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LAND, THE ELEPHANT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: THE PRECOLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL SITUATION

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## LAND, THE ELEPHANT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: THE PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL SITUATION

*Kwame Osei Kwarteng and Beatrice Akua Duncan*

### **Introduction**

This paper proposes to discuss the environmental impact of the cocoa industry on the elephant population in the forest belt of Ghana in the twentieth century. The forest belt of Ghana and, of course, the entire country was ranged by large herds of elephants in the past, but in 2002 the elephant population of Ghana was approximated at between 1000 and 2000 (African elephant Status Report 2002: 206). The role the cocoa industry played in the decimation of the elephant population in the forest belt in general and Ahafo area in particular in the twentieth century is the focus of this discussion.

Bowdich (1966:327), Rattray (1923:218), Dickson (1969:57), Cardinal (1971:167), Posnansky (1973:155), and Anquandah (1982:87) have all provided evidence to suggest that there were large elephant populations in Ghana from the coastal belt through the forest region to the savannah belt in the past. Nevertheless, the frontier of the elephant retreated from the coastal belt towards the forest region because of the emergence of so many human settlements along the coast, mainly due to commercial activities, which sprang up as a result of the European contact. However, the forest and the savannah zones continued to harbour large populations of elephant. In the case of the forest belt, despite several centuries of elephant hunting in the Gyaman and Ahafo areas for ivory, by the beginning of the twentieth century when the British colonised Asante, elephants were still well distributed and numerous, (Kwarteng 2008:10)<sup>1</sup> especially in Western Asante.

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<sup>1</sup> K. O. Kwarteng, *A History of Elephant in Ghana in the Twentieth Century*, PhD thesis submitted to Centre of West African Studies, University of

Ahafo (Goaso Complex) located in Western Asante was in the past considered by wildlife experts as the largest elephant range in Ghana (African Elephant Status Report 2002:205) was the hunting grounds of the Asante for over two centuries, because of its rich fauna (Kwarteng 2002:59-66). These seemingly numerous forest elephants had the entire large expanse of the virgin forest of Ahafo, which was contiguous with the forest of Atwima, Ahafo-Ano, Dormaa, Sunyani, Wassa, Sehwi, Aowin, Denkyira, Twifo-Hemang and the Eastern portion of the Ivory Coast as their natural habitat. The elephants moved from one area to the other without let or hindrance. A different scenario, however, emerged following the adoption of commercial agriculture by Ghanaian farmers after the introduction of cocoa into the country by Tetteh Quarshie in 1878 (Agbodeka1972:30). Polly Hill (1997:1) indicates that from about 1892, individual Akwapim, Krobo, Shai, Ga and other Ghanaian farmers from the south of the forest migrated to the forest region to acquire forestlands (*kwaae* in Twi) to grow cocoa, the new cash crop. This mad rush for *kwaae* resulted in the rapid diffusion of the cocoa industry to New Juaben, Akyem Abuakwa, Manya and Yilo Krobo by 1900, reaching Asante in 1905, and by 1907, it had been firmly established there (Ibid). By the 1930s large hectares of *kwaae* in Western Province of Ashanti had been put under cocoa cultivation (Dickson1969:306). This development culminated in an agrarian revolution in Ghana, because it engendered waves of migration of farmers and farm labourers into the forest belt from every nook and cranny of the country and even from the neighbouring French colonies of Togo, Dahomey, and Upper Volta.

The craze for acquisition of *kwaae* for commercial agriculture had a wide environmental ramification. It implied that the vast forestlands in Ahafo, Atwima, Ahafo-Ano, Twifo Hemang, Denkyira, Adanse, Wassa, Sehwi, Dormaa, Sunyani, Asante and other places, which had hitherto not been cultivated were cleared for cocoa cultivation. This led to degradation of the forest, and also had dire

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Birmingham, UK, 2008, p. 10. Kwarteng relied on evidence provided by A.W. Cardinall, *In Ashanti and Beyond*, for the above information.

consequences on the forest elephant, as its range or habitat became fragmented and shrank. The habitat of the elephant was thus restricted mainly to Government constituted forest reserves, with the unreserved forestlands lost to agriculture.

