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The Big Tuskers of Tsavo

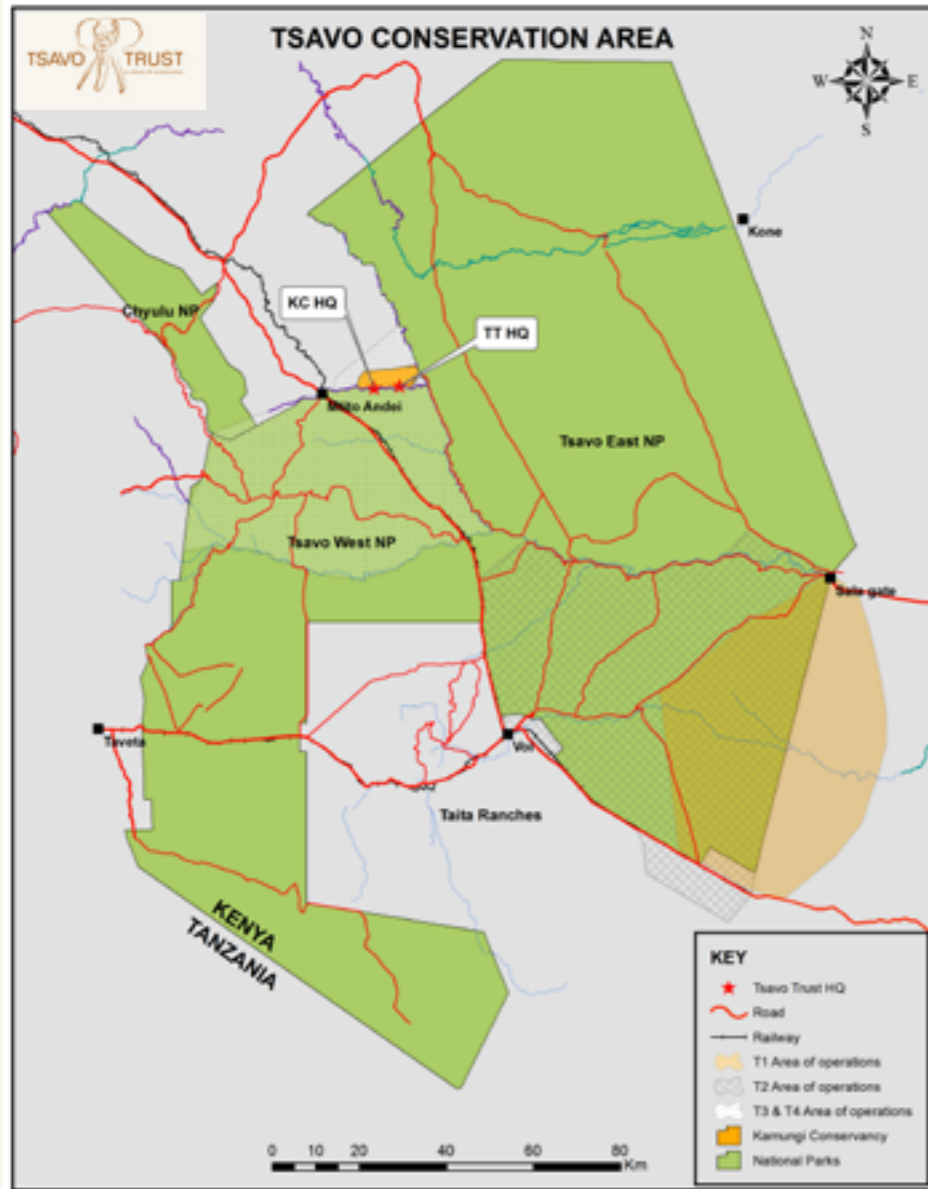
Rationale Highlighting the Importance of the
Big Tusker Project – Tsavo Conservation Area, Kenya



