

Spatial determinants of habitat use, mortality and connectivity for elephant populations across southern Africa

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Spatial determinants of habitat use, mortality and connectivity for elephant populations across southern Africa

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my dad, Jerry Roever.

Abstract

Southern Africa contains 58% of the world's savannah elephant population, yet 72% of their range occurs outside of protected areas. It is, therefore, important to develop management guidelines that satisfy the needs of both elephants and people while maintaining environmental heterogeneity and ecosystem processes. Managing elephants as a metapopulation may provide the solution. The goal of this thesis was then to use a habitat-based approach to identify landscape characteristics which could contribute to the functionality of a metapopulation for elephants.

Using resource selection function models, I identified habitat suitability for elephants across southern Africa and used these models to evaluate whether current habitat configurations allow for the assumptions of connectivity and asynchronous population dynamics required by a metapopulation. I found that water, tree cover, slope, and human presence were important predictors of elephant habitat selection. Furthermore, functional responses in habitat selection were present across space and time for water and tree cover, showing the adaptability of this generalist species to resource heterogeneity.

Using habitat selection along with circuit theory current flow maps, I then found a high likelihood of connectivity in the central portion of our study area (i.e. between the Chobe, Kafue, Luangwa, and Zambezi cluster). Main factors limiting connectivity were the high human density in the east and a lack of surface water in the west. These factors effectively isolate elephants in the Etosha cluster in Namibia and Niassa clusters in Mozambique from the central region. Models further identified two clusters where elephants might benefit from being managed as part of a conservation network, 1) northern Zambia and Malawi and 2) northern Mozambique.

Incorporating information on elephant mortalities in northern Botswana into habitat selection estimations, I found that source habitats for elephants occurred within the central Okavango Delta region and sink habitats were associated with periphery of the study area where human use was highest. Eighty percent of elephant mortalities occurred within 25 km of people. The protected designation of an area had less influence on elephant mortality than did the locations of the area in relation to human development. To exacerbate human-elephant conflicts, people tended to settle in areas of high-quality elephant habitats, creating resource competition between elephants and people. Consequently, elephant mortality near humans increased as a function of habitat suitability, and elephants responded by using less suitable habitats. While humans occupied only 0.7% of the study area, mortality and behavioural effects impacted 43%.

Based on the habitat factors examined here, elephants in southern Africa could be managed as a metapopulation if (1) connectivity is maintained and encouraged and (2) spatial heterogeneity in resources and risks serves to stabilize elephant demography. This habitat-based system of management could serve to alleviate unstable elephant populations in southern Africa and create more natural, self-sustaining regulatory mechanisms.

Acknowledgements

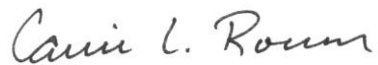
First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Rudi van Aarde, and my colleagues and friends in the Conservation Ecology Research Unit (CERU). They helped me through all of the highs and lows that accompany any academic pursuit and were always around to discuss science or life. I am grateful to Mike Chase and Kelly Landen from Elephant without Borders, who are doing amazing work for elephant conservation in Botswana and are some of the nicest, most generous people I have met. Keith Leggett provided me with elephant data and showed me some of the Australian outback, and Hawthorne Beyer and Hugh Possingham welcomed me into their lab at the University of Queensland. I am also grateful to Mandy Lombard, Teri Ott, and Tamara Lee for help with data management and GIS support. Finally, I am forever thankful to Lilian Scholtz who drove me home when it rained, worried about me when I was sick, and helped me navigate University bureaucracy so I could spend more time on research.

I would also like to thank all of the funders that contributed to the elephant program over the last 15 years. Without you, the massive amounts of elephant telemetry data, aerial survey data, and GIS layers that went into this thesis would not have been possible. I am also thankful for the personal funding generously provided by Conservation International's Africa Wilderness Programme, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Peace Park Foundation, the University of Pretoria, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Even though they were sad to see me travel so far from home, their unwavering support and occasional care-packages containing reminders of home were always with me.

