

Flying elephants to Africa would be foolish meddling

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Body

Here we go again. Yet another group of sentimental urban western animal lovers has decided what is best for African wildlife, but may have neglected to tell the Africans involved about that decision. The Aspinall Foundation, whose head of PR is the redoubtable animal protection activist Carrie Johnson, the prime minister's wife, has announced that it will fly 13 elephants from a Kent zoo to Kenya. The foundation argues that this exercise is a "world first . . . to rewild an entire breeding herd" and is hoping to raise £1 million in donations to fund the venture.

The folly of this publicity-seeking exercise was rather cruelly exposed when Kenyan wildlife officials, the intended recipients of Johnson's largesse, said they had not been contacted about said translocation and expressed concern about the wisdom of sending zoo animals into the African wilderness.

As Professor Keith Somerville, the widely respected expert on human-elephant conflict, told

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, Kenya really doesn't need any more elephants, given that its population has doubled since 1989 and is coming into increasing conflict with the fast-expanding human population.

Unfortunately, westerners have a habit of interfering in African wildlife conservation matters and have done so since early colonial times. At the turn of the 20th century we white colonials went out to Africa and hunted the wildlife in industrial quantities, shooting many species to the brink of extinction. Then, when we recognised that this was all too much, we decided to protect the remaining wild animal populations by creating "national parks", to be visited by our friends and neighbours from western suburbia.

At the same time we kicked out the indigenous Africans who lived in those wildernesses. These subsistence hunters had been guardians of the wildlife for centuries and yet we forbade them to hunt, branding them poachers.

While this translocation folly is now unlikely to happen it is a graphic indicator of the arrogance of western animal protection activists who have been driving the debate on African wildlife conservation for the past decade and more. There appears to be no consultation with rural Africans who live among the wild animals - more than 60 per cent of the animals actually live outside the national parks and among said rural communities.

The wild animals of Africa are only going to survive if the people they live alongside enjoy benefits from this arrangement, not if donor-funded animal rights organisations decide what is best for them.

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