

My Elephant Neighbor



Des Elephants & Des Hommes
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Summary of project goals and objectives:

Conservation education program for 10 year-old children with the following objectives:

- 1) To offer the "My Elephant Neighbor" program to two hundred and fifty (250) ten year-old pupils from 25 schools located around the Deux Balé Forest in Burkina-Faso. Specifically, the on-site program consists of a day excursion in the nearest elephant reserve to observe elephants and learn about their biology, ecology and cultural importance. The educational component teaches children about the vital importance of natural habitat for elephants, biodiversity and also for human populations.
- 2) To investigate the long-term impact of the program. This research is being carried out independently by PhD Candidate Erica Rogers from the City University of New York. In 2011 she studied the immediate impact of the program in Burkina-Faso finding a positive effect of the direct exposure (through the outreach program) and of the indirect exposure (through the classroom activities with the "My Elephant Neighbor Booklet").

Summary of project results, activities and findings:

Outdoor component: We conducted as planned the 25 on-site excursions for 25 schools in February and March 2012. In total 250 children took part in the program accompanied by their teachers. Elephants were seen in 70% of the excursions, which is a bit less than in previous years. Fortunately for the elephants, the quality of the habitat is improving and they are more dispersed throughout the reserve to forage. 90% of the participant children had never seen an elephant in person before the excursion, which shows, once again, how relevant this educational program is. 25 teachers and 5 education officers participated in the program. All of them said that were happy with the program, stating that it benefits the children and that it is an important complement to their teaching. They told us that the program contributes positively to the education of the children who develop a positive attitude towards wildlife conservation and environmental protection. As every year, most of the teachers and education officers would like the outdoor component of the program to be extended to all the schools in the province and all of the pupils. Currently, this is not possible. The economic situation of the region is such that this outdoor excursion is not affordable for any of the schools.

Classroom component: For the scholar year 2012, the 170 primary schools of the Balé Province and nearly 80 other of the neighboring Mouhoun Province (the closest to elephant habitat) participated in the program. This is a significant improvement in comparison to the 20-25 schools we had worked with from 2007 through 2010! A workshop held in February 2012 finalized the organization of the classroom component of the program. The final version of the "My Elephant Neighbor, Boucle du Mouhoun" booklet was ready along with a teacher manual that was conceived to assist the teachers using the booklet with their students. Both documents were approved by the Education authorities of the Region and by the Environmental Education Office of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. In total between 10,000 and 15,000 children were exposed to the program thanks to the educational kit offered to schools. Two age groups are targeted for the use of the educational kit (CM1-CM2). The CM1 group (students aged around 10 years old) is the group selected for the outdoor component which totals about 250 to 500 students. The two components are complimentary with the main conservation messages in common. Of course, our deepest wish would be to have all the kids taking part in the outdoor component. It is however financially impossible.



Over the past ten years, the Des Elephants et Des Hommes educational program in various areas in Africa has found that over **80% of children aged around 10-12**, living near elephant reserves where the NGO is active, **have not seen an elephant!** They knew that in France this statistic was much lower but decided to use the services of a well-established pooling institute in France to tease out the figures. The results were that **over 80% of the children aged between 9 and 15 in France have seen an elephant.** Among those children, **80% have seen an elephant in a zoo, 60% in a circus** and 7% travelling in Africa or Asia. We believe that without exposure, there is little hope for children to be concerned about the welfare of the surrounding elephant populations or to grow into motivated conservationists. We hope, despite obvious current challenges, that most Burkinabé and West African students will soon have the opportunity to visit one of their national parks, where wild elephants live.

To quote from Erica Rogers's research report (included):

"In sum, positive attitudes and knowledge about elephants increased over time following the intervention, and continued to increase for the following year. The longitudinal effect of the program, in which not only the direct exposure group, but the entire cohort showed a significant increase in positive attitudes and knowledge about elephants over the course of one year, suggests that there is a sustained impact of the nature class and that information and ideas are shared throughout the class. The data indicated that observing elephants had the most impact in the short term, but over time all groups are at about the same positive score. In effect, the long-term effects over the course of one year are comparable across groups. [...] While without the

intervention, more empathic children were more likely to have positive attitudes towards elephants; the intervention was effective regardless of empathic capacity. Therefore, this is not an intervention that works only for empathic children. In order to assess changes in behavior, a much greater longitudinal study will be necessary to see the actions of these children when they are responsible for the care and conservation of the elephants and their habitat. Future studies should also explore the qualitative data and the scenario based questions included in the protocol that were beyond the scope of the current report. Overall, the results provide data that points to a positive impact of the My Elephant Neighbor program in achieving its stated goals."



We are of course delighted with the results found by Erica. We were hoping that the program had a positive impact on the student towards elephant conservation and harmonious human-elephant coexistence. The research shows this positive impact. We were happily surprised to see that the positive impact, first recorded among children exposed to elephants during the outdoor component, was also quickly recorded among the children not exposed to elephants. This means that offering the "My Elephant Neighbor" program to a few children per school actually impacts positively the other students of the schools, and probably their teachers and families.

This result reinforces our feeling that this modest program, conducted in Burkina-Faso since 2007, has already had a positive impact in the Mouhoun Region, especially around the Deux-Balé National Park. We are convinced that the program contributes to motivating the inhabitants to preserve their wildlife and elephants, not only because they can generate income but also because they are part of their heritage. Elephants are the flagship of a healthy environment that can be enjoyed by all. One of the fundamental of this program is that elephant conservation will only be possible in the long-term if their human neighbors are their most active protectors. Actions of governments, wildlife institutions and conservation NGOs can only be successful if communities living in the vicinity of elephants really want to live with elephants in harmonious

coexistence. Despite the positive results, we are aware that the program still needs to be improved, both in its content and assessment indicator and agree with Erica that research should be continued in Burkina-Faso and in new places we hope to be working soon.



