

Wildlife Count in a Uganda National Park

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As a result of a count of elephant, giraffe, zebra and ostrich in the Kidepo Valley National Park, made in February 1975, the author, who is Director of the Uganda Institute of Ecology, concludes that, despite some fluctuations, especially among giraffes, the numbers were fairly typical for the dry season.

The Kidepo Valley National Park, created in 1962, in the extreme north-east corner of Uganda, consists of the valleys and tributaries of the Narus and Kidepo rivers, some 914–1220m. above sea level, and the forested mountains to the west and the south-east a total area of 1294 sq. km. On the Ugandan side the mountains and the hills, rising to over 2740m., almost surround the park. To the north is the Sudan while several kilometres to the east is Kenya. The mountainous areas are covered with open tree savanna and forests.

The rapid increase in the elephant population and the destruction of their habitats in recent years in the two other Uganda national parks, Rwenzori (formerly Queen Elizabeth) and, especially, Kabalega (formerly Murchison) Falls, have been described by Laws and others (4, 5, 3, 7). In Kidepo, Clapham (1) reported increased elephant damage, but apart from Ross (6), who described the general distribution of eland and giraffe, there have been no detailed reports on the numbers and distribution of the large mammals in this park.

The park has two seasons. In the very hot dry season, October–March, the rivers (except Narus) dry out, the grassland completely dries up, and fires are severe. In the wet season, April–September, the rains vary from 890mm. in the Narus valley to 640mm. in the Kidepo Valley. The vegetation grows in the wet season and supports many large mammal species.

In 1974 (2) I noted that poaching, particularly of elephants, in Rwenzori National Park had more than trebled since 1971, and Eltringham (1974) also reported massive reductions in elephant numbers both here and in Kabalega Falls and Rwenzori National Parks; these reports emphasised the fact that commercial poaching for trophies has enormously increased in Uganda, and it is now necessary to count the large animals in the national parks regularly. This paper reports the results of an aerial count on February 7, 1975 showing the distribution of elephant, giraffe, zebra and ostrich in Kidepo.

Methods

An aerial recording of the total numbers and distribution of four species – elephants, giraffes, zebras, and ostriches – was made over the unforested part of the park by two observers who sat on opposite sides of the aircraft. The four species were selected because they are easy to see from the air, they are targets for poachers, and their low numbers in the park made it possible to spot and count them accurately. The plane was flown along north–south transects 2km. apart at a height of 170–200m. and a speed of 176km./h. All animals seen were counted, and their positions marked on a map (scale 1:125,000) as they were called out, each species having an appropriate symbol.

Table 1 Dry-season Count in Kidepo Valley National Park

| Year | Elephant | Giraffe | Zebra | Ostrich |
|------|----------|---------|-------|---------|
| 1967 | 277 | 72 | 262 | * |
| 1968 | 417 | 143 | 368 | * |
| 1971 | 470 | * | * | * |
| 1972 | * | 165 | 637 | * |
| 1975 | 333 | 76 | 449 | 28 |

* No records available.

Results and Discussion

The total numbers, given in Table 1, were 333, 76, 449 and 28 elephants, giraffes, zebras and ostriches respectively. The figures for total counts taken in the dry seasons of 1967, 1968, 1971 and 1972 are given for comparison. From 1967 to 1972 these populations were increasing but since 1972 all have decreased; with elephants the decrease started in 1971. A reduction by 137 elephants in three years is not significant, although numbers would be expected to have risen in these three years through normal reproduction. No elephant carcasses were seen during the census. It is likely that a good number of elephants had migrated during the dry season into Morongole, Nyangea and Zulia Forest Reserves and into Sudan, and this seasonal migration (an accepted phenomenon) is a more probable explanation than poaching for the low numbers in February 1975. For obvious reasons no attempt was made to count the animals in the Morongole and Nyangea Forest Reserves. It is hoped that in the wet season the elephants will migrate back into the open area.

The number of zebras—449—was very close to those found in the previous surveys. (The 1972 figure of 637 was probably a little too high.) Several zebra carcasses were seen, probably killed by predators and diseases/old age. A fairly stable population of zebras seems to have been maintained over the past six years.

Giraffe numbers showed a genuine significant reduction. Only 76 giraffes were observed, a decrease of over 54 per cent on 1972. Although there were no obvious remains left by poachers it is believed that the indigenous people have been poaching giraffes for meat (P. Ssali-Nuluma, pers. comm.), but whether poaching alone can explain the reduction remains to be seen. There may be other explanations if the populations of 143 and 165 for 1968 and 1972 respectively were accurate.

At the time of the aerial survey all the rivers except Narus had dried up, and the animals depended on water drawn from the river Narus, water holes and bore holes. They were found mainly along the Narus and (to a lesser extent) the Kidepo Valleys. The greatest concentrations were usually along the valleys where water and green vegetation cover were available.

Elephants were widely scattered in the Narus valley with noticeable concentrations around Apoka and Kalabi dams, and in Lokimati and Napore Hills, and were seen feeding on *Borassus* palm nuts. Zebras were concentrated at the Narus circuit and at Kananarok around the hot springs. Giraffes were widely scattered in the Narus valley; few groups were found in the Kananarok and Lokudal areas. Ostriches were also widespread in the Narus and Kidepo valley particularly towards the Uganda/Sudan border and

Narus circuit. The distribution is typical of that found in the dry seasons (6).

It may be concluded that the numbers of the elephants, zebras, giraffes and ostriches found were typical of the dry season in Kidepo Valley National Park and that none are so seriously reduced as to suggest increased causes of mortality. But regular counts need to be done in the park.

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An Indian Chief's View

In 1855 Chief Seathl (Seattle), of the Suwamish tribe in the state of Washington, wrote to the US President in reply to the Government's proposal to purchase the tribe's land. Extracts from this letter of 120 years ago were published in *The Ecologist*, January 1975, and these are some quotations:

'We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on . . .

'There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps I am a savage and do not understand – the clatter only seems to insult the ears . . . The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented with a pine. The air is precious to the redman. For all things share the same breath – the beasts, the trees, the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the smell.

'If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and I do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to the man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.'