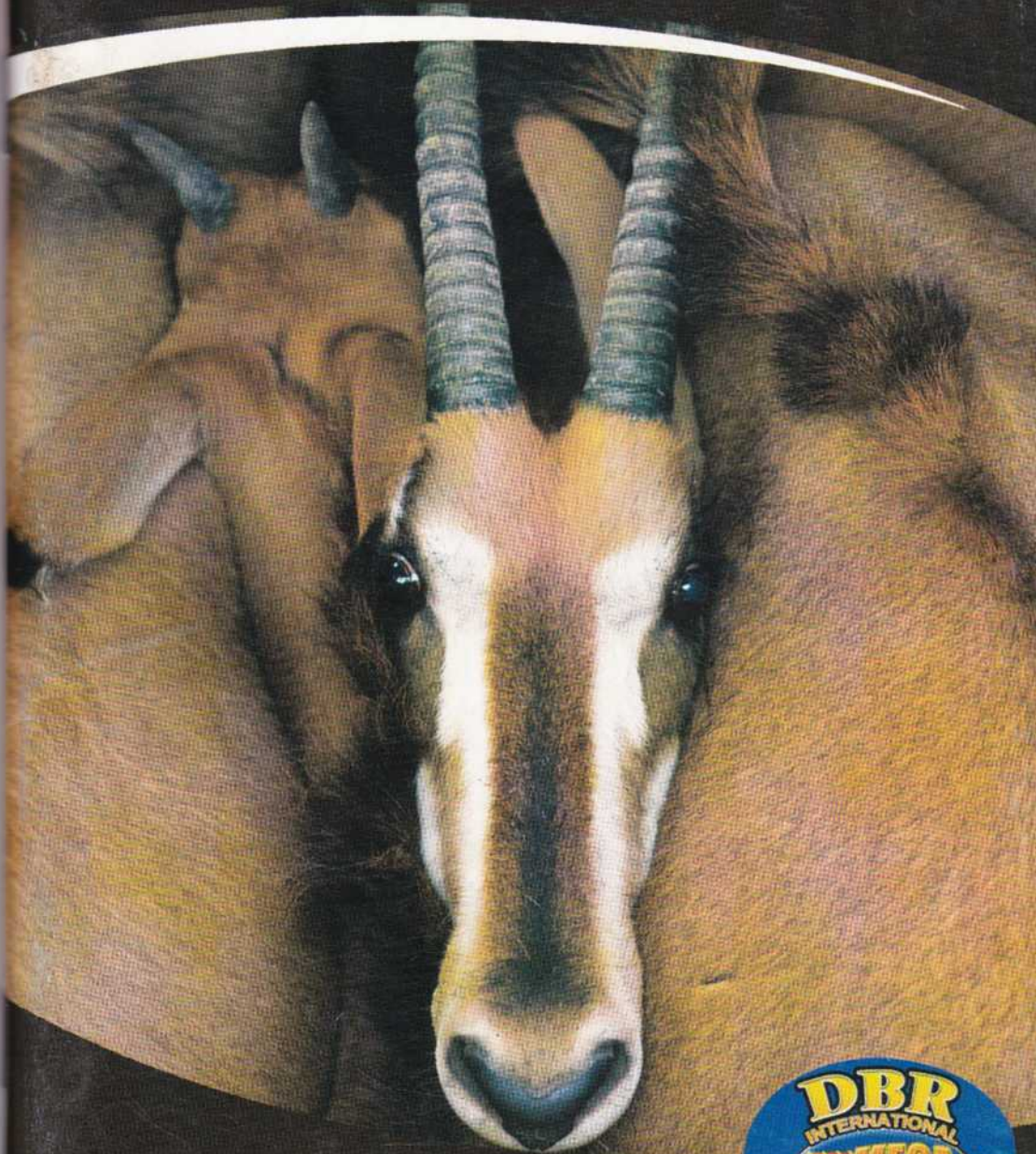


# THE EYE



December 2010 - February 2011  
The Insider's guide to Malawi - Free Issue



# Majestic Majete

By Kate Evans

As I zoom in with my binoculars, I can see the layers of wise wrinkles around her brown eye and long eye lashes. I can see the deliberate work of her trunk, used to snap leaves and carry them carefully to her large mouth. I can see each tusk, egg-shell white but with a layer of dirt from constant use. One tusk is shorter than the other, indicating that this elephant is "right-tusked" like I am right handed. Her ears flap and as I lower my binoculars, I can see she is eyeing our vehicle.

Her massive body shifts as she starts moving, left to right. I can almost feel her bulk in the vibrations through the ground and the car chassis. She gives us one more serious look and changes her direction, searching out better, tastier leaves a few yards away. She turns her back to us and swishes her tail, ambling deeper into the bush.

