

tuskers'

LAST STAND

A year ago, Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife made a decision to relocate the country's last free-ranging elephant population from the forest reserve at Phirilongwe to Majete Wildlife Reserve in the south of the country. Reactions from local communities and international observers were mixed and vocal. Now that the dust has settled, **Stephen Cunliffe** travelled to Majete in search of both the Phirilongwe elephants and the answers to this heated debate. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



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The southern shores of Lake Malawi were once home to large herds of elephants that roamed across the untouched landscape. But their idyllic existence was not to last. With the passing of the decades and the rapid expansion of Malawi's human population, elephant numbers in the area dwindled until, in 2007, an aerial census conducted over the Phirilongwe Forest Reserve and Ndowa Hills in Mangochi District counted just 57 individuals. Something clearly had to be done to protect the survivors.

The situation continued to deteriorate. An ecosystem utilisation study of Phirilongwe, carried out by a wildlife research unit based in nearby Liwonde National Park, revealed that constant pressure was being exerted on its resources by human encroachment and deforestation for agriculture, charcoal and firewood. With 30-plus

responsible for 16 human fatalities between 2004 and 2009. The news was confirmed by Jason Bell-Leask of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). 'There are reports of at least 10 elephant-induced human casualties as well as an unknown number of elephants killed. To protect themselves and their crops, the villagers often resort to bullets, spears, wire snares, poisons and nail-embedded planks to hunt and maim the animals,' he explained.

Bitter arguments raged, and the question of a solution swirled in political and conservation circles until 2009, when the DNPW announced that it would team up with IFAW to relocate the troublesome tuskers. In early June, a family group of nine elephants was successfully moved to Majete. But the excitement was curtailed when Ismail Khan, a member of a group called the Friends of Phirilongwe, claimed that the translocation violated Malawi's constitution and obtained a High Court injunction restraining IFAW and the DNPW from moving the remaining elephants. The operation was suspended.

Khan's group requested further scientific research into the feasibility of retaining the elephants at Phirilongwe and demanded an environmental impact assessment to determine what would happen to the forest if they were moved. 'With the threat of the elephants removed, our concern is that people will venture further into the reserve, leading to more deforestation and erosion,' he said. The group referred to a 2005 WWF paper, which had examined human-elephant conflict in the area and found that the animals played a critical role in maintaining what was left of the forest. The paper stated that without protection the trees would disappear within two decades. The Friends of Phirilongwe reiterated a call made earlier by a local NGO, Health, Education, Environment and Economic Development (HEEED), that a park be established to safeguard the reserve and its remaining elephants. The group also supported the suggestion that a fence be erected as a cost-effective way to enclose the relatively small area.

Khan claimed to have a petition signed by 1 200 Mangochi residents, all of whom, he implored, 'don't want the last elephants of the Malawi lakeshore to go and don't want the forests to go. They want to safeguard their

ecosystem'. His argument stretched to tourism as well. 'Tourists come to the Mangochi District to see animals. Are they going to come after they have taken our elephants away? I doubt it.' He begged the international community to assist Malawi in establishing a proper Phirilongwe Reserve as the best solution to the dilemma. 'Human-elephant conflict has been mitigated and managed throughout Africa; this is not rocket science, but established game management practice,' he concluded.

IFAW's Bell-Leask conceded that Mangochi District marketed itself as having Malawi's best tourism package (it includes Lake Malawi National Park, Phirilongwe Forest Reserve and the most beautiful spot on the lake, Cape Maclear). 'The elephants are definitely part of that mix,' he said. However, the wishes and safety of the local communities needed to be considered and it was finally agreed that the elephants had to go.

'There's no doubt in my mind that the relocation of the Phirilongwe elephants is the only realistic option available. It represents a win-win scenario that will benefit the lives of the elephants and also those of the greater community,' he added. A local elder,

Chief Namkumba, spoke on behalf of the local residents, 'We are surprised that those calling themselves "Friends of Phirilongwe" are arguing about the habitat of the forest. We have lost human lives to elephant stampedes ... [and suffered the] loss of crops and property for quite some time. The elephants must go to Majete now!'