Disclaimer

This thesis contains four manuscripts (Chapters 2-5), prepared for submission to different peer-reviewed journals. Chapter 2 has been published in *Ecography* (2012; 35, 972-982), and Chapter 3 has been published in *Biological Conservation* (2013; 157, 128-135). For consistency, styles and formatting for all Chapters follow the requirements for the journal *Biological Conservation*. I hereby declare all the work to be my own and that I have acknowledged all those that helped me and contributed in producing this thesis.



Carrie Lynn Roever

Table of Contents

Dedication	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements.....	5
Disclaimer.....	6
Table of Contents.....	7
List of Tables.....	9
List of Figures	11
CHAPTER 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
References.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER 2. FUNCTIONAL RESPONSES IN THE HABITAT SELECTION OF A GENERALIST MEGA-HERBIVORE, THE AFRICAN SAVANNAH ELEPHANT	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
Publication Details	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Abstract	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Methods	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Results.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Discussion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Acknowledgements.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
References.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER 3. FUNCTIONAL CONNECTIVITY WITHIN CONSERVATION NETWORKS: DELINEATING CORRIDORS FOR AFRICAN ELEPHANTS.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
Publication Details	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Abstract	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Methods	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Results.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Discussion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Acknowledgements..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

References..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER 4. INCORPORATING MORTALITY INTO HABITAT SELECTION TO IDENTIFY SECURE AND RISKY HABITATS FOR SAVANNAH ELEPHANTS ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

Publication Details Error! Bookmark not defined.

Abstract Error! Bookmark not defined.

Introduction Error! Bookmark not defined.

Methods Error! Bookmark not defined.

Results..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Discussion..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Acknowledgements..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

References..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix A. Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix B. Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix C. Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER 5. SIMILARITY IN HABITAT PREFERENCES IMPEDES HUMAN-ELEPHANT COEXISTENCE ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

Publication Details Error! Bookmark not defined.

Abstract Error! Bookmark not defined.

Introduction Error! Bookmark not defined.

Methods Error! Bookmark not defined.

Results..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Discussion..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Acknowledgements..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

References..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix A. Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER 6. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS..... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

References..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Tables

- Table 2-1. General description of some local conditions within each study site (population). The presence of water was calculated independently for the dry and wet seasons. High human use was defined as a human density of > 16 people/km² using LandScan (2008) human population data. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 2-2. Candidate models considered when assessing habitat selection by elephants across southern Africa. The number of fixed and random parameters (K) is presented. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 2-3. The top ranking model using Bayesian information criterion (BIC) for female and male elephant habitat selection in the dry and wet season. Top model weight (w) is presented along with Spearman rank correlation coefficient (r_s) and significance for model fit (*). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 2-4. Parameter estimates of the top-ranked BIC model for each population in the dry (a) and wet (b) season. Estimates for which confidence intervals do not cross zero are indicated by *. Missing values (-) occur when a given parameter was not included in the top model. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 3-1. Euclidian distance between neighboring clusters of elephant data arranged from west to east. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 3-2. Coefficient estimates and standard errors for habitat selection models. Significance to $p = 0.001$ is indicated (***) , and quadratic terms not included in the final model are denoted (-). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 4-1. Structure of the AIC candidate models evaluating elephant habitat use (elephant location vs. random location), elephant mortality risk (mortality location vs. random location), and difference in selection (mortality location vs. elephant location). Distance to water and distance to road were correlated; therefore, they could not be used in the same model. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- Table 4-2. Coefficients (β) and standard errors (SE) for the top-ranked AIC models. An asterisk (*) was used to indicate where the confidence intervals did not overlap with zero. Model fit