Will Burrard-Lucas

Background on the Big Tuskers of Tsavo

Historically, elephants carrying tusks weighing in excess of 100lbs (45kg) per side were known as “hundred pounders” and were much sought after by hunters and poachers alike but also by many visiting tourists to Kenya. The famous elephant of Marsabit National Park called “Ahmed” in the 1970’s is a perfect example of an iconic elephant that went on to receive Presidential Security Decree - as a result he lived out his full life and died naturally of old age. Believe it or not, today, at least 9 of these giant bull Tuskers remain in Tsavo, and it is their protection from ivory poachers (alongside the protection of other impressive emerging bulls (at least 26 of them) that will be the “hundred pounders” of the future). This provides the rationale behind the **Big Tusker Project**. There are also at least 4 iconic cow Tuskers with tusks reaching the ground that are also being monitored. The Tsavo Conservation Area (TCA) arguably holds the last remaining sustainable population of large “Super Tuskers” on this planet today. If they are not secured now they could be gone forever.



The TCA spans a massive 42,000 square kilometers (22,000 square kilometers of Park and 20,000 square kilometers of dispersal areas), which is roughly the size of Switzerland.

This wilderness area harbors immense biodiversity and holds the single largest population of elephants in Kenya, 12,866 the last aerial census (February 2017), arguably the world’s last viable population and gene pool of elephants carrying exceptionally large ivory.

The TCA has suffered significant elephant poaching over the years. A population estimated at over 45,000 elephants in the early 1970’s plummeted to fewer than 6,000 by 1989.

But some good years, (following by the formation of KWS and the imposition of the international ivory trade ban), reversed the downward trend and the population enjoyed stability for just over two decades, until the late 2000’s, when poaching escalated once again. With this ugly development, it places the big Tuskers at huge risk and the crucial need for their protection and recognition as icons and of a National heritage.



This photo shows a very rare Tsavo bull elephant carrying huge tusks of at least 110lbs (50kg) each tusk. It is these last remaining unique and iconic “Super Tuskers” that we aim to protect in full partnership with the Kenya Wildlife Service within the Tsavo Conservation Area, southern Kenya. By placing an emphasis on these individual elephants this project in fact provides an enhanced level of protection and monitoring of the entire Tsavo elephant population. Not only this but coverage of many other wildlife species, particular endangered species, such as Tsavo’s Black Rhino population, fall under this umbrella project.

Big Tusker Project - Summary

Tsavo Trust’s Big Tusker Project (BTP) works in full collaboration with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), other conservation and research partners such as Save The Elephants (STE), US Fish and Wildlife Service, USAID, Tusk Trust, The Oak Foundation, Leopardess Foundation, Zoological Society of London, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, International Elephant Foundation, conscientious corporations and many individual supporters who share our enthusiasm to protect and monitor the elephant population of Tsavo with a specific emphasis on the large “Tuskers”. This monitoring is carried out by Tsavo Trust’s Aerial Unit providing regular “eyes in the sky” working in tandem with ground protection teams who provide “eyes and ears” on the ground.

Also, in total partnership with the KWS Research and Monitoring Department, Tsavo Trust has deployed the Tembo 2 and Tembo 4 mobile ground teams, which carry out daily monitoring of big Tuskers in Tsavo East National Park (TENP) and Tsavo West National Park (TWNP), as well as an array of many varying activities under this department, directed by KWS, to include endangered species monitoring such as Hirola, Grevy’s Zebra and predator monitoring just to mention a few. Tembo 2 and Tembo 4 teams are totally self-sufficient with a 4 x 4 vehicle, 3 Tsavo Trust staff, camping equipment and further field tools for the task at hand.

In providing a combination of an aerial surveillance platform as well as protection and ground monitoring teams, “eyes in the skies” and “eyes and ears” on the ground can be maintained, but only as much as funding provides. So much more can be rolled out, but this is very dependant on funding availability.



Tsavo Trust's Super Cub aircraft are the perfect aerial platform to provide vital security reconnaissance over the vast and largely roadless Tsavo Conservation Area. Special emphasis is geared towards securing the big Tuskers and working in support of KWS, for aerial backup to biodiversity protection related activities, elephant movement patterns, and aerial census programs.



