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ELEPHANT PTT

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Elephants to be tracked using new device

Written by Solomon Mburu

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May 20, 2008: Modern technology may soon come to the aid of farmers living under the constant threat of elephants from Mount Kenya forest.

Tests on a new GSM technology that seeks to enhance communication between local communities and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) are at an advanced stage.

Dubbed 'Push to Talk on Cellular' (PoC), the technology has brought together Safaricom Ltd as the lead organization, Groupe Spéciale Mobile Association (GSMA) Development Fund, Wireless Zeta Telecomunicaciones (Wireless ZT), Nokia, the Nokia Siemens Networks, and local conservation organizations.

The early warning system combines the functionality of a walkie-talkie with a mobile phone.

It enables communication between two individuals, or a group of people, and is particularly useful in connecting a user group.

PoC can also be used alongside voice and data services on a single handset. Users can make standard phone calls and send text messages while accessing two-way communication and group talk.

The technology uses network resources only when talking, this makes it use less money than a conventional call.

"It is a good and cheap communication tool that allows the local community to communicate on movement of elephants," said Dr Anthony King of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum.

Early warnings

The PoC pilot project was carried out at three sites in Laikipia from November to December, last year.

Fifty people, including community-elected scouts, government rangers, and private landowners, received training in how to use the handsets.

Once trained, individuals patrolling the fences surrounding farms and ranches were charged with calling other group members to warn if elephants were coming close to private landholdings.

Once fully implemented the early warning system is set to help farmers in Laikipia district to protect their crops from damage by marauding elephants.

Laikipia district has gained a reputation as one of the worst areas for elephant human conflict. This is due to the presence of some 5,000 elephants, which form the second largest elephant population in the country.

Growth of human population and expansion of settlements has mounted continued pressure on the elephants.

Findings from the pilot project which is being carried out are expected to show its commercial viability.

Among the challenges faced is the time it takes for local farmers to learn how to use the specially constructed handsets and the need to travel long distances so as to the charge the ones which are frequently used.

The early warning system has been used in South Africa where it has improved communication between communities and park authorities.

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