### **Human-Elephant Conflict and the Decline of Elephant Numbers**

The forest elephant loss of range and habitat to the expanding cocoa industry provoked human–elephant conflict, which in the final analysis contributed immensely to the decline of the elephant population in the forest belt of Ghana. There is an existing scientific debate on the expansion of Agriculture revolving around Hardin’s theory of *the Competitive Exclusive Principle*, which postulates that where the demands of two species are sufficiently similar, competition between them will lead to the extinction of one (Hardin 1960:1291-7). The competition between humans and elephants for food and habitat falls within this category. Sugg and Kreuter (1994:22-23), contributing to the debate note that elephants began to decline with the advent of sedentary agriculture about 10,000 years ago, when every hectare of land put under cultivation was lost to the elephant. Kwarteng (2008:24) observes that Sugg and Kreuter may have overstated the case somewhat; since not every hectare of land put under cultivation was a direct loss to the elephant. But *The Elephant Conservation Plan for Ghana* (1991) indicates that the emergence of large expanses of farmlands between forest reserves in the forest zones of Ghana and Ivory Coast has led to fragmentation of both elephant habitat and population into small, scattered and isolated units, thus, confirming the claim of Sugg and Kreuter.

Though poaching and the ivory trade cannot be ruled out as having contributed to the decline of the forest elephant in Ghana, nonetheless, the foregoing evidence clearly supports the argument that the expansion of the cocoa industry was decisive in the decimation of the forest elephant population. The elephant did not remain aloof to the incursion on its habitat by the pioneer cocoa farmers. It countered the intrusion on its habitat by either intermittently or persistently carrying out forays from the Forest Reserves into the cocoa and crop farms to cause extensive havoc to

them. This therefore, created conflicts between farmers and elephants all over the forest belt. Specifically, elephants destroyed settlements, terrified farmers to abandon their farms and in the worst cases killed some of the farmers. These raids were widespread occurring at different places simultaneously and consecutively.

In fact from the early 1960s to the close of the twentieth century, forest elephants gave the cocoa farmers and some timber contractors working in the forest belt anxious moments. Archival evidence on elephant control duties by the Department of Game and Wildlife from 1961 to 1994 indicates that elephant crop raiding occurred in Ahafo, Sehwi, Cape Coast, Twifo Hemang, Kenyasi, Sunyani and Nzimaa areas.<sup>2</sup> Farmers, who had invested all their financial and human resources in the acquisition of the land and the cultivation of the farms, became desperate and sought assistance from their local authorities for protection against the menace of the marauding elephants (*Ibid*).<sup>3</sup>

In response to the distress calls by the farmers, District Commissioners of Ahafo and Dormaa, where the first recorded incidence of human–elephant conflicts occurred, appealed to the Regional Conservator of Forest at Sunyani, through the Regional Commissioner for assistance from the Game Warden at Damongo. In most cases, the Game Warden responded to the request by dispatching Game Scouts from Damongo to the affected areas to carry out the control operations, which entailed shooting and killing of at least one of the rampaging elephants to scare the others. It should however be noted that the Game Warden, Asibey Asiamah, hesitantly subscribed to this method during control operations. This was because he noticed the ineffectiveness of the method in resolving the human–elephant conflict in Ahafo, and was also aware that it ran counter to the wildlife conservation policy his department espoused, for which reason; he proposed the establishment of a national park at Mim area in lieu of cocoa farming.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Game and Wildlife, Goaso, file nos. GOGW/2/volume1, GOGW/2/volume 2; GOGW/1a/w/4; PRAAD, Sunyani, BRG1/1/32 volumes I and II.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

Evidence relating to the operations of the Game Scouts indicates that most of their operational activities in Ahafo between 1961 and 1972 were centred around the Mim area. This was an indication of large concentration of elephant population in that area and, as such elephant crop damage was high there. Whatever relief the operations of the Game Scouts brought to the farmers in Ahafo was ephemeral. The elephant destruction of cocoa farms and food crops intensified as soon as the Game Scouts left Ahafo to their base. Again, whenever the Game Scouts were operating in a particular area, elephants would move to the nearby places where they felt secure and invade farms to wreak havoc.

