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A Botswana non-profit is helping to heal fraught human-wildlife relationships through environmental education

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This profile is part of a series of articles exploring how immersive outdoor education is helping raise a generation of land stewards who will be better equipped to care for, restore, and protect land, water, and biodiversity. The selected stories showcase programs from around the world that are making an impact on the ground today.



Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. Courtesy: Walona Sehularo, Elephants for Africa

In rural Botswana—where one of Earth’s last intact elephant populations flourishes—the small environmental nonprofit [Elephants for Africa](#) is teaching schoolchildren not to fear the animals. Its aim is to create a generation raised on stewardship that has the skills to coexist, sustainably, with wildlife.

Across land and sea on six continents and among species from mammals to insects, human-wildlife conflict [is on the rise](#). Fueled by declines in ecosystem connectivity, climate-impacted habitats, and rising human populations, the issue has become one of the leading causes of large-mammal extinction

and is resulting in economic crises, property damage, death, and injury to both humans and animals in the most impacted areas.

In the Boteti region of Botswana, rates of human-wildlife conflict came on quickly. Walona Sehularo, Elephants for Africa's community education coordinator, said that this generation is the first to face it as a chronic issue. Just a few decades ago, it was rare for people and animals to come into contact in the region. Now, it is not uncommon for people to encounter potentially dangerous or destructive wildlife—such as elephants, lions, wild dogs, and cheetahs—several times a day. Many communities have developed fear-based responses, resorting to killing wildlife to protect people, crops, and livestock.

Supporting existing programs and immersing kids in nature

One way Elephants for Africa is working to calm the chaos of a crowded landscape is by educating children about environmental issues, wildlife behavior, and sustainable methods of keeping themselves and their properties safe. Its program Elefun partners with local schools to bring environmental education into classrooms and students onto land.

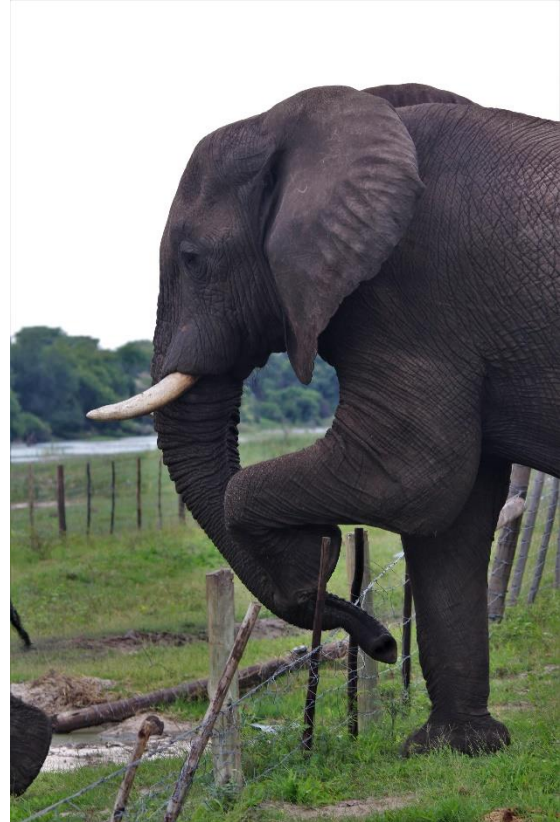
The Botswana government [requires](#) every school to offer an environmental education program, but funding and staff capacity is often lacking. Elefun supports these clubs by traveling to schools and facilitating ongoing environmental education with a focus on regional wildlife.

The extended structure of the program, which provides kids with a new lesson each month over the course of about two years, is important. According to an article [published](#) by the journal *People and Nature*, it takes repeated engagement with nature and environmental education for kids to form a strong sense of nature connection.

Fighting fear with knowledge to challenge ideas of wildlife as the enemy

A pillar of the Elefun curriculum is its culminating park trip. After several semesters of classroom-based learning on a variety of sustainability-related topics, staff bring kids out onto the land, where they are given freedom to explore without a structured lesson. They play games, observe and learn about wildlife, and often spend the night camping in the field.