Photo shows Tsavo Trust's Tembo 2 field monitoring team who work in full partnership with KWS Research and Monitoring Departments following big Tusker movements, as well as endangered species and predator observations (Hirola, Grevy's zebra, wild dog) and much more. Here is Tembo 2 team with a cow Tusker.

Big Tusker Project Significance and Future Plans

This project is an ongoing initiative started by Tsavo Trust's Chief Executive Officer, Richard Moller, in January 2013 in collaboration with KWS, with the following plans and goals:

- **To save the remaining iconic Tuskers of Tsavo:** Through regular and consistent aerial coverage of known home Tusker ranges (eyes in the skies) and providing further ground teams (eyes and ears on the ground). With this extra level of field based operations, protection relating to the Tuskers is significantly enhanced, more so than ever before. For example, in 2017 alone, 867 hours were flown over TCA covering 103,667 km. Identification and monitoring of 10 individual iconic bull Tuskers, 18 emerging bull Tuskers and 7 cow Tuskers was achieved.
- **Maintain aerial coverage and existing ground units:** Tsavo Trust operates two Super Cub aircraft to maintain this aerial blanket over the Tsavos. This type of aircraft is the perfect tried and tested aerial platform over Protected Areas with its ability to fly at slow speeds, it's manoeuvrability in challenging conditions and ability to land and take off in varying rugged bush environments. To add to this, five mobile ground teams (Tembo Teams) are now deployed both in Tsavo East NP and Tsavo West NP to provide a truly effective and long term "security blanket" over the known home ranges of Tsavo's iconic elephants. By doing this, a far greater presence and level of protection, to complement KWS's already existing efforts, can be accomplished.
- **Raise the Tusker profile:** Who would have known or believed such Tuskers still existed today. This is a big positive success story amidst the ever-negative elephant news that we read today. By raising their profile it is hoped that further interest and support for their long-term protection is achieved.
- **Biodiversity - ensure the long-term survival of Tsavo's gene pool of iconic elephants:** By partnering with KWS on Tusker protection for the long term, this is not a short term one off project. Robust partnerships, data sharing, information and research expertise will help to maintain a gene pool in Tsavo that arguably is second to none.
- **Elephant related movement patterns/data collection:** With aerial coverage of many parts of the TCA, elephant movements, that are often weather related, can be tracked and current information is relayed to KWS anti-poaching units to govern where to deploy ground teams for elephant security. With regards to elephant mortality, carcass locations and details are also recorded for KWS and Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) purposes. With this, "hot spot" poaching locations quickly become known and this governs ground anti-poaching deployments. Often when carcasses are located, ivory is still intact, and the aerial unit has played a significant role in ivory recovery (241 tusks recovered in 2017).
- **Ensure continuity of the Tusker database collation:** Data relevant to the Tuskers has been collected since January 2013. This valuable information is shared with KWS and STE for research and elephant management purposes.
- **Meaningful and long-term engagement with specific communities that border the National Parks in the Tsavo Conservation Area.** This approach addresses benefit sharing and alternative forms of income to impoverished specific key communities bordering the Parks, which in turn buffers for the Protected Area. Currently two such communities include the already established Kamungi Conservancy on the northern boundary of TENP, and Shirango Conservancy in its infancy on the southern boundary of TENP, where Tsavo Trust have played a stewardship role.
- **Encourage high end tourism back to the Tsavos using the Tuskers as flagship icons to achieve this.**
- **Enhancing and developing further conservation partnerships where KWS take the lead role.**
- **Establish a "Big Tusker Exhibit / Museum":** In partnership with KWS, one of our long term goals is to be a stakeholder in an elephant museum project that can showcase these icons of National heritage and in this process provides further revenue generation and raises the Tuskers and Tsavo's profile at the same time.