The problem of elephant menace to cocoa farmers reached a head when in July 1962 elephants killed one farmer called Mireku in Ayomso area. The killing of Mireku coupled with numerous incident and reports of elephant damage to cocoa farms, the backbone of the Ghanaian economy, made the Regional Commissioner realise the enormity of the problem, which he described as 'serious'. Subsequently, he directed the Senior Assistant Conservator of Forest at Sunyani to initiate immediate action to 'control these elephants effectively'.<sup>4</sup> Though the Conservator of Forest put some measures in place including an invitation to the Game Warden to send Game Scouts to Ahafo, to kill some of the elephants in order to scare the rest away, it seems that those measures proved ineffective as a solution to elephant depredation of crops in Ahafo. The problem neither ceased nor abated, as every now and then reports of elephant damage to farms and threat to human life were made by farmers, with no lasting solution on sight (Kwarteng 2008:217).

The Game Warden, in pursuance of his goal of conserving the elephant instead of resorting to shooting and killing, advised the Ahafo Traditional Council to pass a resolution for the Government to constitute the Mim area into a national park for the promotion of ecotourism. He explained to the Traditional Council that that was the only way the problem of the elephant crop raiding could be

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<sup>4</sup> PRAAD, Sunyani, BRG1/1/32, from the Secretary to the Regional Commissioner, Sunyani to the Assistant Conservator of Forest, Sunyani, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1962.

tackled. Following this advice, a resolution was passed by the Traditional Council, which was accepted by the Regional and District Administrations. Consequently, in April 1965 a meeting under the auspices of the District Administration was held at Goaso, the district capital, involving the affected farmers, the Ahafo Traditional Council, the Game Warden and the Regional Conservator of Forest.

Though there was an initial opposition to the proposal by the farmers, after the Game Warden and the Regional Conservator of Forest had enlightened them on the economic benefits Ghana would derive from the National Park through promotion of ecotourism, the farmers agreed to cede their farms for the establishment of a national park. Unfortunately, the proposal fell through. The Regional Conservator of Forest who was mandated to inspect and demarcate the Auratara North and South Protected Land and the cocoa farms which would be affected in a report indicated that constituting the area into a national park

Will mean depriving more than 2,000 people of their means of livelihood ... it would mean depriving a large number of people in the Mim area of the food that they eat; it would mean preserving the elephant and totally disregarding the demands of a much higher animal - HOMO SAPIENS.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the Conservator of forest whose department exercised an oversight responsibility over the Department of Wildlife, and as such was responsible for the protection and conservation of the elephant, placed the interest of the farmers, many of whom were illegally farming on the Auratara Forest land, over and above the conservation of the elephant in Ahafo. Though the Game Warden vehemently protested against the report of the Conservator of Forest and insisted that the area should be constituted into a national park, the overthrow of CPP government in February 1966 spelt the doom of the proposed scheme, as the new armed forces government, the

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<sup>5</sup> PRAAD, Sunyani, BRG1/1/32, from L.A. Danso, Kumasi, to the Game Warden, Damongo, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1965.

National Liberation Council abandoned it altogether; and this would spell the doom of the forest elephant, which was erroneously tagged as destructive, and therefore must be eliminated at all cost.

The neglect of the project thus marked the end of a phase in the history of the elephant in Ahafo, and the forest belt in general. In this phase, it can be argued that there was a policy decision which if it had been implemented would not only have resolved or minimised the human–elephant conflict, but would have also ensured the conservation of the forest elephant for the promotion of ecotourism and scientific research, which would have boosted both the national and local economies. Following the failure to implement the proposed Mim National Park, coupled with the increase in the destructive activities of elephants in Ahafo and Dormaa districts of Brong Ahafo Region in particular and elsewhere in the forest belt, a decision was taken to establish a permanent Game and Wildlife office at Goaso for elephant control. Control operations by the Game Scouts during this phase witnessed the slaughter of a majority of the elephants, not only in Ahafo but the entire forest region which was experiencing a boom in cocoa farming.

