Balancing the cost of Wildlife

BY MARGARET JACOBSOHN

Elephants can wreck a field of crops within hours, but these animals can also generate thousands of dollars through tourism. If communities can earn income from tourism and trophy hunting, it will be possible to “Balance the costs of Wildlife”. 
THe still, golden moments before sunset are disturbed by the sharp crack of branches as a herd of elephant feed on the banks of the Kwando River in Caprivi's Mudumu National Park. They are not concerned about the double-decker barge drifting slowly past with its load of respectful tourists training cameras and binoculars on them. The barge glides through the water lilies, round a bend. The tourists return to their deckchairs and cocktails, awaiting the Kwando’s next wild offering. Later that night the herd moves out of Mudumu and enters the fields of the park’s neighbours.

The next morning the tourists are enjoying a luxurious breakfast of fresh fruit, cereals and yogurt, bacon, sausages, eggs and coffee at Lianshulu Lodge. The villagers of Sauzu, one of the settlements near the park boundary, are inspecting the swathe of destruction caused by the elephants. In just a few hours the herd had eaten or crushed more than half the millet field which was to have made a major contribution to a rural family’s subsistence economy.

Elephants do not only damage grain crops. In Kunene Region the world famous Kaokoveld elephants frequently break water installations, fences, fruit trees and small irrigated gardens around homesteads or simply drink large quantities of the stockfarmer’s precious water. Although the windmills and piping damaged by the elephants are repaired at government cost, the disrupted water supply - sometimes for weeks before the repair team visits the farm - can cause major problems including financial losses for stockowners in this arid region.

Lions are undoubtedly the biggest attraction for tourists visiting Namibia’s national parks. From the safety of a safari vehicle the great cats can be viewed from close up in all their awesome splendour, but lions do not always stay inside the parks. Young males in particular are driven from the pride when they reach maturity and have to seek safety out-

side the territories of their own and other prides. This often means crossing the boundaries of the wildlife sanctuary onto neighbouring farmland. From the smaller, unfenced parks, whole prides may also periodically make forays into communal lands to add relatively easily caught donkeys, horses and cattle to their natural prey. During one month, June 1994, a pride of five lions killed nearly 40 head of cattle in the Malangalenga area which borders the Mamili National Park in East Caprivi.

Although elephants and lions are capable of the most spectacular damage to the livelihood of Namibia’s rural population, many other wildlife species cause serious economic losses to subsistence and commercial farmers. In the north-east hippo often raid fields to feed on young maize, millet and sorghum. Where they still occur, buffalo sometimes do extensive damage to cultivated crops and so do kudu, duiker, bushpigs, porcupines, baboons and monkeys. The predators that can, and often do, take livestock include crocodile, cheetah, leopard, caracal, spotted hyena and jackal, as well as some of the larger eagles. The extent of the losses caused by predators can be extrapolated from the claim by Herero and Damara farmers in the Sesfontein district that more than 2 000 sheep lambs and goat kids were killed by jackals in one year (1992).

This scenario reflects the reality of eco-tourism in Namibia: On the one hand tourism is the second largest generator of foreign exchange in the country, essential to our national economy. On the other hand, it is the ordinary rural Namibian who is being
forced to bear the costs of living with the wildlife on which our multi-million dollar tourism industry depends.

At a recent community meeting in Western Caprivi a senior game ranger put forward the conventional argument that all Namibians benefit indirectly from wildlife because income from tourism, trophy hunting and game sales is used by the government to build roads, schools and clinics, etc. This was countered from the local people’s perspective that Namibians who don’t have to live with wildlife also get roads and schools and clinics.

In fact, not only do rural area dwellers receive no additional benefits for bearing the brunt of the problems caused by wildlife, they are also often the people who, because they live in remoter corners of Namibia far from centres of development, receive the least infrastructural and financial assistance from government and the private sector.

Are there solutions to this clear inequity of cost and benefit with regard to damage causing wild animals? The problem is particularly unfair in the country’s communal areas where a burgeoning human population, with new material aspirations, is being economically handicapped by wildlife that is still, according to pre-Independence legislation, the property of the State.

Could the Ministry of Environment and Tourism do more to reduce damage by problem animals? In an ideal situation perhaps it could, but the Ministry has a serious shortage of appropriately experienced officers, their budgets barely enable management staff to cope with their existing tasks. The outstations in communal areas suffer from a chronic lack of serviceable vehicles.

Consequently, when they are able to assist farmers, it is never enough and often too late to prevent serious crop or stock losses.

To address the problem animal issue, some African countries have opted for paying compensation to farmers for wildlife damage. This is not realistic in Namibia with its wide range of problem-causing wildlife and the enormous losses incurred annually throughout the country. If the precedent is set to pay for elephant damage, for example, compensation would also be demanded for other problem animals which often cause greater economic losses.

The cost to the State would be considerable but more importantly, how would the system be implemented and monitored? Who would economically quantify each case of crop damage and livestock loss? Who would go to the scene and verify that a goat its owner claimed had been killed by a jackal had not died of disease or drought?

