

JEMA

Journal of the
Elephant Managers Association



THE
CONSERVATION
ISSUE

DECEMBER 2020

**ELEPHANT
MANAGERS
ASSOCIATION**



VOLUME 31, NO. 3



PHOTO: THE KASIISI PROJECT

Kibale Forest Schools' Program Kasiisi Project Elephant Conservation

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The Kibale Forest Schools' Program (KFSP) is a not-for-profit organization that supports literacy, conservation, and health education programs in 16 schools located within five km of the boundary of Kibale National Park, Uganda. Our overall mission is to conserve Kibale National Park through programs that support education, health and care for the environment. The goal of our conservation education programs is to instill a commitment to environmental stewardship in Uganda's next generation and encourage more sustainable ways of living.

As grateful recipients of two conservation awards from the International Elephant Foundation (IEF), KFSP has worked with Wildlife Club members from our 16 schools to champion the cause of the elephants of Kibale Forest National Park to their parents and communities.

The African elephant, *Loxodonta africana*, has been one of our two flagship conservation education species, the other being chimpanzees. Listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, the elephants of Kibale Forest National Park, like elephants all over Africa, are facing many threats, in-

cluding illegal killing for ivory and meat, and habitat loss and fragmentation. The detrimental impacts on their habitat have resulted in the elephants of Kibale increasingly leaving the park and foraging in fields and gardens. This loss of crops has caused tension between the communities and the wildlife authority, and negative attitudes towards the elephants.

Funding from IEF has allowed us to improve community attitude towards elephants and to increase knowledge of them among children, their teachers, and their communities. Elephant education activities include presentations from experts on elephant biology and behavior, their importance to Uganda, threats to their survival, and how to conserve them. Talks are enriched with film and puppet shows, art projects, poems, skits, music, dance, and drama competitions. We also host ever-popular field trips where the children travel to the closest savanna parks to see elephants and other wildlife in their natural habitat, eat special meals, and have lots of fun.

Students also participate in an "Elephant Pride Day" festival every two years, creating awareness of the importance of elephants in communities highly affect-



PHOTO: THE KASIISI PROJECT



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ed by them, and providing information on how to prevent crop-raiding and why we should conserve (protect) elephants in an eye-catching and exciting way. In 2018, over 300 students led by a brass band marched through ten villages carrying banners with messages emphasizing protection of elephants. They then performed skits, dances, and poems with the same message. Over 1,500 people turned out along the way to engage with the children and to learn about elephants, particularly in more remote villages where this kind of entertainment is a treat.

Students scored significantly better in post-project elephant knowledge tests, significantly more positively in post-project attitude tests, and chose significantly more positive words to describe elephants after the project than before. When asked what were the greatest dangers to elephant survival, there was a shift from human-focused challenges like danger to people and crop raiding, to elephant-centric issues like hunting, snares, loss of habitat, and environmental degradation.

KFSP's conservation education program is focused on spreading a comprehensive environmental education program throughout the schools we operate in. The success of conservation education has been shown to be greatest in the younger generation, and that it increases with higher levels of education and a greater knowledge of conservation issues. We work primarily with primary school children to encourage the development of positive attitudes towards the environment, curbing destructive behaviors such as deforestation and poaching. We also believe that good conservation education begins with initiatives that generate excitement and curiosity about a world

that children often take for granted; because their engagement in any subject depends on their being involved and they need 'hands on' and enjoyable activities to learn.

Conservation is unfortunately not in the school curriculum of Uganda and we have to take care not to interfere with the academic program, but schools offer an ideal focal point through which we can reach not only the children and their teachers, but also their parents and the wider community. Since a child-oriented environmental education has positively influenced the knowledge and behaviour of parents in other sites, we have confidence supported by data that pro-elephant attitudes increase in parents of children engaged in our programs.

Recognizing that effective partnerships deliver the best results, and that our goal should be to enhance rather than duplicate efforts to conserve elephants, KFSP collaborates actively with the district department of education, the Uganda Wildlife Authority, and other conservation organizations in the region. We also rely not only on the grants and donations that determine our conservation theme for each academic year, but also on advice and experience of our funders to guide our programs.

A world without elephants is something none of us wants to contemplate, and we look forward to a time when the elephants of Kibale National Park along with other threatened wildlife are safe. In the meantime, we are grateful to generous donors like the International Elephant Foundation who allow us to share our love of these wonderful animals with a new generation of conservationists.

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