

Two Wrong 'Problems' May Make A Right

By James Workman

The ten-year-old orphan stepped out into the clearing. Then he froze. Before him rose a huge, muddy, hungry bull elephant who trumpeted and swerved toward him, striding closer. Twenty meters fell away in seconds. Nine meters. Two.

Odds are you've heard of the projected 40 million HIV/AIDS orphans in Africa. This 'problem' is blamed on of a series of development failures: family or tribal breakdown; denial by sitting presidents; delay or distraction by health officials.

You may also know of the rise in 'problem' elephants, blamed on conservation success: protected breeding herds increase 5% a year, populations double every decade and spill out of protected areas to eat vital crops, drink scarce water and injure innocent people of surrounding villages.

So what happens when, inevitably, Africa's two demographic 'problems' collide? I was curious. I thought witnessing such a face-to-face encounter might offer a glimpse into the continent's rural future.

So instead of Cessna-floating into a posh Okavango lodge, in December I joined a bush-bashing convoy bound for the rustic leaking tent propped up by Doug and Sandi Groves' 'Living with Elephants.' We thrice got lost, twice bogged. An engine died for two hours. Six adults clenched teeth and dropped spanners in the first mud of summer.

Our incompetence was quietly mocked by our snickering passengers, the dozen insecure ten-year-olds born in Delta villages and crowded in Maun schools. Africa's future.

Tourism guides describe Maun as a 'dusty safari outpost, and gateway to the Delta.' Maybe. But it's also an urban job-magnet that attracts parents away from villages. It has become a vector for the spread of AIDS. It's a transition zone for street kids and orphans.

These kids are caught between competing values, modern worlds and alternate realities. In certain interwoven ways, so is the elephant.

In one world the elephant is the source of life to be embraced. It brings tourists, jobs, paved roads, shopping malls and internet cafes into previous nowhere crossroads like Maun. In the other world the elephant remains a force of death and destruction. It comes in the night; makes kids go hungry at harvest time, keeps them from fetching water.

Some kids had never actually seen an elephant, or suffered real impacts. But they knew what to fear. Their minds were filled with monsters, not the imaginary kind.

After our convoy arrived and had eaten sandwiches, the students sat down and talked elephants. They drew pachyderm pictures. These 'before' images were unflattering: aggressive, mean, cold, knocking down trees, hard-skinned, destructive, chasing people. "Elephants don't like pregnant women, or people wearing red shirts," wrote one with assurance. Said another: "they are like Bushmen; they come from everywhere and arrive from nowhere, surrounding you."

Against my expectations, no one said their portrayals were 'right,' or 'wrong.' No one corrected them. Kids were trusted to make up their own mind after exposure to all perspectives.

An hour later the children walked out to a field and waited. Soon we heard a measured crashing through the bush. The children bunched closer together to face their collective fears.

Later that evening, as the first swarming termite hatch of summer smashed into our lanterns and candles and mugs, founder Doug Groves gave us some background. He and Sandi had salvaged difficult and unwanted 'problem children.' The couple spoke like doting parents. They mentioned their worries over and devotion to Jabu, Thembi and Morula, three juveniles who are never quite domesticated, and never entirely wild.

"Sometimes they wander off and we're worried sick for days," said Doug. "Other times they get threatened by neighborhood bullies, but they stick up for each other." Another worry was that they were reaching sexual maturity, which had all kinds of competitive implications.

It sounded rather familiar. From the students' teachers I learned that half the ten year olds were sexually active, most had been abused, some were aggressive as a result. A few had been orphaned, while many were simply neglected and felt more secure in the company of each other than with resentful relatives.

Living with Elephants' outreach to 200 students was set up as a kind of child-wildlife 'truth and reconciliation' program. No one tries to deny the potential damage – tangible or psychological – caused by rising populations of elephants. The promotional brochure I read includes photos of crops eaten, water points destroyed.

But nor does it shy away from the ideals of adaptation, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Rather than ignore or brush off community rage LWE traces elephant conflicts to its various roots, and tries to set risk-and-reward strategies

in a larger political and economic context. It is supervised by the University of Botswana, partners with the Okavango Delta Management Plan, and works with both the Botswana Department of Wildlife and the Mokoro Community Trust.

In all honesty, I came to the camp skeptical that such a small group of people could make much difference to what seemed like a continental collision course. I remain in doubt. But my doubt is diluted by the image that stays with me.

That first orphan stood still. The bull elephant, Jabu, kept his body motionless, not even swaying. But soon, his trunk betrayed his curiosity. Of its own will the nose rose forward unwinding through the air until it brushed against the orphan's own outreached arms.

The boy quivered at the touch. His whole body shuddered, overwhelmed by the feel of the hairy, wrinkly, heavy searching appendage of the monster he'd so imagined.

I don't know whether either 'problem child' will be transformed by those brief moments of communion with the other. I don't know if he will now feel larger in spirit, more grounded, and confident enough to face down real and imaginary monsters that will inevitably approach with age.

I only know how completely one smiled, while the other seemed to laugh out loud.

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during a very special visit of the Street
Children of the Bana Ba Letsatsi
Foundation
Maun, BOTSWANA

