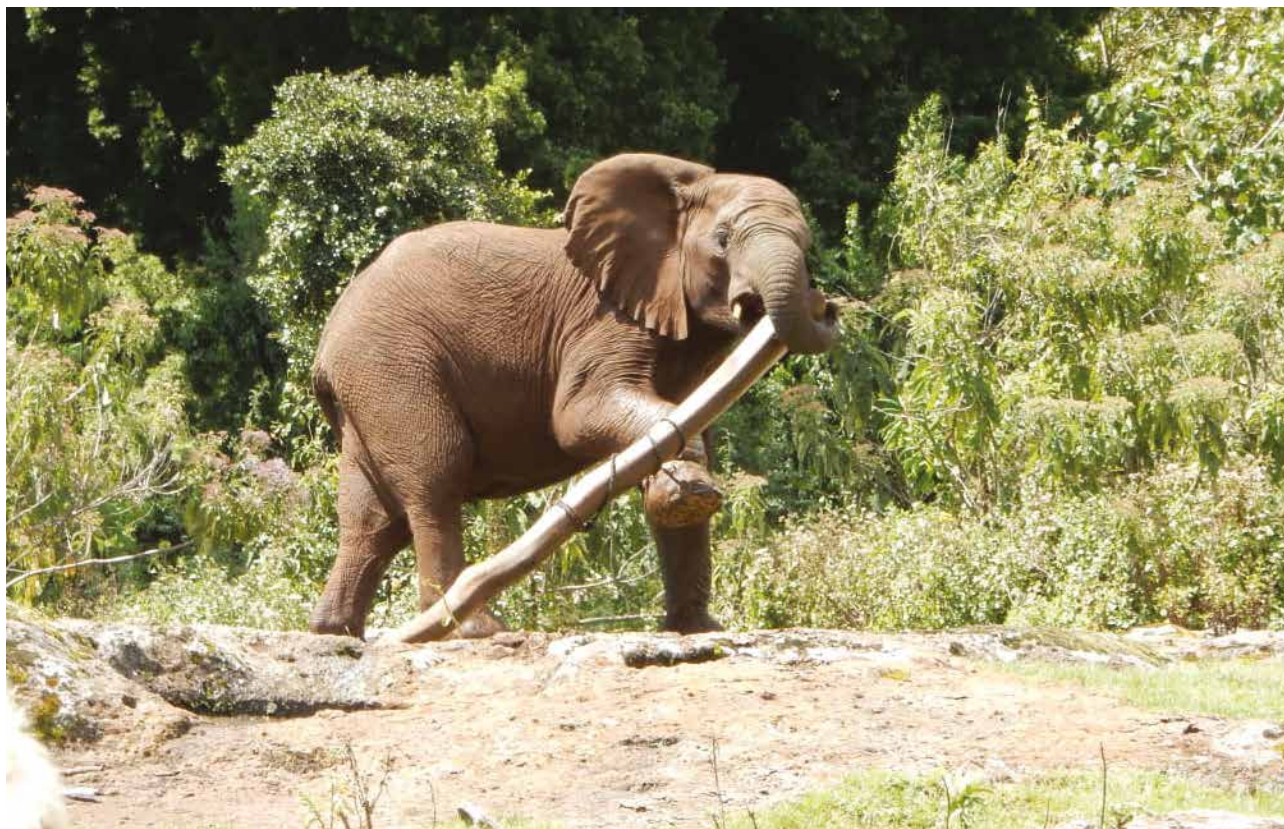


CAVE MINING ELEPHANTS

Chemukung: The Elephant, the Snare and the Log

Mt Elgon's "cave" elephants have small tusks and, with much of the mountain covered in forest, ivory poaching is rare. However, one young elephant faced an unusual challenge.



BY STEPHEN POWLES
& CHARLES KERFOOT

Since May 2017, the East African Wildlife Society (EAWLS)–Mount Elgon Elephant Project (MEEP) has been gaining a better understanding of the unique 'cave mining' elephant population on Mt Elgon (see Swara, Oct-Dec 2019). With appropriate information, evidence-based recommendations can be made that will benefit both the community and the elephants.

Sadly, as with so many other elephant populations across Africa, Mt Elgon's population is under increasing pressure from human-elephant conflict. Mt Elgon National Park and the relative security it provides represents a small part of the range of the approximately 350 elephants believed to make up this population. Much of their time

is spent in the extensive neighbouring Forest Reserve.

The Forest Reserve is seeing a steady increase in human-elephant conflict, largely as a result of crop-raiding by elephants in Plantation Establishment Livelihood Improvement Scheme (PELIS) areas. However, poaching can also have an impact.

In February 2020, having been alerted by a local herdsman, two EAWLS–MEEP community scouts recorded an adolescent cow elephant dragging a large log. A thick nylon rope, set as a snare, attached the log to her right foreleg, cutting deep into her flesh. At times, she would lift the 3 metre long log with her trunk and carry it. In all likelihood, the snare had been set for a buffalo. Most snares are much less robust and targeted at smaller game such as bushbuck, duiker and waterbuck. In the Forest Reserve, many snares are deployed adjacent to Mt. Elgon National Park where there is a high concentration of game.

