

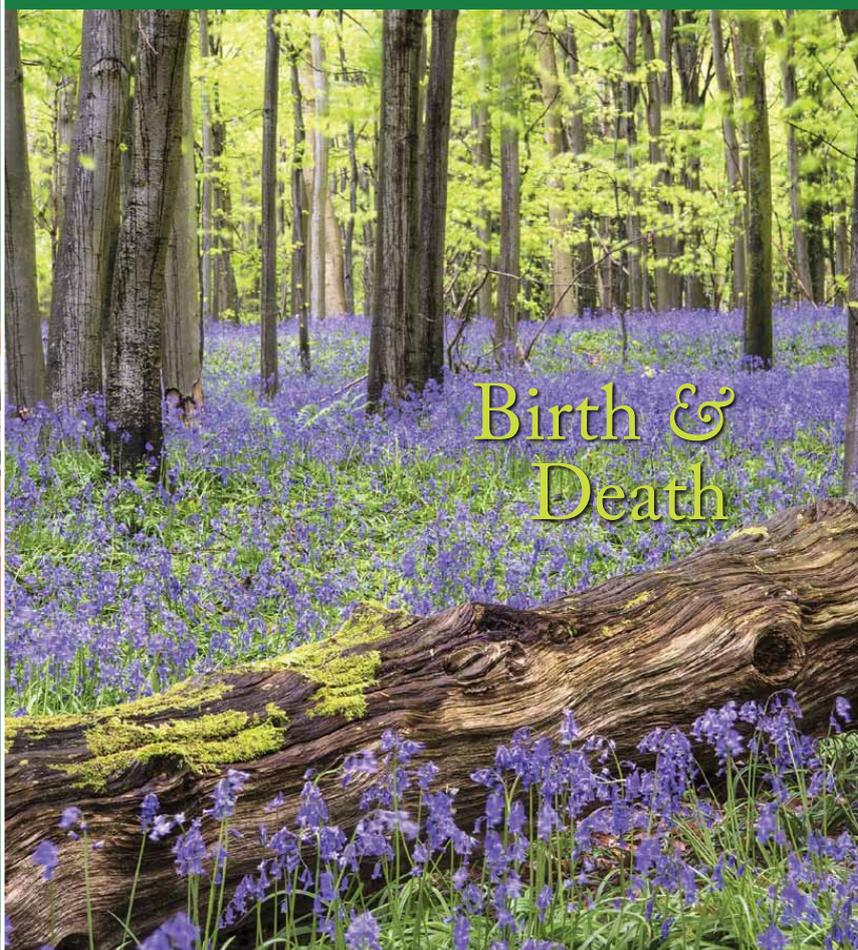
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# Elephant Protection – Interview with Susan Canney

INTERVIEW BY IAN MOWLL

## How did you get involved in elephant protection?

I trained in natural sciences and specialised in zoology. Following a doctorate studying human impact on a Tanzanian National Park, it seemed that the work that came my way was about trying to find ways to accommodate elephants in a world that is increasingly dominated by humans. As a result I have been working on elephant projects since 2000 in Asia and Africa, and in Mali since 2003.

I think the worldwide acceleration in habitat destruction associated with globalisation and rising populations has meant the encroachment of human populations into elephant habitat. While other species “quietly disappear” when this happens, elephants still try to find the food and resources they need. This has led to increasing human-elephant conflict as elephants eat the crops that have taken the place of their forest homes.

Although elephant protection is the initial focus, dealing with the underlying cause requires engaging with the wider context and a complex nexus of environment, people, politics and society.

## What are the problems that elephants face?

Elephants face two major problems. The first, described above, involves humans encroaching into their habitat and clearing it for agriculture, commercial plantations and infrastructure development.

The second is that elephants are being killed for their ivory tusks. Before firearms were invented it was thought there were around 10 million elephants in Africa. Their numbers were halved in the 1970s and 1980s, prompting a 1989 international ban on the trade of ivory by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). As a result elephant numbers began to recover in the 1990s in many areas, opening the door for a partial lifting of the ban for the elephant populations in Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, and one-off sales of ivory to Japan in 2002 and to China and Japan in 2008.

