

A plea to Botswana: Please rethink a “Not Enough Fences” approach (commentary)

Commentary by Steve Osofsky on 14 March 2019

- *The Government of Botswana is considering significant changes to the country's approach to wildlife management.*
- *The proposed policy reflects a worrying lack of recognition of the habitat and migration route requirements that the future of southern Africa's wildlife fundamentally depends upon.*
- *Now is not the time to cut-off migratory corridors or build new fences. Instead, it is time to make land-use decisions that will be socially, ecologically and economically sustainable for generations to come.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Recent headlines

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2019/03/elephant-in-the-room-botswana-deals-with-pachyderm-population-pressure/>) around the world

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/22/botswana-may-lift-elephant-hunting-ban-turn-culled-animals-pet/>)

indicate that the government of Botswana is considering significant changes to the country's approach to wildlife management. I give the government great credit for the transparency it has shown, something which encourages constructive dialogue within Botswana — as well as beyond, given Botswana's global importance to the future of free-ranging wildlife.

Having served as the Government of Botswana's first Wildlife Veterinary Officer in the early 1990s, I have a first-hand understanding of the realities of human-wildlife conflict and its impacts on Botswana's rural communities. I thus acknowledge the very real tensions at play, but I nonetheless believe that the new draft plans pose a significant threat to the long-term survival of

wildlife in southern Africa, and to the ongoing economic growth that Botswana's wilderness has been supporting. The proposed policy reflects a deeply worrying lack of recognition of the habitat and migration route requirements that the future of southern Africa's wildlife fundamentally depends upon.



A typical veterinary cordon fence in southern Africa. Boteti Fence, Makgadikgadi National Park, Botswana. Photo Credit: M. Atkinson, AHEAD.

A potential re-opening of trophy hunting (<https://www.facebook.com/BotswanaGovernment/photos/a.336021353147196/2087432371339410/?type=3&theater>) after a five-year moratorium as well as culling of elephants (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47330414>) are certainly complex and emotion-laden issues, but getting less attention is a new push via the Hunting Ban Subcommittee of Cabinet that threatens the very future of Botswana's wildlife: a call for more fencing, as well as the cutting-off of wildlife migration routes "not beneficial to the country's conservation efforts." (<http://www.mmegi.bw/index.php?aid=79705&dir=2019/february/21>) The over-riding problem is that wildlife migration routes in Botswana and the region have suffered literally and figuratively "cuts" (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239587314_The_Effects_of_Veterinary_Fences_on_Wildlife_Populations) for decades. Any further ill-conceived fences or blocking of such key wildlife pathways, which populations need in freshwater at different times of year and to breed, will surely be the last straw for one of the most important assets on planet earth. In short, after so many years of encroachment upon wilderness by other sectors, there are essentially involving Botswana that are "not beneficial to the country's conservation efforts."



Savanna elephants (Loxodonta africana) in Chobe National Park, Botswana. The success or failure of the KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area (involving collaboration among Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) has significant implications for the world's largest remaining population of elephants. Maintaining migratory corridors is absolutely critical for allowing elephants to disperse regionally rather than be bottled-up by fences and forced into conflict with people. Photo Credit: M. Atkinson, AHEAD.

Just as an airline pilot would not turn off the fuel to a jet's only working engine after losing the other three, Botswana cannot afford to lose any more migration corridors (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=at0mpyZQxfg&feature=youtu.be>). Veterinary cordon fences are used to separate domestic livestock and large wild mammals for animal disease control purposes. Since the building of the first veterinary cordon fences in what was British Bechuanaland in the 1950s,

the management of foot and mouth disease (FMD) – of great importance in terms of its impact on international beef trade – has been dominated by fences. The fences serve to control animal movements (i.e. to separate wildlife, like buffalo, that harbor FMD, from cattle) and so meet the requirements of a subsidized beef export industry. While successfully helping Botswana beef to access European target markets in the past, fences have contributed to the collapse of populations of wild ungulates by interfering with their seasonal movements and blocking access to water in dry years.