Explain what was the project's overall impact on conservation (capacity building, technology transfer, human-elephant conflict mitigation, how it is enhancing the survival of the species, other wildlife etc.).

We can list 2 major impacts of the My Elephant Neighbor project on elephant conservation and harmonious human-elephant coexistence in the Deux-Balé region, one immediate and one future.

Immediate impact: We have run this educational program, first titled "Children and Elephants" then "My Elephant Neighbor" since 2007. In 2007, the situation of the Deux-Balé forest was disastrous with thousands of cows foraging in the forest, piles of illegally collected wood, large trees cut down, small game poaching, illegal fires, and illegal fishing. The first two years of the program, we did not notice any improvement in the situation regarding conservation. Following those two years however, the fact that the program was still running, encouraged the government to strengthen the management of the forest. Since 2009, a new team has been put in charge of the protected area management and we are starting to see improvement and rehabilitation of the wildlife reserve. The elephants now seem more relaxed and are beginning to disperse in some parts of the forest that they could not access before. Other species like roan antelopes, bushbucks, warthogs, African civets, vervet monkeys and baboons seem to be increasing. Most of the illegal activities which used to occur are now under control. It does not mean that the wildlife reserve is back to its natural state and that the entire elephant habitat is now safe, but we can say that we are now moving in that direction. If the efforts are sustained, the situation should improve year after year. This overall impact on conservation is not only due to our educational program but it definitely plays a part in the current progress being made. In 2011, the

government signed a three-year agreement with our organization stating that we should continue our educational program and develop other activities in partnership. Among the terms of the partnership, we have enabled the employment of a local education officer, who was trained by our team. In conclusion, despite the fact that the program is targeted to the children, the broader impact is the entire community.

Impact for the future: Our educational program is offered to children so that they become the most active conservationists for the elephants and the wildlife of their region. The fact that our program is appreciated today by adults helps the rehabilitation of the forest. Once the forest is rehabilitated, it will be the people themselves who will take care of it, protecting the elephants and the rest of its biodiversity. Without this local commitment, the elephants will not be able to safely live in the region. Our educational program, is highly appreciated by the teachers, both on site in the Deux Balé Wildlife reserve and in the classroom. All the teachers think that the program benefits the children. Therefore, we think that our program has already had an impact in the present for improved elephant conservation and human elephant coexistence and we expect that it will have a greater impact in the future because of the positive involvement of the children. Our feeling is that the program is needed for at least another five years in the region to reach sustainable results. Today the trend is positive but the situation remains fragile.

Did this project influence any local/regional/national policy in regards to elephant conservation and/or habitat protection? Explain. The project indeed influences the local and regional policy given that the educational program is now active in all 170 primary schools of the province and the Mouhoun province and the Boucle du Mouhoun region have now also been included in the program. We have signed a three year agreement to work with the wildlife administration on various activities, including environmental education. We are also discussing the potential extension of the project to other elephant sites of Burkina-Faso and in neighboring countries.

Immediate conservation impact: The 300 to 600 Mouhoun elephants, whose core population finds refuge in the Deux-Balé protected areas may disappear before 2050 if their habitat is not protected from ongoing destruction. Our educational program has been active around the Deux-Balé forest since 2007 and we are happy to see that since 2009, the government has joined our efforts and is rehabilitating the protected area of the Deux-Balé Forest. We are currently engaged in a local partnership to foster environmental education and conservation actions. Although our program targets children, its impact is already tangible because the adults of the region are very appreciative of the initiative. Offering our educational program to the children, encourages the adults to protect the elephants because it is very important for them that their children and grandchildren have a chance to see their elephant neighbors.

Long term conservation impact: Children of today will be the conservationists of tomorrow. Without their awareness and involvement, elephant conservation will be a difficult challenge in many parts of its range. In Burkina-Faso and West Africa, the human population is growing fast and will probably triple by 2050. In the decades to come, there will be great need of creativity and motivation to achieve peaceful human-elephant coexistence. Exposing children to their elephant neighbors in a positive manner is the most effective way to involve them and their families in long-term elephant conservation. Our philosophy is very simple: one protects what

one appreciates and one appreciates what one knows intimately. The statistics of our program over the years clearly show that over 80% of the children who were offered the program had never seen an elephant before. In order to protect the local elephants in the future, children need to be positively exposed to them, preferably directly or at least indirectly, so that they will be part of their thoughts for the future. We are glad to see that the results of the first independent research study on the impact of the program showed that exposing children changes their perception of elephants for the better. This is in line with the philosophy of IEF that we would like to thank again for its continuous support.



Conclusion

In conclusion, we strongly believe that the "My Elephant Neighbor" program fosters a positive attitude towards elephants in a region where their population is seriously endangered. The fact that we started this program at a time when the conservation situation was very bad contributed to the involvement of the government to reinforce the protection of the Deux-balé forest and the Mouhoun elephants. If our sensitization efforts continue, we can hope for a sustainable future for these elephants. In the long-term, the inhabitants will be their first protectors. Already illegal activities have decreased, the Deux Balé protected area is under rehabilitation, and the elephants have dispersed in parts of the reserve which were recently over-whelmed with illegal activities such as cattle herding, small-game poaching, and illegal wood collection. The quality of the habitat is improving, the elephants lead a more peaceful existence, and the signs of wildlife are clearly on the rise. Biodiversity is in a better state and human elephant coexistence is slowly becoming less antagonistic. However we cannot become complacent as the wildlife is under

growing pressure, as West Africa is known to have the fastest growing human demography in Africa.

