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A gigantic trek: what it takes to move 200 elephants 1,500km

By Matt Hayward

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The translocation of wild animals is becoming an increasingly important conservation strategy and is happening more and more frequently around the world.

An elephant successfully translocated by SAN Parks from Kruger National Park to Addo Elephant National Park. Author supplied

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy has translocated 20 species (13 of them threatened) to its reserves around Australia. Similarly, the Conservation Land Trust in Argentina has translocated a suite of native mammals including the giant anteater, tapir and jaguar to restore the Iberá Wetlands in Corrientes Province. The Red Squirrels Trust Wales is restoring the Ogwen Valley by eradicating invasive grey squirrels, and translocating native red squirrels and pine marten.

Translocations have become more frequent in Africa, too; elephants are the biggest animals to be moved. In places where species have historically been wiped out, but where managers have now removed the causes of those declines, translocation is an important tool.

One of the biggest elephant translocations ever undertaken is underway as part of an attempt to rebuild Mozambique's elephant population. The global mining company, De Beers Group, has initiated a project to move 200 from their nature reserve in northern South Africa to Zinave National Park in Mozambique – a distance of 1500km. The process has already started and will take place over a number of weeks. The team managing the move is hoping that all 200 will be in their new home by the end of August.

De Beers has partnered with African Parks, an NGO that manages national parks across Africa. African Parks has recently completed the world's largest elephant translocation, moving 520 elephants 250km from from Malawi's Liwonde National Park and Majete Wildlife Reserve to its Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve.

How it's done

The movement of elephants is a major mission.

First, helicopters are used to direct herds of elephants to a capture area so they can be darted from the air. Once that's been done, the elephants are dragged (or co-oerced) onto semi-trailers for transport. The long journey to their new home then begins.

For 200 elephants, this sounds like a monumental task. But South African conservation managers have vast experience with wildlife restoration projects on this scale. As long ago as 1979, 6,000 animals (including elephants) were reintroduced into the newly established Pilanesberg National Park. In 1991, Madikwe Game Reserve took the title of the world's biggest translocation when 8,000 individuals from 28 different species, including elephants, were translocated.

Expertise is critical with translocations because they can go horribly wrong. For example, a Kenyan Wildlife Service translocation of 11 black rhinos this year led to 10 dying because the water at the translocation site was too salty.

Lessons have also been learnt over the years. The elephants translocated to Pilanesberg were youngsters orphaned following culling in Kruger National Park. These youngsters grew up in the absence of adults and the unruly males ended up attacking and killing rhinos. Once adults were returned to Pilanesberg (and the offending elephants were removed), this aberrant behaviour ceased. Now entire herds are translocated, including adult bulls.

Need for relocation

Rampant poaching has afflicted Africa's elephant populations over the past eight to 10 years. Some poaching happens in South Africa, but elephant populations in the country are generally well managed and protected. Some populations have even increased beyond carrying capacity. For example, the reserve in Limpopo that's home to the elephants being moved to Mozambique can carry 60 elephants but has a population of 270.

For decades elephant populations in South Africa's Kruger National Park were held in check by culling. Rangers would shoot entire herds to keep numbers in check, and mobile abattoirs would fleece the carcass and give or sell the meat and products. But this was stopped in the 1990s.

Since then the elephant population in Kruger has more than doubled and there are concerns that they are damaging the park's vegetation to such an extent that other wildlife species are going extinct.

Translocation has been increasingly used to manage this growth in numbers – not just in Kruger but in reserves across the country. Until recently, elephants were moved to establish new populations elsewhere in South Africa. But this option has started to run out because almost all reserves are now well stocked. As a result, South African conservation managers have begun to look elsewhere.

Mozambique's elephant population was decimated during decades of civil war. With the return of peace, and better governance and security, wildlife populations can be restored in a number of different places. Because elephants are such slow breeders, populations in Mozambique have not returned to their previous levels. As a result, translocation and dropping the fences between Kruger in South Africa and Parque Nacional do Limpopo in Mozambique are being implemented.

Translocation for the future

With the swathes of free space in the world and the improved ability to manage threats to species, translocations should become more common as a way to reverse the wildlife declines humans have caused.

But government conservation agencies don't take part in translocations as much as they should because they're risky operations. It's time governments reviewed their approach to active and innovative conservation interventions and show that they're prepared to take risks to improve the bleak plight of the world's biodiversity.

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