

Conserving the iconic elephants of the Kunene Region

Thanks to the success of community conservation in Namibia, the famous desert-adapted elephants of the north-west are steadily increasing in number. In this arid to hyper-arid area where competition for resources such as fodder can be fierce, local farmers and residents have a remarkable level of tolerance towards these elephants. But their patience is finite, and many are starting to think of elephants as a liability. Without a public transport system, local people move largely on foot and on donkeys. The increasing presence and movements of elephants severely restrict farming activities and threaten lives and livelihoods.

Immediate challenges are the lack of knowledge about the numbers and movements of elephants, the increasing number of Human Elephant Conflict incidents and the looming threat of poaching, a threat which has not yet spread to the Kunene Region.

The challenges facing IRDNC in conserving this important and unique population of elephants include:

- Community engagement to have a better understanding of elephant and how they can ensure better co-existence
- A lack of understanding of current elephant populations, numbers, migratory patterns and distribution
- Human elephant conflicts, with elephant competing for water and often destroying community water installations and damaging crops
- Benefits from elephant do not always outweigh the cost of living with elephant

About the Kunene Region...

The arid and semi-desert north-western Kunene Region comprises 115,260 km² and has 88,300 inhabitants. Four out of its six constituencies are involved in community based natural resource management. The Kunene is the third poorest region in the country, with a poverty rate of almost 40%.

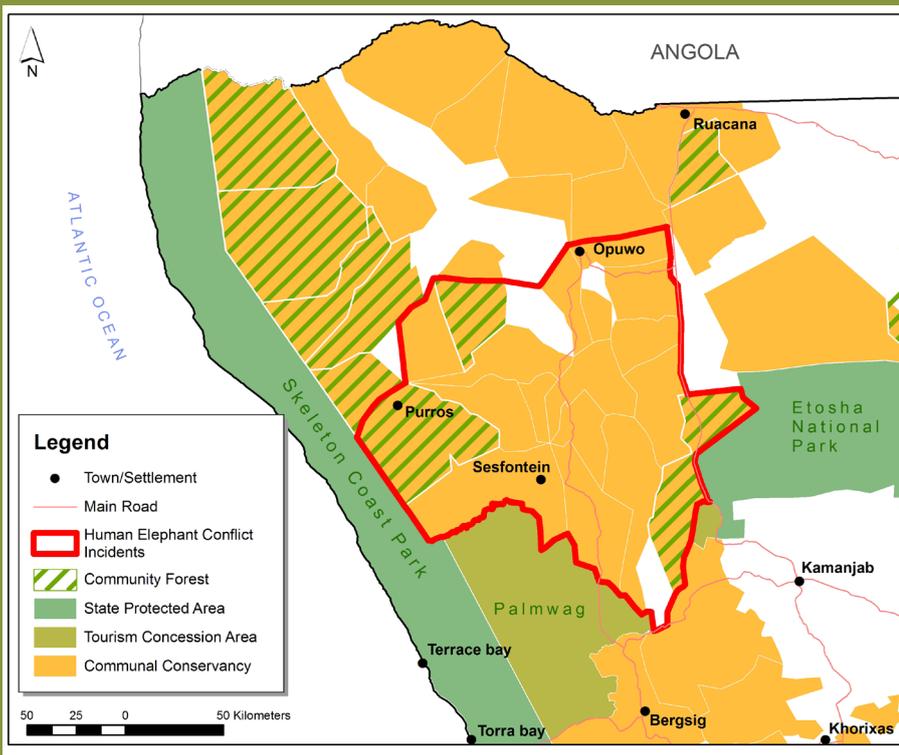
The Kunene Region has many tourist attractions and tourism is a key development sector due to the region's spectacular mountainous landscapes and free-ranging wildlife. The Kunene Region is home to the world's largest population of free-roaming black rhinos. Namibia's famed desert dwelling elephants also occur, along with several ungulate species.

A severe drought lasting close to five years has decimated livestock and wildlife in the Kunene Region. In the 1980s, the region's wildlife rebounded after a similarly devastating drought that was exacerbated by poaching.



Escalating conflict with elephants

Between 2013 and 2017, 773 incidents of human elephant conflict incidents were recorded in the area bordered in red on the map below:



Most incidents were damage to water installations that are shared by farmers and elephants – since elephants sometimes have not alternative water supply – and to gardens and crops belonging to the 19,000 people living in this remote semi-desert. Most of the people living in the elephant range conservancies in Kunene live in conservancies that have little or no income.

What to be done

IRDNC has initiated a number of initiatives that will address the challenges:

Community engagement through awareness creation, communication and consultation – Better understanding the views of local people towards elephants, followed by needs-based awareness creation, training and education.

Improved knowledge through monitoring – Increasing our knowledge of the elephant population, its numbers, herds, movements, needs and requirements, combined with monitoring.

Elephant conflict mitigation measures – Together with local farmers, coming up with creative solutions possibly including low-cost electric fencing.

Building the local economy and adding value through tourism - Tourism industry stakeholders are interested in guided excursions and viewpoints to enhance elephant sightings at waterpoints. IRDNC is developing a Highlands Tourism Development Plan aimed at low impact tourism linking caves, campsites and elephant in tourism routes to improve local development and well-being. Training of Community Game Guards is needed so they can become guides for elephant tourism, which would also generate other much-needed jobs.