The Majete elephants are infamous. One hundred and thirty-two of them were relocated from Liwonde and eighty-three from the Mangochi area. Their transition was controversial, with each side believing they were arguing for what was best for the animals. Today the 215 elephants have been living in Majete's vast 700 sq. km park in the Lower Shire Valley for several years.

These elephants have experienced severe poaching and many

have had conflicts with humans in the past. The stress of the relocation, the adjustment to a new home and a history of mistrusting humans have made many elephants in these herds highly-strung.

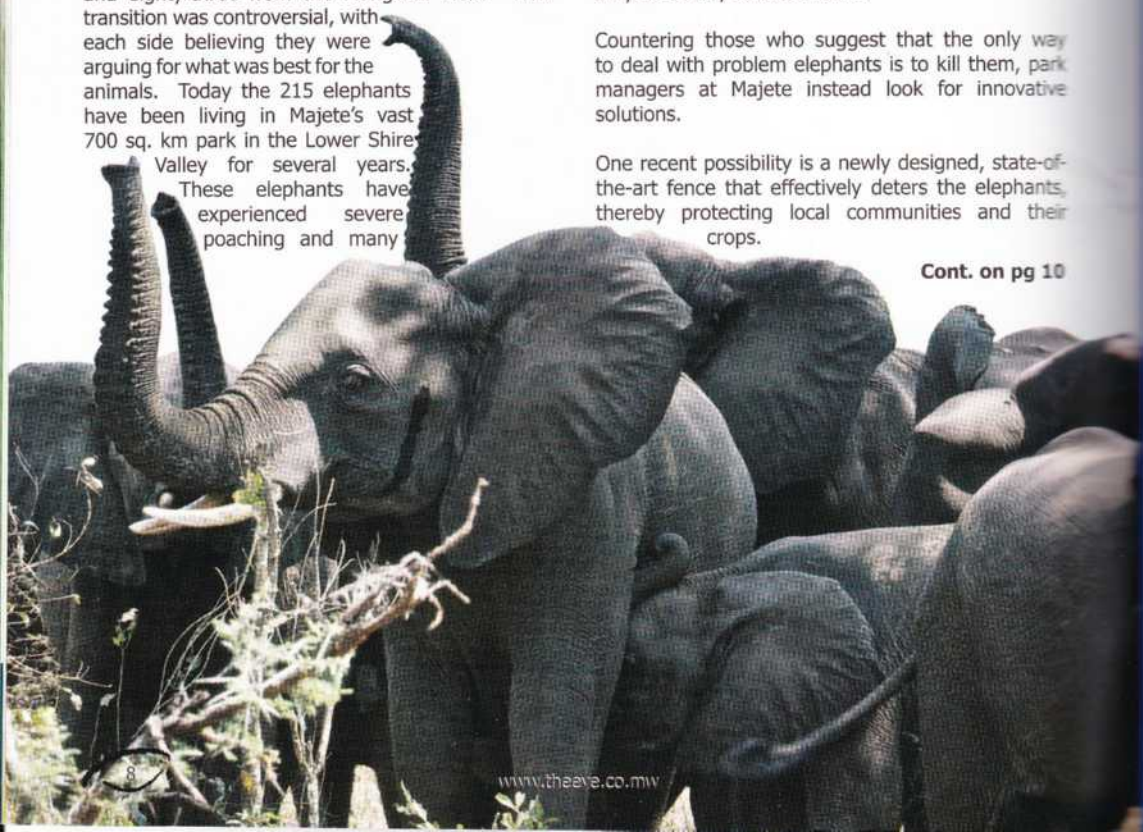
One hears stories of broken fences, fatal accidents and aggressive charges. When looking at these massive but elegant creatures as they saunter away from our car, it is difficult to imagine that they live up to their reputation.

As always, the Majete elephant's story is more complicated. There are certain elephants that park guides know to be wary of, including new mothers who take their maternal duties seriously. One is reminded of the elephant cow in Liwonde who is famous for spearing the hood of a land cruiser when humans got too close. Several bull elephants have realised that they have a taste for local crops and will break through fences to sample their favorites, but they are quickly rounded up and seem content when they are safely back at home.

Countering those who suggest that the only way to deal with problem elephants is to kill them, park managers at Majete instead look for innovative solutions.

One recent possibility is a newly designed, state-of-the-art fence that effectively deters the elephants, thereby protecting local communities and their crops.

Cont. on pg 10





Trials have been successful and park managers hope the fence will alleviate this serious problem.