using k-fold cross validation and the Spearman rank correlation coefficient (r_s) is also presented. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 4-3. Percent composition of habitat states occurring within each study region. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix A, Table 4-4. Transects were sampled more intensively when elephant density was known or suspected to be higher in the region. To ensure this did not introduce a source of bias, we sub-sampled the aerial survey transects and retained only points observed along 4km transect intervals. We then reran the logistic regression models with the sub-sampled data (sub-sampled) and compared the results to that of the original data (original). The sign of the coefficient did not vary, and the significance varied only for the elephant vs. random model for the “slope” covariate. The beta coefficients, however, did vary between the sub-sampled and original datasets. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix A, Table 4-5. The elephant vs. random logistic regression model had the greatest differences in beta (β) coefficients when comparing the model produced from sub-sampled data to that of the original data. Therefore, we wanted to see how these changes influenced the relative probability of use surface. We created the probability surface for the sub-sampled model using identical methodology as the original data, and then subtracted it from the original probability surface to test for differences. The majority of the study area retained the same probability of use score (56.3%) or changed by ± 1 class (39.0%). Only 4.7% of the study area differed by more than ± 2 classes. . **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix B, Table 4-6. Results of AIC model selection using dry season water availability. AIC values, change in AIC (ΔAIC), and the model weight (w) are presented for the three habitat selection models tested. The top model is presented in bold. Top models do not vary from those observed using the wet season water availability. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix B, Table 4-7. Beta coefficients (β) and standard errors (SE) for the top-ranked AIC models. Because water varies seasonally, we compared model results estimated using water availability during the dry season (only permanent lakes and rivers were filled) with that of the wet season (all water sources). An asterisk (*) indicates where the confidence

intervals did not overlap with zero. Model fit was good ($r_s > 0.96$) for all models..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Table 4-8. Results of AIC model selection. AIC values, change in AIC (ΔAIC), and the model weight (w) are presented for the three habitat selection models tested. The top model is presented in bold. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 5-1. RSF models for potential and realized habitat use. Estimated using elephant aerial survey data (one point per elephant herd at one time period)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 5-2. Home range statistics for telemetry collared elephants between June and December 2010. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

List of Figures

Figure 2-1. Map of the study area located in eight countries in southern Africa. Elephant local convex hull home ranges were grouped into seven populations (Etosha, Chobe, Kafue, Zambezi, Luangwa, Niassa, and Limpopo) based on study site. Proportion of tree cover from no tree cover (0) to complete coverage (1) is presented. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 2-2. Relative probability of selection of water for females and males in the dry and wet seasons as a function of the distance to water. Values for each population are displayed only across the range of distances observed within that population. In the dry season, both male and female elephants had a U-shaped selection, where they selected areas both near and far from water. In the wet season, selection for water showed greater variability across populations for both sexes..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 2-3. Functional responses in habitat selection for female (red) and male (blue) elephants. Selection coefficients were estimated for each individual using a resource selection function model and were modelled as a function of the mean slope, tree cover, or proximity to humans within each home range. Both significant (filled circle) and non-significant (open circle) selection coefficients were modelled. Only the regression for