Some argued that this would limit poaching by flooding the market, causing prices to

crash and making poaching less profitable. Others warned that it would unleash explosive demand, and a rise in the price of ivory that would trigger a surge in the poaching of illegal ivory that could be “laundered” by the legal markets of China. The latter camp was correct, but underestimated the impact because the billion-dollar industry has attracted organised criminal networks – the same people who traffic drugs, people and arms – who feed the increased demand in Asia as a result of a rise in disposable wealth, with about 70% of illegal ivory ultimately destined for China. In addition it appears that speculators are stockpiling ivory (and rhino horn) assuming the price will increase as elephants (and rhinos) disappear.

The result is that there are now approximately 350,000 African elephants left and they are being lost at a rate of around 27,000 per year.

These two problems are interlinked where poor, marginalised people seek land and encroach into elephant habitat, or bear the impacts of elephants displaced by large-scale clearance for plantations or mono-cultures, or live adjacent to protected areas from which they are excluded to benefit tourists and others more wealthy and powerful than they are. Young men with no employment or prospects are vulnerable to recruitment by trafficking networks that want ivory.



Photo © Idrissa Ganame



Elephants interlocking trunks

### How do elephants help us, other animals and the environment in general?

Elephants help in many different ways and at different levels. Most obviously, they regenerate forests by spreading the seeds of trees excreted in dung, so the seeds start their life in their own little “grow bag” of compost. Germination and seedling survival are much higher for seeds given such a good start in life. An adult elephant produces about one tonne of manure every week and in the process fertilises the soils by spreading nutrients across the landscape.

Elephants disperse more seeds of more tree species than any other animal – and further. Tree species with large seeds need big animals to disperse them, and some forest tree species have seeds that actually require passage through an elephant’s gut to be able to germinate.

In addition botanists have reported that tree species with large seeds tend to store more carbon per unit volume of wood, meaning forests with elephants and other large animals are better carbon sinks.

Elephants open up woodland thickets, releasing nutrients into the ecosystem and providing food and shelter for other animals. For example a multitude of lizards rely on the cover provided by the debris created by elephants to escape the piercing talons of a hungry raptor.

In Mali, local people speak of elephants knocking down otherwise inaccessible fruits and seeds from high branches that are gathered by the women for food and sometimes sale. Fruits and leaves are also eaten by livestock that gather around their feet, while dung is valued for helping conjunctivitis, a widespread problem in these environments.

Elephants dig for water in dry river beds and, once the water hole has been created, other animals can access the water, helping the whole ecosystem.

When we asked local people in Mali what they thought about elephants, the predominant view was that elephants are an

indicator of a healthy and diverse ecosystem that is more productive and resilient to environmental change. The ecosystem forms the basis of their livelihoods and a part of their identity: if the ecosystem thrives, they thrive.

Most said they feel a sense of awe when they witness elephants’ social interactions and the wide range of emotions they express. They also feel that every species has a right to exist and that it contributes something unique to the ecosystem. This notion was described to me as being encapsulated in the word *baraka*, or blessing. Each species has its own *baraka*, and if a species is lost, the ecosystem is irretrievably diminished and poorer in its ability to sustain life.

### Can you tell us about elephant behaviour?

Local people have numerous anecdotes about elephants. In Mali they talk about their joy when groups reunite, the closeness of their family groups and their apparent care for each other – particularly for their young.

They have reported seeing elephants covering their dead with soil and branches and several individuals standing vigil for a number of days. Such “death rituals” have been widely reported and all seem to include a calm descending over the elephants and they gently explore the bones. Sometimes they pick them up and turn them over. During this process they are definitely in a different state from their usual way of being and their temporal gland streams, a sure sign of emotion. It is not known why they do this. Maybe their body-mind complex needs to process the emotions or maybe, like humans, it’s part of their social bonding.

