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Wildlife Management Aids Rural Development

by Bowden Quinn

Harare, Zimbabwe -- District Councillor Charles Jiri used to think an elephant was "an ugly, useless beast." Now, he says, "I would nurse a sick animal back to health."

Jiri's change of heart is the result of a government program that enables rural communities to benefit from the wild animals around them. Jiri's district has received thousands of dollars in revenue from the killing of elephants and other game.

The effect of the program is especially noticeable this year, when a severe drought has brought crop failures and food shortages to much of Zimbabwe.

Chief Warden Barry Ball of the Department of National Parks and Wild Life says the drought has led to an increase in poaching in communal areas, where most of Zimbabwe's population lives. After a bad harvest, farmers need the meat or money they can get by killing a wild animal to make it through the long dry season.

But, Ball adds, "I guarantee that the level of poaching in (the northwest) will be far lower because the people in that area know that the animals are bringing them money."

The government program mainly benefits people living in lightly populated communal areas near the northern, western and southern borders, where most of the wild animals are. The best results have come in the northwest region, where the program began. Poaching there has almost disappeared.

Councillor Jiri's northwestern district received more than US \$233,000 last year in wildlife revenues. His council is using the money to build four health clinics.

For several years the government has wanted local communities to benefit from their wildlife. No effective policy could be implemented during the Seventies, when this country was called Rhodesia, because of a guerrilla war against white minority rule that made much of the rural area a no-man's land.

When peace came with independence two years ago, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's government started giving local councils the revenues from hunting in communal lands. Professional hunters buy the right to kill animals from the government, and pass on the costs to overseas visitors who pay substantial amounts for their big game trophies. A lion, for example, will bring \$1,900 to the area in which it is killed.

Another part of the government's new policy is Operation Windfall. In this program, the government distributes locally the meat from elephants killed in communal areas. Local councils get the proceeds from the sale of the elephants' ivory and hides.

Previously, the government sold the meat on the open market, and all revenues went to the wildlife department, which is still what happens with elephants killed in national parks.

The wildlife department gave local and district councils a total of \$666,000 in wildlife revenues last year, which is "more money than some of these councils have seen in their lives," according to Richard Pitman of the department.

Reports about killing African game whose numbers have dwindled raise an outcry in some quarters, but the regulated killings prevent deaths in greater numbers as a consequence of overpopulation.

Also, uncontrolled game populations bring the animals into conflict with farmers. As long as rural Africans regard animals as competitors for food and land, wildlife will be in danger.

Limited hunting controls most animal populations. Elephants, with no natural predators, must be killed on a regular, large-scale basis. The wildlife department kills an average of 2,000 elephants a year, mostly in the national parks, though the number fluctuates with changing conditions.

The elephants are killed to protect the terrain. Zimbabwe has between 40,000 and 50,000 elephants, which is probably ten times as many as the area had at the turn of the century, Pitman estimates. Elephants destroy trees and can do a great deal of ecological damage if left to multiply unchecked.

Pitman says the government's new policy has brought a remarkable change in rural people's attitudes toward wild animals. Before, villagers thought of the animals as pests that could damage crops and threaten lives. They grew angry watching government officers and white tourists shooting game that the villagers would be put in jail for killing.

Now, rural people see the animals as a source of income well worth protecting.

Department officials have talked of creating mini-reserves in heavily populated areas in the center of the country. Such reserves could be a safeguard against drought-induced famine, because wild animals can live in areas and under conditions that are unsuitable for farming or cattle-raising.

This idea hasn't reached the planning stage. If it does become a project, completion would still be many years away. The first step, Pitman says, would be to teach the local people to let the animals live until the game population has grown enough for culling.

At one time, this might have been considered the toughest part of the job. The results of the government's new policy have shown that traditional views of wild animals can change quickly when people see their interests at stake.