proximity to humans during the dry season was significant ($P = 0.03$). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3-1. Map of the study area in southern Africa incorporating seven countries. Areas with elephant telemetry data were grouped into clusters based on location and following the designation proposed by van Aarde and Ferreira (2009). Data from the Limpopo cluster were used for out-of-sample model testing. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3-2. Relative index of habitat use for female (a) and male (b) elephants. Black regions represent areas that were not predicted because the variable values were outside of the range observed within the habitat selection model. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3-3. Current flow using the habitat selection index as the resistance. Owing to the computing limitations of the program Circuitscape, the study area was divided into five sections (dashed black line). Black regions indicate areas of zero flow. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3-4. Current flow using the habitat selection index as the resistance, along with absolute barriers. Absolute barriers were defined as values greater than those observed within 99 percent of the elephant location data for distance to water, human population density, and slope. Black regions indicate areas of zero flow. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4-1. Map of the study area located in northern Botswana. The area included three national parks, one game reserve, and multiple wildlife management areas which were grouped and referred to as study regions. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4-2. Five habitat states categorized based on relative probability of use (ten ordinal bins from 1-low to 10-high) and relative probability of mortality (ten ordinal bins from 1-low to 10-high) for elephants. This figure was adapted from Nielsen et al. (2006). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4-3. Relative probability of use (a) and relative probability of mortality (b) for elephants based on logistic regression models and binned into 10 ordinal classes. Relative probability of mortality represents year-round mortality events, whereas relative probability of use pertains to dry season (June – December) occurrence. Black lines indicate jurisdictional boundaries. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4-4. Relative probability of occurrence for live elephant (solid black) and elephant carcass (dashed gray) locations as a function of distance to water, slope, and distance to humans. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4-5. Habitat states for elephants in northern Botswana. Non-critical habitats represent areas of low elephant occurrence. Primary and secondary habitats represent areas with high to moderate use and low mortality. Primary and secondary risk areas represent regions with high mortality and high to moderate use by elephant. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix A, Figure 4-6. Relative probability of use surfaces created using the sub-sampled (A) and original (B) data and binned into 10 ordinal categories. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix B, Figure 4-7. While model fit was good when using either the dry season or wet season water availability, the wet season water availability did a slightly better job at predicting the elephant use locations. The wet season probability surface had fewer locations in non-habitat and more locations in secondary and primary habitat than did the dry season probability of use model. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix B, Figure 4-8. Relative probability of use predicted using dry season water availability (A) and wet season water availability (B) and binned into 10 ordinal categories. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix B, Figure 4-9. Habitat states for elephants calculated using the relative probability of use model estimated using dry season water availability and relative probability of mortality model estimated using wet season water availability. Seasons varied between the models because elephant use locations were observed in the dry season only, whereas elephant carcasses persist for several years so the mortality event could have occurred during any season. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Figure 4-10. Relative probability of occurrence as a function of distance to water for live elephant (red) and elephant carcass (blue) with 95% confidence intervals (dotted line). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Figure 4-11. Relative probability of occurrence as a function of slope for live elephant (red) and elephant carcass (blue) with 95% confidence intervals (dotted line). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Figure 4-12. Relative probability of occurrence as a function of distance to humans for live elephant (red) and elephant carcass (blue) with 95% confidence intervals (dotted line).
..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Figure 4-13. Relative probability of use for elephants binned into 10 ordinal classes and overlaid with the live elephant observations (n=3 040) noted during the aerial survey (black dots)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix C, Figure 4-14. Relative probability of mortality binned into 10 ordinal classes and overlaid with the elephant carcass observations (n=341) noted during the aerial survey (black dots)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-1. Map of the study area located in northern Botswana. The area included three national parks, one game reserve, and multiple wildlife management areas (gray). Aerial surveys were conducted in the survey area, which was buffered by 40 km to accommodate the data obtained from elephants equipped with telemetry collars..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-2. Potential habitat (a) and realized habitat (b) for elephants. Habitat use is reduced in the realized habitat model due to the presence of humans. Habitat selection indexes were estimated beyond the aerial survey area (black line) at a distance of 40 km. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-3. Potential habitat minus realized habitat and overlaid with elephant carcass locations. Less suitable areas (orange) specify where elephants were effectively displaced due to the presence of humans, and this represents the conflict zone. Fifty nine percent of elephant mortalities (n = 341) occurred in this conflict zone, an area that encompassed only 31 percent of the aerial survey area (black line). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-4. An illustrative example of how habitat suitability around human settlements (a) influenced elephant displacement (b). Settlements located in highly suitable elephant habitats had larger displacement areas around the settlement (classified as “less suitable”), an area which extended up to 21 km from the village edge..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-5. The number of elephant mortalities (A) and observed elephants (B) within and outside of the conflict zone as a function of the potential habitat suitability (low=1, high=5). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5-6. Based on habitat selection theory, we expect individuals to avoid less suitable habitat (negative selection coefficient) and select more suitable habitat (positive selection coefficient). This pattern occurs for female and male elephants with home ranges outside of the conflict zone (a). For individuals with at least 20 percent of their home range in the conflict zone, females (b) selection less suitable habitat and males (c) select all habitats less than available. Habitat suitability category 5 was withheld as the reference category, and if the confidence interval crossed zero, selection was not significantly different from available. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix A, Figure 5-7. An illustrative example of how the location of human settlements in low or high quality habitats (A) reduced habitat suitability (B). A negative difference denotes a decrease in habitat suitability as a function of human presence. The difference values are based on the original, continuous habitat suitability values for the potential and realized habitat indexes, before they were converted into categorical values. . **Error! Bookmark not defined.**