TOP

A snare attached the right foreleg of an adolescent cow elephant to a large log of about 3m in length and 250mm in diameter. At times she would lift the log with her trunk and carry it.



She probably came with the herd from the park, slowly dragging or carrying the enormous log as she strove to keep up with them, the log leaving a drag mark as she did so.

From the state of the wound, it appears that she was caught about three weeks earlier. Observations made by the scouts in that period indicate the particular herd of around 40 elephants that she is thought to be a part of was then in the National Park (as opposed to the Forest Reserve when she was found).

She probably came with the herd from the park, slowly dragging or carrying the enormous log as she strove to keep up with them, the log leaving a drag mark as she did so. If so, her remarkable journey over mountainous terrain and through the thick forest had taken her from the National Park (11.6km away, as the crow flies), across the Kibewyan River and into the Forest Reserve, possibly travelling as far as 15km over the three weeks. In the 32 hours from when she was first recorded by the EAWLS–MEEP scouts to when she was treated, she moved, as the crow flies, 782 metres. On the ground, the distance would have been further.

When discovered she was quite passive, possibly because of the pain or poor nutrition due to the time since she was caught by the snare. By this point, the log had been worn smooth from its journey across the mountain. On arriving at a river she was seen squirting water at the injury in what might have been an attempt to soothe the pain.

The two scouts who first recorded the elephant’s location immediately informed Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) who responded rapidly. Dr Limo who leads a KWS mobile veterinary clinic in the Mara (supported by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust) was flown up from the Mara the next day. The team (consisting of Limo, KWS rangers and the EAWLS–MEEP scouts) had a six-hour hike through hilly terrain amid bursts of heavy rain to reach their patient. They eventually found her at around 6.30 pm. The scouts cleared the bush around her, allowing Limo to dart her safely.

TOP
Chemukung slowly dragged the enormous log as she strove to keep up with the herd, over mountainous terrain and through thick forest, possibly travelling as far as 15km over three weeks.



TOP
A thick 2m nylon rope had cut deep into her flesh, about 300mm above her toes at the level of her carpus. The wound encircled her leg.

MIDDLE RIGHT
With the wound clean, iodine and antibiotic spray were applied, painkillers and antibiotics were injected and she was revived. Within three minutes, she was on her feet and looking around for the log!

BELOW RIGHT
The team of rangers and EAWLS-MEEP scouts that helped save the elephant.



By this stage it was dark and they were ‘operating’ under torchlight. The rope was removed from a deep and extensive wound that encircled her lower leg. The scouts report that, surprisingly, the leg did not smell. Possibly regular flushing had kept it relatively clean. Accessing the lower side of the leg necessitated rolling her over which was achieved with long poles cut from the surrounding bush. With all the dead tissue removed followed by repeat flushings with water and peroxide, Limo was able to fully assess the injury.

Thankfully, the carpal joint itself was not compromised or infected. Had it been so, euthanasia may well have been the only realistic option. With the wound clean, iodine and antibiotic spray were applied and it was then packed with a green clay (the latter to absorb toxins). Painkillers and antibiotics were injected before reviving her. Within three minutes of the reversing agent being injected, she was on her feet and looking around for the log! She soon moved off. By this point, it was 9 pm.



One can only have the greatest admiration for the team of vet, rangers and scouts who were able to find and then successfully dart and resuscitate their patient in such challenging conditions. It is hard to imagine worse conditions in which to carry out his difficult work than those encountered by Limo that night. Enormous credit must go to him.

Limo reports that he has treated a few snared giraffe with a log still attached to the snare, but never an elephant. Given the severity of the wound, remarkably, Limo expected her “to make a full recovery, albeit slowly.”

Following this incident, EAWLS–MEEP funded a community engagement meeting, led by KWS, in the area where the elephant was treated to discuss the work of EAWLS–MEEP and what had happened.

Over the subsequent days and weeks, the scouts have kept a close eye on the treated elephant. For two weeks she remained near water and in thick bush, moving very little. However, after six weeks the scouts reported that she was moving with the herd, albeit with a limp, and that the herd “were looking after her.” The outcome looks promising.

The scouts were asked what name should be given to the elephant. They chose Chemukung – Sabaot for the limping one. Latest reports are that she continues to do well. Sadly, the threats to her and her population have not gone away but it appears that, against the odds, she will live. ●

TOP

In all likelihood the snare had been set for a buffalo. Most snares are much less robust and targeted at smaller game such as bush buck, duiker and water buck.

LEFT

EAWLS – MEEP funded a community engagement meeting, led by KWS, in the area where the elephant was treated to discuss the work of EAWLS – MEEP and what had happened.



STEPHEN POWLES is a vet (retired) and passionate wildlife photographer and conservationist.



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