From 1972 (when the Game and Wildlife office was opened at Goaso) to 1994 (when a moratorium was placed on control killings), following the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) ban on killing and trading in the African elephant, Game Scouts were sent to villages and farms in Twifo Hemang, Sehwi, Dormaa, Sunyani, Nzema and of course Ahafo districts, where the incidence of elephant crop raiding occurred to control the elephants. During the operations, the Game Scouts killed one or two elephants to scare the rest. As a policy, the Game Scouts were required to kill elephants that were found raiding farms, but they disregarded that policy and chased elephants deep into the forest reserves and killed them, and following that, sold the carcasses to the farmers in the nearby villages. Thus, the systematic and sustained killing of elephants as a solution to tackling the widespread human–elephant conflict provoked by the incursion of cocoa industry into the habitat of the elephant was a major contributory factor to the drastic decline of the elephant population in the forest belt of Ghana.



### Environmental Implications of the Decline of the Elephant Population in the Forest Belt

The remarkable reduction of the number of the elephant population in the forest belt undoubtedly had far reaching ecological ramifications. The elephant which is described by scientists as a keystone species plays an important role in the survival of the ecosystem. According to Western (1989:43), keystone species play an inordinate role in maintaining the linkages in a food web, to the extent that their extermination would cause a cascade of change or extinction in the ecosystems. Marc Parren (1991:31) also describes the forest elephant as possessing messenger-boy characteristics, by ensuring dispersal of seeds of primary tree species of closed forest areas into abandoned cocoa farms. Marc Parren (1991: 35-6) again, avers that the elephant acts as a bulldozer opening up the dense understory of primary forest and thickets, creating a patchwork of woodlands and grasslands that support both grazing and browsing animals (Western 1991:90).<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Western (1989:45) concludes that 'the elimination of elephants in the rich African forests will lead to faunal impoverishment.' From Western's conclusion, it may be reasonable to suppose that the cocoa industry by contributing to the decline of the forest elephant in Ghana, had in effect caused immense environmental change, as most animals that relied on the existence of the forest elephant for survival would reduce in number, thus leading to faunal impoverishment. In addition, Short (1981:177-186) and Lieberman (1987: 365-369) note that elephants disperse seeds in the Ghanaian forests,<sup>7</sup> particularly large, tough

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<sup>6</sup> Western, David, 'When the Forest falls silent' in *Elephant: The Deciding Decade*, edited Orenstein, Toronto, Key Porter, 1991, p. 90. See also Western, 'The Ecological role....', *op cit*, p. 45; E.B. Barbier et al, *Elephants, Economics and Ivory*, London, Earthscan, 1990, p. 19, explain what Western means here by stating that elephants open up areas to make them accessible to other herbivores, including domestic stock, by feeding and trampling down tall sedges and promoting the growth of higher quality grasses.

<sup>7</sup> First Draft Strategy for the Conservation of elephants in Ghana, Wildlife Division, Accra, July, 2000, p. 6.

seeds (Western 1989:45). Moreover, Wasser is quoted as observing that elephants are majestic animals and are not trivial to the ecosystem. They are a keystone species and taking them out significantly alters the habitat (Henderson 2007: 33). Judging from its role as a keystone species and a messenger-boy, it is obvious that the dwindling of the forest elephant population as a result of the expansion of the cocoa industry has brought about environmental change, because most tree species that depended upon the elephant for germination and dispersal would have their dispersal and germination rate reduced drastically. Therefore, it is not a surprise that trees species like Odum (ebony), Kokrodua (Afromosia) are rare to find in the Ahafo forest in particular and the entire forest belt generally.

### **Conclusions**

This article has presented a situation in which the introduction of the cocoa industry into Ghana was a mixed blessing to pioneer cocoa farmers in Ahafo, in particular, and the entire forest belt in general. Though it bestowed economic prosperity on both the citizenry and the state, it has on the other hand, caused faunal and flora impoverishment; thus causing serious environmental alteration. The state should have formulated policies and devised strategies towards ensuring that the expansion of the cocoa industry would not impact adversely on the elephant population and for that matter the ecosystem. The state, in its desire to derive the maximum economic benefit from the cocoa industry to carry out socio-economic developments, did not take into consideration the attendant environmental impact of clearing large forestlands for the cultivation of cocoa farms.

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