Another option would be for all potential problem animals to be confined to effectively fenced national parks and game reserves. If such a policy were implemented, the implications for Namibia’s elephant population, the majority of which either live in, or seasonally use feeding areas on communal land, would be catastrophic. Internationally endangered species such as wild dog and cheetah, which require vast areas to range in, would also become virtually non-viable within the country’s borders. On the other hand, jackal and caracal, which cause major smallstock losses, have proved remarkably resilient in spite of the commercial farmers’ costly attempts to exterminate them. We should also remember that predators and scavengers, including jackals, also perform a valuable ecological role.

The confining of all problem causing wild
animals to the larger national parks would also have a negative effect on Namibia’s tourism industry, which is marketed on a wide range of venues, many of which are on private or communal land. Because this is the case, the conflicts between wildlife conservation and rural development must be urgently addressed if tourism is to achieve its full potential in Namibia.

The most promising solution to the problem is the integration of wild animals back into the country’s rural economy so that financial losses are balanced by direct benefits. This has already been very successfully done on privately owned farmland in Namibia which has stimulated the growth of a booming, complementary industry based on trophy and photographic safaris, game harvesting and live game sales.

In communal areas, the first step must be to redress the inequities and discrimination of the past. The existing nature conservation legislation must be amended to grant communal land farmers similar conditional rights to use and market their wildlife resources as those that are given to private landowners by the Nature Conservation Ordinance 4 of 1975. When the farmers neighbouring Mudumu National Park get direct economic benefits through trophy fees and tourism enterprises - from the elephants that raid their crops - it will go a long way towards changing their attitudes to these and other national wildlife assets. From the income they receive, they as a community, will be in a position to verify, evaluate and pay individual owners of damaged fields, if they so choose.

Some tourist enterprises are already attempting to share their profits with local people. Following on the pioneering policies of Skeleton Coast Fly-In Safaris under the late Louw Schoeman, a number of other tourist operators including Lianshuлу and Palmwag Lodges and Etendeka Wilderness Camp are now collecting bed-night levies which will be paid annually to their neighbouring communities.

Research indicates that financial benefits from wildlife could far outweigh the financial costs if communities are given the rights and opportunities to wildlife and tourism earnings.

Research in Caprivi on four years of elephant damage to crops estimates that some of the worst-affected villages, such as those around Mudumu National Park on the east bank of the Kwando, lose around N$1 000 worth of crops per year. Losses of cattle and goats to lions, hyena and crocodile cost another N$2 000 or so per village - except for the four villages on the northern border of Mamili National Park, where lion attacks are more frequent, causing livestock losses ranging from N$1 300 to N$2 300 per village in 1994 (calculated at the market price of cattle of N$800 per head). These losses are catastrophic in a rural subsistence economy. Though the crop losses have a lower cash value, they are significant because the poorest households depend on crops rather than cattle.

However, these villages along the Kwando River in East Caprivi, it is estimated that local losses from wildlife damage have been around N$70 000 per year since 1991. By comparison, total annual earnings of local individuals selling crafts and working in lodges and camps are probably already around N$300 000. This could double if tourism and wildlife develop to their sustainable potential (for example, community guided walks and mokoro rides, a few more lodges), and increase further through joint ventures.

Cash alone won’t offset the costs of lost livelihood and disruption - especially if the benefits are earned by a few individuals and not whole communities. But it shows that with appropriate rights and institutions it can be well worth it for local communities to develop wildlife as a complement to farming, despite the costs.

Caroline Ashley and Caitlin O’Connell, drawing on research by Jon Barnes and monitoring by IRDNC community game guards in eastern Caprivi.
However, economic benefits will not alone balance “the costs of wildlife”. Rural communities must also be given a role in the management of the wild animals that share their land and affect their daily lives. Only when they are empowered to see themselves as genuine partners in the custodianship of the wildlife resources in their areas can we expect them to act responsibly towards them. This is the rationale behind the community game guard systems in the Kunene and Caprivi Regions. NGO sponsored rhino-monitoring teams, drawn from local communities, are another aspect of this approach.

In the communal areas, where natural resources are common property, the long-term success of this new policy will hinge on the creation of appropriate, representative, local community structures for sharing responsibility, with the conservation authorities, for the management of wild animals outside of parks and reserves, and also for the equitable distribution of economic benefits accruing to the local people from its consumptive and non-consumptive use.

Finally, and most importantly, is the need to establish an environment of mutual trust, understanding and respect between rural communities, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the tourism industry and local conservation NGOs. Only once this has been achieved can we hope to effectively resolve the conflicts between wildlife and human needs - one of the greatest challenges facing all concerned with the long term future of Namibia’s priceless natural heritage.

Lions sometimes venture onto farmland where they kill livestock. Instead of indiscriminate poisoning or revenge killings, known “problem animals” can be made available to trophy hunters for a high fee. Lions were declared a protected species in Namibia in 1995.