“Most of these kids grow up seeing animals as a constant enemy, something that comes in and takes away from my family,” said Sehularo. They have seen elephants destroy their families’ crops, carnivores wipe out livestock, and, in extreme cases, witnessed people seriously injured by wildlife. Being out on the land gives kids an opportunity to forge a new, and more positive relationship with animals. It also



An elephant steps over a fence in Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. Courtesy: Walona Sehularo, Elephants for Africa



A group of elephants enjoy the water in Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. Courtesy: Walona Sehularo, Elephants for Africa

helps them develop a sense of oneness with the land. Elefun seeks to foster a stewardship mindset in its students, meaning that they begin to identify as part of nature, rather than as separate from or superior to it.

This strategy aligns with recommendations from the *People and Nature* article which says environmental education programs should give kids autonomy over how and at what pace they engage with nature. To be most effective, this type of education should allow young people space to overcome fears of being in nature or of specific species through gradual interactions that do not push them too far out of their comfort zone.

This slow-and-steady process is one that Sehularo has seen play out during the park trip, which is often where he observes the most intrapersonal growth in students. He recounted the journey of one child whose fear of elephants kept her from participating in a game of “spot the elephant” at the beginning of the trip. Trip leaders prompted her to acknowledge that fear, emphasizing that there was nothing shameful about it, and shared their knowledge about elephants and their behavior to help her feel comfortable at a safe distance. By the end of the trip, she was enjoying herself and enthusiastically pointing out elephants alongside her classmates.

“Breaking down those little boundaries, for us, it’s what it’s about,” said Sehularo. “The goal ... is not to get the kids to love elephants. It’s to get the kids to not be afraid of the elephants; to get the kids to tolerate being able to live with an elephant.” From there, he said, students have the space to develop a love for the animals at their own pace.

Tracking and forecasting impact

Elefun is only about five years old, meaning that staff can observe progress in individual students' attitudes toward wildlife, but the program's long-term impact is uncertain. What is known is that its mission targets a globally significant issue and its strategy leans into research-backed tactics for improving environmental stewardship in youth.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity has pinned human-wildlife conflict as a major issue, establishing Target 4 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to [achieve](#) better management of human-wildlife conflict. The framework explains that species extinction is higher than it has been at any point in the past 10 million years and continues to rise. One of the driving factors is human-wildlife conflict that often results in actions and policies that harm or extinguish wildlife. Thus, to reverse the trend, the relationship between people and animals must be healed.

Outdoor classrooms are one step in that process. Articles published by several major environmental journals, including *Nature* and *People and Nature* call for educators to bring kids outside to forge nature connection and foster lifelong stewardship. The International Union for Conservation of Nature report *Home to us all: how connecting with nature helps us care for ourselves and the Earth* [comes to similar conclusions](#), and the IUCN's [#Natureforall](#) campaign focuses much of its energy on mobilizing young people.



An elephant walks through Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. Courtesy: Walona Sehularo, Elephants for Africa

Similarly, Elefun's aim of shifting how kids grow up to view wildlife could play a role in shaping public opinion and resulting policies down the line. Research from the journal *Nature* [shows](#) that peoples' perceptions of animals as "pests" may have a greater impact on public opinion—and thus policy and

action—than “cognitive considerations for conserving biodiversity”. Similarly, childhood experience in nature plays a strong role in peoples’ tolerance and perception of wildlife later.

In Botswana, Sehularo said, “at the end of the day, as with any place ever, politics does follow people’s feelings.” Widespread fear of elephants, and their foundation in legitimate risk, have sometimes led governments to make policies aimed at assuaging those fears.

Alternatively, policies geared toward protecting animals sometimes frustrate people who see them as prioritizing wildlife over humans. It’s not a we-love-wildlife-more-than-people scenario,” said Sehularo. And educating kids can help chip away at that perception. “Kids are the greatest bargaining chip,” he said. When kids come home from a lesson and start asking questions their parents cannot answer, it sparks conversations that prompt adults to open their minds, learn more, and consider more proactive policies.

Creating change through education is an incremental process, but Sehularo is hopeful that it will have a meaningful impact over many decades. “[We hope] that this generation of kids, when it’s their time ... have been equipped with the skills to think about the environment and to question things about the environment so that they could then potentially enact policies that are good for the environment.”

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