In Indonesia local people say that elephants need the primary forests not so much for food but for peace to have their babies. They described how elephant “midwives” stand in a circle around an elephant who was giving birth protecting and stroking the pregnant mother, swaying and making sounds with her. They assist the newborn’s release from the amniotic sac, then help it stand up and take its first steps.

In Mali they speak of their cleverness: in one incident elephants constructed a causeway of wood and branches to help rescue another elephant stuck in mud. They also spoke of their tolerance and how they rarely hurt humans, despite much provocation and many opportunities to do so. One anecdote was when an elephant was lying down next to a small water hole and some children climbed on to the elephant to play on its back. There was no response from the elephant until they lit a fire, at which point the elephant sucked up some water and squirted it onto its back, shook off the children, got up and walked away!

In India the story was that in the past when elephants were used for logging, bells were hung around their necks so that

the workers could tell when they were raiding crops at night, however the elephants scooped up mud and stuck it inside the bells so they could not be heard during their night-time adventures.

### How is the sacred important in your work?

The role of the sacred is to recognise the whole and to “draw the line”, to establish limits that bring people together as equal. All the qualities of elephants discussed above are much greater when taken together, something that is recognised in the concept of *baraka*.

I am sometimes asked “why does your work in resource management need the elephants? Surely you can achieve all those things without invoking the need to protect elephants”. However, if “sacred” is used to denote something that is so important that it is unquestioningly respected by all, the elephants provide a vital unifying element and focus that applies to everyone – whether a powerful chief, a peasant, rich, poor, from a village or a distant town. Without this the process is vulnerable to derailment by multiple agendas as there are always elements of society trying to get more than their fair share – by whatever means!

### What is your contribution to elephant protection?

We deal with a huge area, almost the size of Switzerland. After spending three years understanding the elephant migration I realised that the only way the elephants would survive was if the day-to-day activities of the 265,000+ people who live in this area were supportive of elephant conservation. And so we spent the next three years discussing our results with local people, asking them what they thought, how they experienced elephants in their lives and what they thought could be done about conflicts. At the same time we used this engagement to build a common vision throughout Mali that these elephants must be protected.

The area was suffering from over-use and degradation, both from the influx of people seeking land and from the impact of globalisation on the urban areas. Commercial charcoal and fire-wood operations plundered the local woodlands, and a study revealed that 96% of the cattle using a key lake belonged to wealthy individuals living in distant towns who amassed huge herds of cattle as signs of prestige.

A key problem was that each different ethnicity in the area had its own system of resource management but would not obey the others’, which resulted in a “free-for-all” that led to habitat destruction and degradation. This diminished local subsistence livelihoods and created competition between clans and ethnicities – and between humans and elephants.

So we brought the different clans and ethnicities of a community together to discuss the problem until they arrived at a shared understanding. Then they have to work



Field manager meeting with eco-guardians

out solutions. Invariably this means electing a representative management committee of elders who determine the rules of resource use, including the areas to protect as important elephant habitat. Teams of young men (“eco-guardians”) patrol to detect infringements of the rules and conduct resource protection activities such as building fire-breaks and planting trees.

Studies have shown that livestock from communities protecting their water, pasture and forests are worth 50% more than those from communities that don’t have functioning resource management systems. At the same time, those managing their pasture are able to sell hay and charge outsiders for access to water and pasture. As they say, “we benefit twice: we have more pasture for ourselves and we raise money from others” – and in doing so, they control the destructive impact of the “prestige herds”.

This process of collective resource management promotes reconciliation and builds solidarity to resist the current insecurity. It also prevents the radicalisation of the youth by providing an alternative to taking up arms. Most prefer this option because, although they do not reap the financial rewards offered by the jihadist groups, they have an occupation that carries local prestige within the community and that’s less risky. During the conflict of 2012-13 not one of the 520 eco-guardians joined the jihadist groups, despite being offered \$30-\$50/day to do so.

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