

Campement des Elephants

by Dr. Per Åarhaug

The Elephant Camp, situated on the northern boundary of the Benue National Park in northern Cameroon, is an unusual hunting concession in many ways. It used to be one of those areas open to unguided private hunters. As with most of these areas, it was more or less depleted when it was exclusively allocated to me in 1992. There were no elephant roaming the whole area which was once named after them.

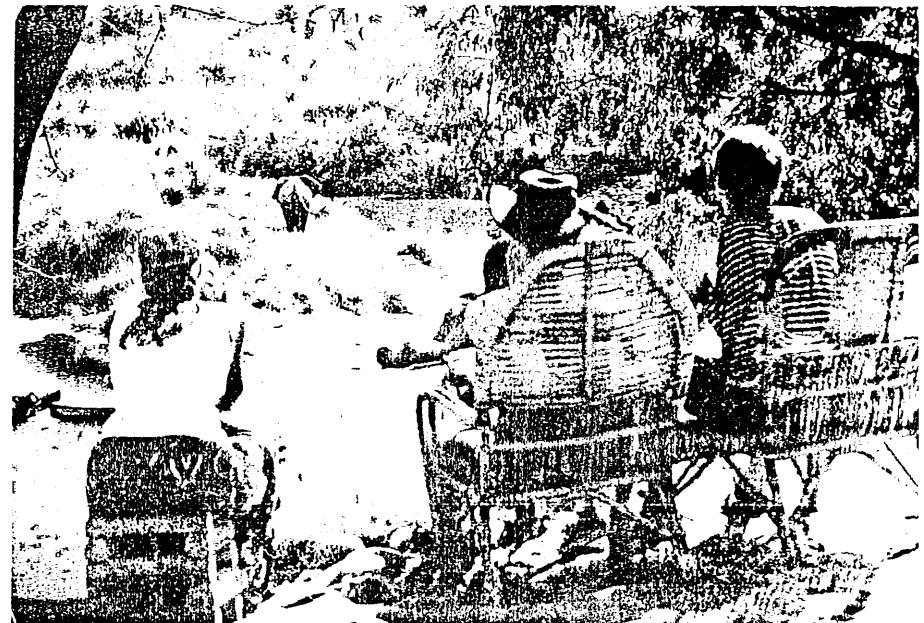
Theoretically, these hunting areas always had a very good conservation status, almost like a national park. Alas, as in most other places of Africa, the reality is a far cry from all the good intentions imposed by urban governments. Back in the 1980's, there used to be some 20 to 25 black rhino in the concession; but we haven't seen any rhino or even a rhino track since 1995. With the province capital Garoua merely an hour and a half distant, the lack of proper management and control over the area was a plain invitation to violent poaching. Since my colleagues and I took over, the game is coming back in leaps and bounds, appreciating the security of a properly controlled area. The concession now holds a resident elephant population between 300 and 500 head. It is not unusual to watch elephant, hippo, leopard and other big game right in the middle of our camp.

During the years of building up the game population again, we continuously conducted big game hunting safaris on a rather low scale. In the meantime the game has recovered to such a degree that we intend to increase the hunting considerably. Beside hunting, there is also very good fishing, and various other forms of individual eco-tourism. Due to our strict sustainable use policy, the number of visitors is limited and utmost care is taken to avoid disturbance of the ecosystem.

The management of Campement des Elephants is heavily involved in scientific research and is running an ecological research station, the Ray Research Center, in the area, collaborating with several national and international

universities and wildlife institutions. So far, eight MCys students have completed their field work in our area. The first Cameroonian postgraduate student has just finished a two-years' training program in natural resource management. Some of the research people guide eco-tourists on hiking trips into the core areas of the concession. Next year we start an exciting program fitting western kob and Giant eland with radio transmitters to monitor their seasonal movements.

Most of our hunting clients find our scientific programs quite interesting. At the end of the day, they are the ones who raise most of the funds to finance proper research work.



Scientific researchers at work



The Campement des Elephants



The Lord Derby eland, the prize of the Sahelian savannah