore, frustration among people about the ways conservation takes place may also constitute an important cause behind poaching, since poachers often seem to be able to carry out their activities with the collusion of local people.

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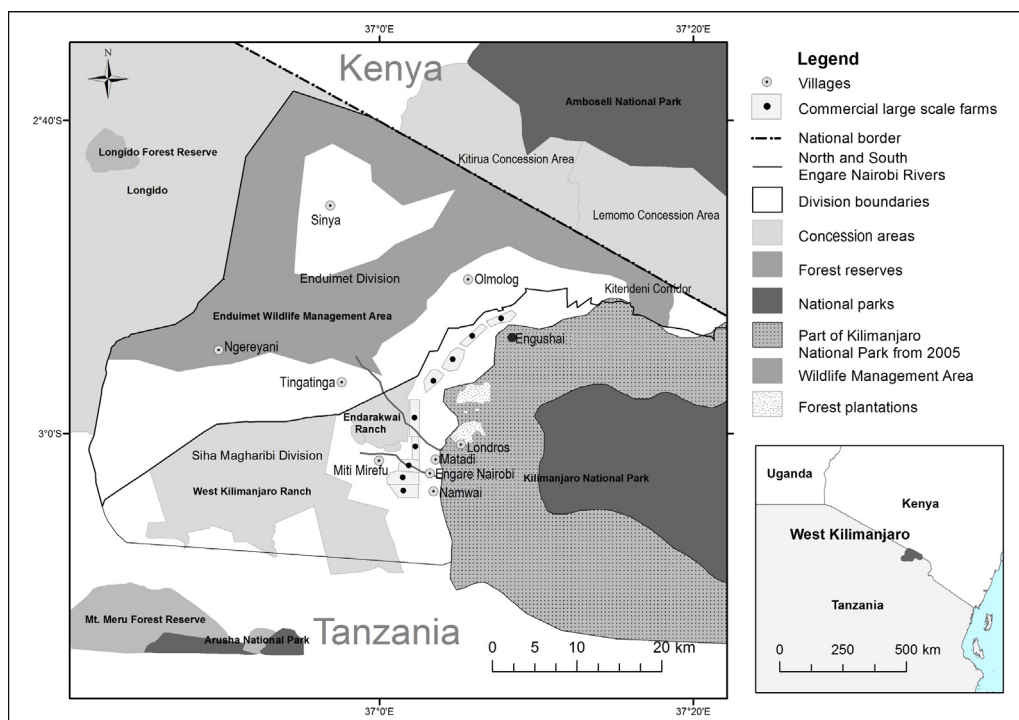


Fig. 1. Map locating Engare Nairobi and neighbouring villages, the two divisions of Siha Magharibi and Enduimet, and conservation areas and ranches.

Case studies of human–elephant conflicts in Africa often conclude that increases in human and/or elephant populations are the main causes of these conflicts as elephants and people overlap in their use of habitats and come into conflicts (e.g. Thouless, 1994; Hoare, 1999; Hoare and du Toit, 1999; Naughton-Treves et al., 1999; Walpole et al., 2003; Weladji and Tchamba, 2003; Osborn and Hill, 2005; Sitati et al., 2005; Graham, 2006; Walpole and Linkie, 2007; Sitati and Tchamba, 2008; Warner, 2008; Karimi, 2009; Kikoti et al., 2010; Mackenzie and Ahabyona, 2012). Some studies also point to land-use changes as a driver of such conflicts (e.g. Campbell et al., 2002; Noe, 2003; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010). These land-use changes result both from population dynamics and from the impact of policies and governance. Other studies also focus on drought leading to increased resource scarcity as a factor sparking off conflicts (e.g. Dapash, 2002; Zubair et al., 2005; Graham, 2006; Lee and Graham, 2006; Warner, 2008; Lamarque et al., 2009).

Elephants require large tracts of land and consume large volumes of forage (Kangwana, 1996; Kikoti, 2009). They may spend 70–90% of their time foraging and can eat 100–300 kg of vegetation in a single day (Osborn, 2004). Thus, in their search for pastures and water, they engage in extensive seasonal migrations often including moving through farmland (Kangwana, 1996; Kikoti, 2009). Human–elephant conflicts can be defined as interactions between humans and elephants where direct and indirect negative consequences, whether perceived or real, exist for one or both parties (Decker et al., 2002; Zhang and Wang, 2003).

This article contributes to the understanding of these conflicts with a detailed investigation of a case of elephant killings providing an insight into the interaction of a broad set of explanatory factors. First, increases in both human and elephant populations in West Kilimanjaro are essential components in the land-use dynamics resulting in the conflicts. Second, large areas have, in various ways, been protected during the last few decades as a result of the agency of actors external to the local communities. These actors include the Wildlife Division and the Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism,

wildlife-based tourism investors, and international conservation organisations. Small-scale farmers and pastoralists try to sustain a living on the land remaining in between the protected areas, while encountering growing problems with wildlife. This has left people with an increased feeling of being marginalized and disempowered and with limited possibilities to influence the situation through democratic means. Thus, we argue that this case may be interpreted as an act of resistance by people who feel disempowered and who have limited access to representational channels to voice their concerns. This situation is not unique in Eastern and Southern Africa where powerful actors have worked for the establishment of protected areas and generally facilitated conditions to increase wildlife. Thus, we suggest that an unknown number of the other elephant killings in Africa that are referred to as ivory poaching may also result from a resistance to conservation. In addition, it is also likely that resistance to conservation play a role recruiting local community members into networks of ivory poaching.

In the following, we first review literature on resistance to conservation before we present the study area and the ‘web of relations’ approach used as part of our methodology. Thereafter, we analyze each of the possible factors, and establish the ways in which multiple involved factors combine to explain why the elephant killings took place in this case. Finally, we discuss the role played by elephant killings in addressing human–elephant conflicts in the study area.

Resistance to conservation

There is a rich scholarly literature on different forms of resistance to what is perceived as illegitimate or non-democratic governance (e.g. Scott, 1985; Fegan, 1986; Ortner, 1995; O’Brien, 1996; Gupta, 2001; Watts, 2001). People who are dispossessed and marginalized by conservation projects also tend to resist governance in various ways (Holmes, 2007). Cavanagh and Benjaminsen (2015) identify four different forms of such resistance; nonviolent, militant, discursive, and formal-legal. Illegal wildlife killings

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