Within weeks, the Blantyre High Court had set aside the injunction and allowed the IFAW-sponsored relocation to resume. Despite the opposition by the Friends of Phirilongwe, there was considerable support for the move from other stakeholders, including Peter Fearnhead, CEO of African Parks Network (APN), which administers Majete Wildlife Reserve.

Adding his voice, Malawian conservationist Humphreys Nzima argued that the dangers posed by the elephants were immediate and that reaping the benefits of retaining the herd in Phirilongwe required costly long-term development. Kester Vickery, co-owner of Conservation Solutions, the professional South African game-catching organisation that undertook the task of relocating the animals, agreed. 'The ideal scenario would be to set up a reserve in the Phirilongwe region, but there is no finance and no suitable area,' he pointed out. 'The only viable solution is to move them ▶'



'TOURISTS COME TO THE MANGOCHI DISTRICT TO SEE ANIMALS. Are they going to come after they have taken our elephants away?'

ABOVE Majete Wildlife Reserve ranger Francis Chombo uses radio telemetry equipment to monitor the whereabouts of the translocated Phirilongwe elephant herd.

OPPOSITE The South African game-capture organisation, Conservation Solutions, undertook the challenging task of relocating the last remaining beleaguered elephants from the shores of Lake Malawi to Majete.

PREVIOUS PAGE Like other elephants in Africa, Malawi's last free-ranging individuals had been coming into increasing conflict with the local, growing human population.

villages housing more than 3000 people situated within and around the area frequented by the Phirilongwe elephants, the slash-and-burn tactics of the subsistence farmers were rapidly destroying the last remaining natural habitat. The animals' migration corridors were being closed off and access to the lake was blocked.

As they sought food and water, the elephants were forced to pass through villages and farmland, damaging crops and raiding granaries for stored maize. The inevitable conflict was revealed when Joe Chinguwo, a Malawi Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) officer in neighbouring Lake Malawi National Park, reported that the Phirilongwe elephants had been



to an existing, properly fenced sanctuary where they can finally settle down.' He added that many of the translocated elephants displayed injuries sustained during the long-standing conflict, including snare-amputated trunks and old bullet wounds.

The arguments of other critics, who claimed that Majete wanted the extra elephants merely to increase their tourism potential, were countered by Fearnhead. 'Actually, we were not eager to receive the Phirilongwe elephants because, in a small, closed reserve with the number of elephants that we already had, the newcomers would accelerate the time when there would be too many, necessitating management intervention.' He went on, 'However, it would serve little purpose for the DNPW to move the animals to one of its other unfenced parks, as they would undoubtedly become a problem to another community. Enclosed by a game-proof electrified fence and with an effective law-enforcement capacity, Majete offered the only viable alternative. That's why we agreed to take them.'

