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Studying Elephants: AWF Technical Handbook Series #7

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Book Review

Studying Elephants: AWF Technical Handbook Series #7

Editor: Kadzo Kangwana

Publication Date: 1996

Pages: 186

Publisher: African Wildlife Foundation, P. O. Box 48177, Nairobi, Kenya; phone: 254-2-710367; fax: 710372

Price: The book is complimentary, with a shipping and handling fee of \$15.00 U.S. (since the book is shipped from Nairobi, Kenya).

Review by Robert H. I. Dale

Note: The African Wildlife Foundation recommends that the book be ordered through the Washington, DC office of the AWF. Contact Christie Feral, Program Officer, African Wildlife Foundation, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 602, Washington, DC 20036; phone: 202-265-8393; fax: 202-265-2361. The book is available in English, French, and Portuguese.

This book was written to inform protected-area staff and researchers of the techniques used to study wild African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*). Because of limited resources, it is suggested that research in any region be related to the area's management objectives.

Although the book's main purpose is to promote competent and useful field studies of free-roaming populations of African elephants, many of the chapters will be interesting to anyone who works with elephants in captivity. Remember, however, that the text is intended to provide basic information and guidance for beginning researchers, not sophisticated details for experts.

Following Joyce Poole's chapter outlining the social structure, life history, and ecology of African elephants, there are 17 chapters organized into 6 sections: Elephant Management, Counting Elephants, Studying Populations, Developing (that is, new) Research Techniques, Elephants in their Human Context,

and Handling Elephants. The addresses of all authors are provided, and anyone planning research is encouraged to contact the relevant experts. Also provided are the address of a liaison group, the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, reference lists including several hundred research articles and books, and the addresses of equipment and computer program suppliers. The chapters are brief, 4–17 pages in length.

Some of the chapters provide technical information that is relevant for research with captive animals, such as Phyllis Lee's chapter on recording behaviors, Karen McComb's chapter on vocal communication, Cynthia Moss's chapter on identifying elephants and "aging" them (because of her discussion of body shape changes and tooth wear). Hamisi Mutinda's chapter on reproductive physiology, Kadzo Kangwana's chapter on human-elephant interactions (because of the information on survey techniques), and Chris Thouless' chapter on immobilization also provide some directly relevant information. Most of the chapters, on the other hand, are interesting because of the methodological context they provide for understanding the field studies' data. The chapters on counting elephants from the air (Iain Douglas-Hamilton; Susan Mbugua) and from dung counts (Richard Barnes) involve unexpected logistical and mathematical complications. Finally, the chapters on radio-tracking (I. J. Whyte) and satellite-tracking (Chris Thouless) have a certain *Star Wars* flavor, although Web surfers will probably not be impressed. Satellite tracking has even been used to allow schoolchildren to follow the movements of a relocated male Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). [See <http://www.si.edu/elephant>; *U.S. News & World Report*, October 21, 1996.]

Perhaps more than anything else, I was pleased to be "brought up to speed" on the variety of research techniques that are available. The authors have been conscientious in describing the types of errors that befall each technique, and they give advice on how to avoid these errors. I recommend that anyone planning to conduct research with elephants read this handbook. You can never predict how one of the techniques described might help you complete your project.