Big Tusker Project - Goal, Objectives and Activities

Table below shows goals, objectives, activity and timetable combined

Goal	Objective	Activities	Timetable
To enhance and further develop elephant security (with specific emphasis on Tsavo's "Super Tuskers") through regular aerial and ground security, monitoring and back up to the KWS within the Tsavo Conservation Area, Kenya	1. To regularly carry out aerial monitoring reconnaissance flights in collaboration with KWS over the TCA and in so doing providing a vital tool for elephant security	Consistent aerial monitoring of various locations within the TCA, including "hot spot" poaching zones	75 hours per month (covering approx. 9,000 kms) split over the 6 objectives
	2. To support KWS with aerial back up when called upon during ground operational armed contacts and others as necessary.	Provide vital aerial backup to KWS as and when necessary when emergency armed contact situations arise	As and when necessary
	3. Specifically locate and maintain 'eyes in the sky' with respect to Tsavo's 'Tuskers'	Regularly fly in the known home ranges of the known 'Tuskers' to show a regular presence and collect data for the Tsavo Trust BTP database	At least 30 hours per month
	4. To routinely establish the real time location of concentrations of elephant herds and movements , monitor and relay information to KWS regarding potential threats	Through regular aerial reconnaissance seasonal elephant distributions will be observed for ground unit deployments	At least 20 hours per month
	5. Locating and recording elephant carcass information for purposes of MIKE and to carry out ground follow up exercises in support of KWS for varying roles but mainly for elephant carcass verification and ivory collection in the Tsavo Trust field vehicles	Ground follow-ups, resulting from aerial findings, will take place to confirm carcass details and others using Tsavo Trust field vehicles in collaboration with KWS, where Tsavo Trust plays a support role	20,000km per month in the six Tsavo Trust field team vehicles covering large distances within the TCA
	6. To support KWS and ZSL as a meaningful partner with air and ground back up to rhino conservation and other endangered species	Through regular provision of aircraft for recce flights and ground mobile units as requested with KWS taking the lead role	At least 25 hours per month



Tsavo Trust Super Cub, 5Y NRF on an aerial reconnaissance flight over a herd of elephants in December 2017



5Y TTZ in action during reconnaissance flight over TENP in November 2016, with iconic Tusker SA2 below

Big Tusker Project Components



Aerial Unit
Tsavo Conservation Area



Tembo 1 and Tembo 5
Biodiversity Protection Units - **Tsavo East**



Tembo 2
Research and Monitoring Unit - **Tsavo East**



Tembo 3 and Kamungi Scouts
Biodiversity Protection Units - **TCA**



Tembo 4
Research and Monitoring Unit - **Tsavo West**



Intelligence



Tsavo Trust Headquarters
Kamungi Conservancy

The photos below show the magnificence of just some of Tsavo's great Tuskers. These few examples show a real conservation "positive" that they are still in existence today. Tsavo Trust aims to build on this positive alongside it's key partner Kenya Wildlife Service.



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Tsavo Trust has physically observed LU1 from the air and the ground 196 times since January 2014. This equates to 1 observation every 8.4 days. There is no question that this adds an extra level of security to the wellbeing of this Super Tusker coded as LU1.



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This photo shows the majestic late cow Tusker called Mudanda who sadly passed away of old age in the 2017 drought which hit Tsavo, in today's modern elephant world it is rare for an elephant with such tusks to die of old age.



MU1 was first formally identified as an Emerging Tusker on 15th December 2013. Tsavo Trust knows this Tusker very well and has watched him grow from an Emerging Tusker to a full Super Tusker over a space of five years.



Another of Tsavo's majestic bull Tuskers coded HA1, July 2018. He will soon be elevated from an Emerging Tusker to a Super Tusker category given the size of his impressive tusks.



Although this iconic elephant resembles the famous "Ahmed" of Marsabit during the 1970's, in fact this is the well known late Tusker of recent times called Satao. He was very well known to Tsavo Trust, but sadly his freshly poached carcass was found on the southern boundary during a joint KWS/Tsavo Trust aerial recce flight on 2nd June 2014 right on the southern boundary of the Park, tusks hacked out and missing.

Please help secure the last Super Tuskers by supporting KWS through Tsavo Trust's Big Tusker Project

Thank You



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