Session Report:

IFAW side-event

at the SADC 25th Anniversary Conference and Summit

TITLE: Room to Roam: Enhancing connectivity for wildlife and coexistence in Southern Africa

DATE: 21 May 2025   **Time:** 1400-1600Hrs

THEME: Promoting conservation connectivity by securing wildlife dispersal areas in Southern Africa is essential for the long-term persistence of elephants and large carnivores and maintaining biodiversity and associated ecosystem services - necessary for economies, livelihoods, food security and health.

CO-ORGANISERS: International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) & The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority (ZIMPARKS)

PRESENTERS:

- Dr Robert Guldemond (Conservation Ecology Research Unit (CERU)), University of Pretoria)
- Dr Pieter Olivier (M.A.P Scientific Services)
- Dr Langa Malidadi (Alliance for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for Conservation in Africa) (AICA)•
- Dr Henry Ndaimani (International Fund for Animal Welfare)
- Julia Levin (Conservation International)

The full slide deck PDF accompanies this report.

AUDIENCE: 100+ attendees from Member state representatives, NGOs, IP&LCs, ICPs

OUTCOME

This meeting focused on elephant conservation and connectivity in Southern Africa. Experts discussed research findings on elephant populations, movements, and habitat connectivity, emphasizing the importance of large, protected areas and corridors for the persistence and viability of metapopulations. The discussion also covered community role in conservation efforts, policy recommendations for improving human-wildlife coexistence, and innovative approaches to landscape management and financing for large-scale conservation initiatives.

Elephant Conservation and Population Trends (Robert Guldemond)

Findings from a 25-year study on elephant populations across Southern Africa were presented. The study showed that elephants generally thrive in sufficiently large, protected areas, with most populations exhibiting positive or stable growth rates. Robert emphasized the importance of connectivity and large conservation areas for elephant well-being while also highlighting the need to address human-elephant conflict. He introduced a map showing potential elephant corridors across the Southern African landscapes, which could help with genetic diversity and prioritising conservation efforts.

Elephant Movement and Habitat Connectivity (Henry Ndaimani)

Henry presented findings on elephant movements and habitat connectivity in Southern Africa landscapes. The talk highlighted the importance of water sources in elephant distribution, noting that elephants spend significant time outside protected areas. The presentation included data from elephant tracking in the Hwange landscape, showing how water availability and land use changes affect elephant movements. He spotlighted the potential impact of a new water body under construction (Gwayi-Shangani Dam) on elephant ranging behavior and the need for further research under changing bioclimatic conditions in these human dominated landscapes. **Elephant Connectivity Planning Toolkit (Pieter Olivier)**

Pieter discussed the importance of connectivity in conservation, focusing on the Malawi Zambia TFCA. He explained a four-step approach to identifying potential corridors for elephants: gathering baseline data, developing a high-resolution land cover map, creating a habitat suitability model, and developing a connectivity model. He introduced a landscape planning toolkit that integrates multiple data layers to help stakeholders assess and visualize factors influencing connectivity. The toolkit provides information on land cover, human infrastructure, elephant habitat suitability, and real-time elephant movement data. Emphasise was placed on the need to balance elephant movement with human needs in these corridors, suggesting the need to develop and scale potential co-benefits such as carbon initiatives in areas with high deforestation rates.

Community-Driven Conservation Policy (Malidadi Langa)

Malidadi flagged the importance of community involvement in co-design and implementation of Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) initiatives and proposed policy responses to improve coexistence and prosperity. He emphasized the need to change the conservation narrative from an exclusionary model to one that recognizes communities as custodians of biodiversity and holders of invaluable traditional ecological local knowledge. He further suggested several policy reforms, including legal recognition of community territories, inclusive decision-making processes, investment in human well-being, and addressing human-wildlife conflict through compensation and functional grievance redress mechanisms. He concluded by calling for multi-sectoral approaches to address the root causes of conflicts and strengthen community organizations' capacity to engage in conservation efforts.

Conservation Funding Solutions Discussion (Julia Levin)

Julia highlighted the critical need for increased funding in conservation efforts, emphasizing that current global spending on the environment is insufficient to address biodiversity loss. She spotlighted various financing solutions, including resource efficiency, resource mobilization, economic delivery, aligning incentives, and sustainable finance, which involves long-term, predictable financial flows. She further stressed the importance of building a comprehensive toolbox of finance solutions for conservation actors and outlined a clear process for designing successful financial models to address the funding gap, as well as the importance of understanding value placement in elephant conservation and connectivity. She proposed an integrated landscape approach that gives equal value to ecosystem recovery and landscape livelihood activities, aiming to create solutions where both people and ecosystems can benefit.

Conclusion

The facilitator concluded the Room to Roam discussion on connectivity, highlighting how the presenters had explored the topic from a balanced viewpoint vis- *a vis* academic, applied research, practitioner, private and community perspectives.

Two questions were discussed in the plenary.

a. Functionality of the virtual fence alert system: Panelists responded by explaining how the system sends notifications to community members and wildlife authorities, with a dashboard to monitor reports and resolutions.
b. The role of art and music in conservation efforts: The panelists emphasized their importance in bringing emotion and authenticity to the message, complementing the scientific and factual aspects of conservation work. Other follow-up questions were handled outside the meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: We extend our sincere gratitude to all presenters and participants for sharing their insights and experiences. Special thanks to the facilitator who ably guided the discussion.

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Programme

Sharing and Learning (1400-1600hrs)

Scene: Welcome and setting the scene (Alleta Nyahuye, Patience Gandiwa) (15mins)

Case Studies

1. The science behind protected area networks for elephants (Robert Guildemond) (15mins)
2. Room to Roam: Enhancing Transboundary Connectivity for Healthy Ecosystems (Henry Ndaimani) (15 mins)
3. Planning for Connectivity: A Case Study of the MAZALA Landscape in Zambia and Malawi (Pieter Olivier) (15mins)
4. Placing Local Communities at the Heart of the SADC TFCA Agenda for Coexistence and Prosperity (Malidadi Langa) (15mins)
5. Free to roam landscape approaches (Julia Levin) (15mins)

Q & A for panelists (15mins)

Pictures