Park guides and managers are also learning more about each individual elephant. With over two hundred elephants currently in the park and more being born, it takes time to get to know them. Like humans, elephants have personalities and habits. Some seem to enjoy human company and will even show off for pictures. Others are scarred from past experiences and should be avoided. Guides and managers are careful to monitor these more temperamental elephants and learn from one another and their experiences. Despite the elephants' notoriety, Dorian Tilbury, the Field Operations Manager at Majete since April of this year, does not hesitate to take his two baby daughters out into the bush to experience the elephants first hand.

### Recreating the Majete of years ago.

Elephants are not the only stars of Majete. The park also boasts a herd of seven black rhinos, five female and two male, who arrived in Majete in 2007. Already, four females have had calves and there is one more on the way.

Rhinos are extremely sought after for their horns. This meant that Majete park operators had to be particularly careful in preparing for their arrival and made sure the park was secure and that rhinos could be tracked at least six times a week. There is a chance that more rhinos could join those already at home in Majete, as long as habitat and security assessments ensure that the park can sustain them.

Beyond these two members of the "big five," Majete hosts many different species. The park is careful to reintroduce only animals that were naturally occurring in the park before game populations were decimated in the early 1990's. Poaching led to the death of every single elephant in the park and severely depleted the kudu, waterbuck, bushbuck, reedbuck, hippo and warthog populations. Today, these animals, along with sable, eland, hartebeest, nyala, impala and zebra, are flourishing within Majete. The park also has over three hundred cape buffalo. Today, the total number of game is over 4,000.

Looking forward, Majete hopes to reintroduce several big cats. They will start small by bringing in four leopards and four cheetah. Eventually, the park hopes to reintroduce lions as well, but only after a prey analysis has been completed and park managers are sure that Majete can sustain a lion population.

Majete did not recover from its severe problems of poaching, encroachment, logging, illegal agricultural activities and game depletion overnight. It has taken a dedicated team, extensive funding and a close partnership with public and private sectors.

Cont. on pg 12



The African Parks Foundation (APF), based in South Africa, signed a contract with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife to take on the rehabilitation, development and management of the park in 2003. Since then, the APF has raised over \$9,000,000 in capital investment and operating expenditure. Funds have been used for securing the park (fencing, and law enforcement), infrastructure, as well as technical and administrative activities.



In addition to hosting a large population of game, Majete has made many advances in tourism. Today, a visitor can enjoy the park via self-guided tours, guided safari tours, walking safaris, an overnight stay at the Thawle Camp (which offers luxury, en suite safari tents and full board options) or the Community Camp Site. The park is constantly improving roads, building hides and adding watering holes. Zambian-based Robin Pope Safaris is also in the process of building a lavish up-market, eco-friendly lodge in the north of the park and park managers have started work on a new day-visitor centre that will offer refreshments.

### Majete's relationship with Malawi

Perhaps the most exciting development is the planned construction of an environmental education centre. The centre will offer interactive, innovative ways of learning about Majete, its ecological importance and ways to help in conservation efforts.

The education centre is just one example of the most important aspect of the African Parks' vision for Majete, to "deliver and demonstrate bio-diversity rehabilitation and conservation together with sustainable levels of natural resource utilisation for the benefit of the economy, the people of Malawi and neighboring communities, whilst also ensuring financial viability." As Dorian Tilbury says, "How we address Majete's relationship with the local communities will define the success of the park." Within park management, there is a real commitment to the betterment of local communities, as African Parks helps to mobilise community based advocacy

and provide training and capacity building. The African Parks Foundation is developing Majete for the people of Malawi and as a result have experienced enormous community support.

But African Parks goes beyond community development. Park officials, like Tilbury, desperately want to pass on a love of the park and its conservation. The environmental education centre is a part of that; it will be a forum for tourists and locals alike to learn to care about Majete and its biodiversity. With 130,000 people living just outside the park, it is difficult to reach everyone with development initiatives and conservation messages. Park managers believe that they are on the right track and that they will continue to improve, citing the education centre initiative as an example. There is a hope that the children who visit the education centre will be touched - that they will become the future of conservation in Malawi because they can say "this is important to me."

Majete is sure to continue its rise, becoming one of the preeminent parks in Malawi and eventually south-eastern Africa. As we drive through the massive gates and wave goodbye to the friendly park guide, we hope to come back soon. Majete is a place that is constantly changing, adapting and evolving; it is place that is being designed and shaped for our children and our children's children. With the help of local communities, the national government and APF, generations to come will get to see eye to eye with wild elephants and chase the perfect photograph of a majestic kudu or hartebeest.

For more: [info@africanparks.com](mailto:info@africanparks.com)

All photos courtesy of Mark Jones,  
[www.markjonesphoto.com](http://www.markjonesphoto.com)