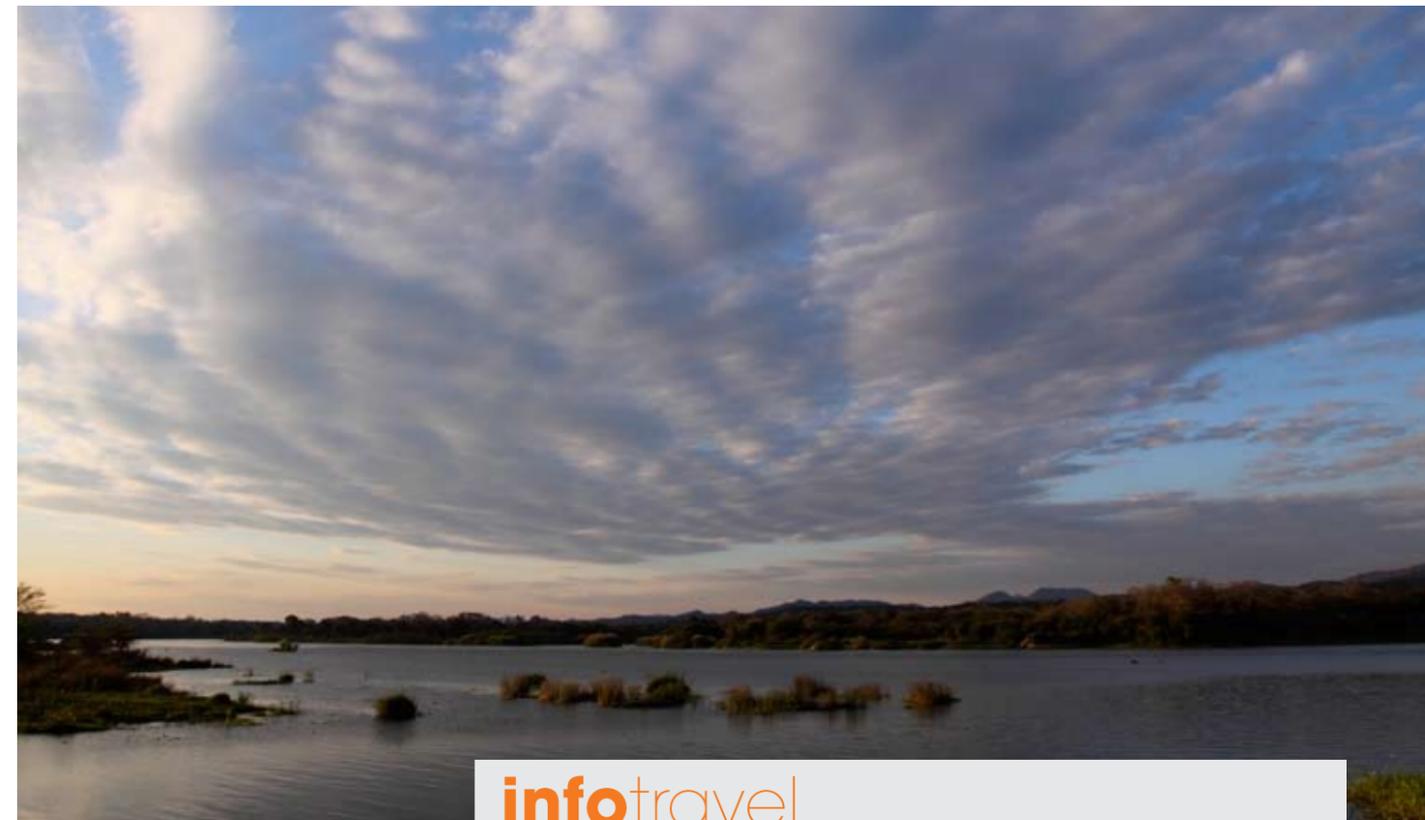
Whether you sanction the translocation of the herd or not, one fact is without dispute: the 83 elephants (a further

27 individuals were located after the 2007 survey, but a terrible cable snare on the leg of one meant it had to shot) have found sanctuary in Malawi's best-managed wildlife reserve. With two perennial rivers and a variety of habitats, Majete provides an attractive refuge for the beleaguered beasts. The riparian forest along the Shire and Mkulumadzi rivers gives way to mature mixed woodlands characterised by marula, terminalia, knobthorn and combretum species. In the west of the reserve, an undulating terrain of granite-topped hills is dominated by brachystegia woodland. This diversity of vegetation makes Majete a haven for wildlife and nature enthusiasts alike. This happy state of affairs, however, is a relatively recent achievement.

