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Letters

Ecological drumbeats

"African elephants: A dying way of life" (SN: 5/21/88, p.333) assails the fact that poaching is preventing the adequate maintenance of the elephant population, mainly in East Africa. However, it fails to allude to the rapid decrease in the number of many other important animal species now thinly spread throughout the entire West African ecosystem. Included among those are the apes or monkey group, the felines, pygmy hippopotamus and several other species.

Equally responsible for the downward trend in the population of animals is the ever-increasing practice of random game kill by rural Africans and their urban African clients. The regions of black Africa are now experiencing a high yearly population growth rate, while the business of cattle herding along the expanding southern margins of the Sahara is phasing out. It is anybody's guess what that could mean for those remaining animals whose numbers are on a decline as a result of uncontrolled killing.

Pro-wildlife institutions headquartered

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outside of Africa cannot by themselves restore any broad-based ecological normalcy to those exotic environments. But in close cooperation with certain groups of professional Africans — agriculturalists, biologists, foresters, geologists, etc. — these institutions can make a more significant contribution to saving not only the lives of animals but also those of plants, especially those nearing extinction.

There is an urgent need for interdisciplinary interaction amongst these professionals. Their ultimate goal could be geared toward narrowing the gap between man and nature. The random felling of trees and the butchery of animals will only tend to widen that gap, creating an "ecological watershed" in many wildlife communities of Africa. Africa's ecosystem can no longer afford to echo drumbeats that are out of tune with nature.

Galimah K. Baysah
Liberian student
Toledo, Ohio

The same financial incentives that incite the slaughter of elephants should be put to

work to protect them. There must be some way the game authorities can take the tusks off an elephant without killing the animal. It seems that the authorities could shoot elephants with tranquilizer darts, remove the tusks and then release the elephants. The authorities could then sell the ivory to finance the whole procedure.

By harvesting ivory without killing the elephants, you would eliminate the incentive for poachers to kill elephants: Each de-tusked elephant would be effectively "inoculated" against poachers. Moreover, you would give the local governments a financial incentive to protect the elephants. And if harvesting ivory from live elephants resulted in a small percentage of elephants dying from accidental overdoses of tranquilizer, wouldn't that still be preferable to the current policies, which leave 100 percent of the elephants prey to poachers?

Is there some fundamental principal of elephant ecology that would prevent a system of live ivory harvesting from being developed? Or is it just that no one has ever tried it?

Douglas M. Grossman
Lakewood, Ohio

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