*Highly valued by tourists and trophy hunters alike, wild buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) also act as maintenance hosts for foot and mouth disease (FMD) viruses. Disease control measures (i.e., veterinary cordons fences) and land-use practices (human settlement and livestock grazing) are among the most important determinants of buffalo distribution and numbers in the region. Photo Credit: M. Atkinson, AHEAD.*

Between 1978 and 2003, populations of wildebeest and red hartebeest in Botswana's Kalahari region declined by an order of magnitude (http://wcs-ahead.org/gltfca_grants/pdfs/ferguson_final_2010.pdf). Wildebeest declined from 315,000 to 16,000, and hartebeest from 293,000 to 45,000, as a result of fragmentation of their range by fences (http://wcs-ahead.org/gltfca_grants/pdfs/ferguson_final_2010.pdf). And as the antelopes decline, so do lions and other carnivores.

The idea that the Government now wishes to close "all wildlife migratory routes that are not beneficial to the country's conservation efforts"

(<https://www.facebook.com/BotswanaGovernment/photos/a.336021353147196/2087432371339410/?type=3&theater>) ignores the reality that migration routes across Botswana and the wider region are simply the lifeblood of free-ranging wildlife, including elephants, and the basis of a visionary transboundary 'peace parks' (<http://kavangozambezi.org/en/>) movement first led by Nelson Mandela and his peers, with a focus on regional poverty alleviation.

Virtually all plains game in Botswana has been on the decline since the 1950s (when fencing began in earnest). The last thing Botswana's vibrant tourism sector (<http://www.botswanatourism.co.bw/>) (growing at a remarkable 5-6 percent per year) needs is to cut off more migrations and kill the proverbial wild geese laying the nation's golden eggs.



An elephant challenging an electrified fence, Matetsi, Zimbabwe. Photo Credit: M. Atkinson, AHEAD.

For decades, I have been genuinely honored to work with my friends and colleagues in Botswana's governmental and nongovernmental sectors. Together, we have recently come up with innovative ways (<http://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/452396/>) to help poor communities optimize the benefits they receive from the region's fragile rangelands — from *both* wildlife *and* livestock (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/tbed.12175>), by helping to find new approaches (<https://research.cornell.edu/news-features/cattle-conservation-collaboration>) to managing animal diseases like FMD that do not require reliance on fences that block key wildlife migrations. In fact, His Excellency President Masisi referred to this important collaboration in his most recent State of the Nation address (<http://wcs-ahead.org/>).

Botswana is clearly at a crossroads. A collective investment in earnest stewardship of natural resources must be made by all stakeholders dependent on southern Africa's precious land-base — farmers, ecotourism operators, as well as those interested in the trophy hunting industry. There is now, for the first time in several generations, an opportunity to find ways to optimize land-use choices in the interest of system resilience and diversified livelihood opportunities. Now is not the time to cut-off migratory corridors or build new fences. Instead, it is time to make land-use decisions that will be socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable for generations to come.



*The giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) is a protected species throughout most of its range — there may be fewer than 100,000 giraffe left in all of Africa. Photo Credit: M. Atkinson, AHEAD.*

CITATIONS

- Mbaiwa, J. E., & Mbaiwa, O. I. (2006). The effects of veterinary fences on wildlife populations in Okavango Delta (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239587314_The_Effects_of_Veterinary_Fences_on_Wildlife_Populat) *International Journal of Wilderness*, 12(3), 17-41.

• Thomson, G. R., Penrith, M. L., Atkinson, M. W., Atkinson, S. J., Cassidy, D., & Osofsky, S. A. (2013). Balancing livestock production and wildlife conservation in and around southern Africa's transfrontier conservation areas. *Transboundary and emerging diseases*, 60(6), 492-506. doi:10.1111/tbed.12175 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/tbed.12175>)

Steve Osofsky is a wildlife veterinarian and the Jay Hyman Professor of Wildlife Health & Health Policy at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, and was the first Wildlife Veterinary Officer for the Botswana Dept. of Wildlife & National Parks, in the early 1990s. He works on developing and helping to apply science-based approaches to conservation at large scales, particularly in terms of policy guidance to address challenges at the interface of wildlife and livestock in the context of sustainable development.

FEEDBACK: Use this form

(<https://form.jotform.com/70105173731143>) to send a message to the author of this post. If you want to post a public comment, you can do that at the bottom of the page.