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UN environmental agency awards biologist for reducing human-animal conflict



British biologist, Dr. Lucy E. King and an elephant

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A British biologist today [received](#) a United Nations award for her work using the diminutive bee to thwart the world's largest land animal, the elephant, from crop-raiding in Kenya.

At a ceremony at a UN wildlife conference in Bergen, Norway, Lucy E. King was honoured with the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals of the UNEP (UNEP/CMS) Thesis Award for her work on reducing conflict between humans and elephants.

Building on the fact that African Savannah elephants tend to be frightened by the sting of the honey bee, Dr. King's research led to the development of a beehive fence to prevent migrating elephants from entering agricultural areas. Following a two-year pilot project in Kenya, the beehive fence was successfully adopted by farming communities in three different districts and by three separate tribes.

“Dr. King’s work spotlights an intelligent solution to an age-old challenge while providing further confirmation of the importance of bees to people and a really clever way of conserving the world’s largest land animal for current and future generations,” UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner said.

Dr. King’s experiments revealed that elephants would regularly flee from the digital playback of bee sounds and, in doing so, transmit a unique low-frequency rumble warning other elephants in the area to retreat. Based on these behavioural patterns, she devised a fence featuring one beehive every 10 metres, dissuading elephants from accessing the enclosed area.

Noting that investments in biodiversity and ecosystems were “a key strand” of UNEP’s Green Economy work ahead of next year’s conference on sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Rio+20), Dr. Steiner added that Dr. King’s work was an important development for the future of environmental sustainability.

“Her research underlines how working with, rather than against, nature can provide humanity with many of the solutions to the challenges countries and communities face,” he added.

Following a two-year pilot project in Kenya, the beehive fence was successfully adopted by farming communities in three different districts and by three separate tribes. Ninety different raids, or attempted raids, by elephants were monitored during which only six incidents of elephants crossing the fences were recorded.

“By reducing conflicts between people and elephants, Dr. Lucy King has designed a constructive solution that considers the needs of migratory animals but also the economic benefits to the local communities linked to species conservation,” said CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema.

In addition to the beehive fence’s preventative benefits, beekeeping was recently listed as an equal income generator for Kenyan farmers, with beekeeping recognized as the third most time-consuming activity after farm work and charcoal making in 2010. The project is now being replicated in Tanzania and Uganda.

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