Proclaimed in 1955, Majete soon became, to all intents and purposes, a 'paper park'. Patricio Ndadzela, project coordinator for the reserve, explained, 'Malawi is full of "paper parks". They exist as green smudges on maps but in reality there is nothing left on the ground. A lack of government funding combined with the low profile of conservation in the country allowed poachers to cause devastation in them, and Majete suffered the same fate. In the late '80s, it was home to some 300 elephants; less than five years later they had all been wiped out.'

After signing a 25-year management lease agreement with the Malawian government in 2003, APN took over the running of the 691-square-kilometre reserve. Money and expertise were pumped into it, providing a much-needed catalyst for its resurrection, and an ambitious restocking project ensued. More than 3 000 herbivores were reintroduced, including Lichenstein's hartebeest, sable antelope, eland, buffaloes, zebras, black rhinos and elephants. Within a few years Majete was transformed into one of the nation's premier wildlife-viewing destinations.

The project has not been without its trials and tribulations. Foremost among these has been the huge



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When to visit Majete Wildlife Reserve is accessible throughout the year, although 4x4 vehicles are advised in the wet season. Game viewing is at its best during the cool dry season between May and October.

Getting there The reserve is situated in south-western Malawi, some 70 kilometres (a 90-minute drive along a well-signposted, scenic road) from Blantyre International Airport. Stock up on fuel and supplies before leaving Blantyre.

Where to stay Thawale Camp is an APN-administered facility located in the prime wildlife-watching section of the reserve. Accommodation is in six comfortable, permanent en-suite tents, and there's excellent black rhino viewing at the floodlit waterhole. Those on a tight budget may prefer the well-maintained Majete Community Campsite near the park entrance. A new 18-bed luxury lodge overlooking the confluence of the reserve's two major rivers is due to be opened in 2011 by Robin Pope Safaris. Go to www.robinpopesafaris.net or e-mail info@robinpope-safaris.net for the latest information or to make a booking.

Health and safety Malawi is one of the safest countries in Africa and incidents of violent crime are infrequent, but be aware of petty crime in the towns and cities. Malaria is prevalent, so consult your local doctor or travel clinic for malaria prophylactics and immunisations prior to departure.

Further information To find out more about facilities and activities, consult the African Parks Network website www.african-parks.org/majete. For reservation enquiries, email info@africanparksmw.com

challenge of winning support from the communities living along the park boundary. According to Stella Mzumara, APN's community development coordinator, 'Some 130 000 people live in 146 villages surrounding the reserve, and they are hungry for its resources.' The villagers are permitted regulated access to collect thatching grass and wood, but their actions are carefully monitored to ensure sustainability. Mzumara's team also conducts awareness campaigns to educate them about APN's role at Majete. 'Conservation will only succeed in the long term if local people buy into it. It's a real challenge because of the numbers of people involved, but we are making headway,' she added.

APN has approached the restoration of Majete intelligently. A final phase of reintroductions in August 2009 saw the translocation of another 600 animals to the reserve. The black rhino population is also set to swell, while the eagerly anticipated arrival of cheetahs and leopards will dramatically increase carnivore diversity in a park where crocodiles and spotted hyaenas are currently the only resident large predators. Majete's comeback will culminate with the return of 'the king of the beasts' in 2012.

Ndadzela summarised, 'Conservation without money is merely conversation.

People talk about the problems but lack the resources to do anything about it. APN brought money and expertise and in just seven years it has transformed Majete from a "paper park" into Malawi's greatest conservation success story.' ■

NOTE: The final cost of relocating the 83 Phirilongwe elephants was US\$300 000.

OPPOSITE The perennial Shire River flows through the east of Majete, providing an idyllic environment in which elephants can thrive.

BELOW Whether you agree with the relocation of the Phirilongwe elephants to Majete or not, one fact is without dispute: these elephants can now slake their thirst in Malawi's most secure and best-managed wildlife reserve.

THE RELOCATION OF THE PHIRILONGWE ELEPHANTS ... will benefit the lives of the elephants and also those of the greater community

