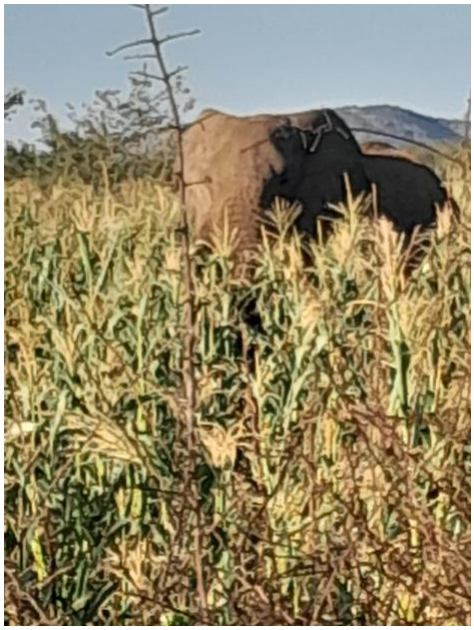
Community Rangers Making Coexistence Possible in Kunene.

Imagine losing an entire year's maize harvest in a single night. For many villages in Namibia's Kunene region, this is a recurring reality. Elephants break through fences, destroy gardens, damage water infrastructure, and move silently through unlit villages. These encounters have resulted not only in loss of livelihoods but in injuries and, in some cases, loss of life.

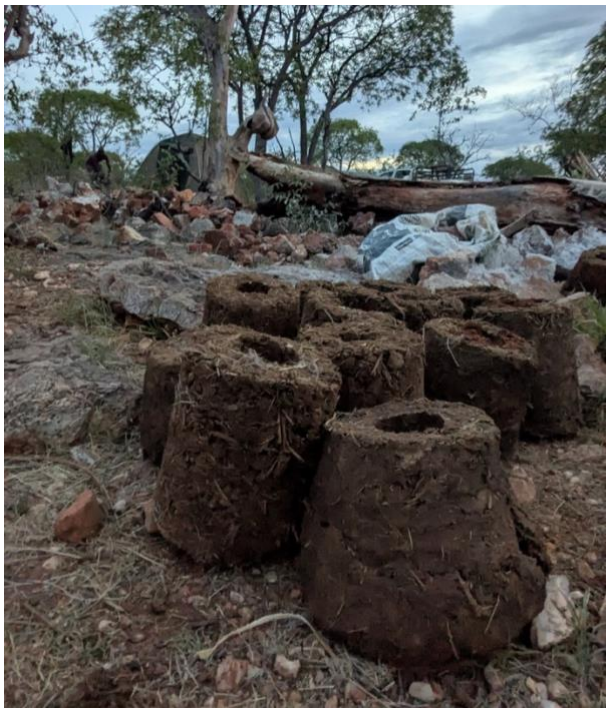


Faced with repeated devastation, many community members initially called for elephants to be removed or killed. Instead, a different solution emerged—one based on coexistence rather than conflict.

In 2020, John Kasaona, Executive Director of the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), launched the Kunene Elephant Rangers program, widely known through the Kunene Elephant Walk initiative, to address escalating human–elephant conflict in the region.

The program began with community volunteers using chili bombs and loud noises to deter elephants from fields and homes. Over time, this grassroots effort evolved into a structured, community-led conservation and protection program. Today, trained rangers from 15 conservancies actively track elephant movements to predict migrations, send early warnings to surrounding villages, and intervene when elephants approach farmlands. They know each elephant by name and know immediately when a new one arrives and which ones to keep a closer eye on.

Rangers use a combination of non-lethal deterrents, including strobe lights, loudspeakers, and elephant repellent—a locally made mixture of elephant dung, cow dung, and chili, molded to fit charcoal to produce a smoke elephants avoid. These methods have proven effective even in areas without electric fencing. In many cases, rangers stay awake throughout the night to protect fields and food stores that families rely on for the entire year. As a result of these efforts, 62 villages have successfully harvested their crops without elephant disturbances.



Beyond conflict prevention, the rangers collect vital elephant population and movement data that supports research and long-term conservation planning. They have also constructed strategically placed watering holes away from villages to reduce competition at community water points. Rangers have observed that elephants prefer clean water; separating elephant watering points from those used by other wildlife has significantly increased the success of these man-made water sources. During the 2025 holiday season, rangers also took the initiative to clean natural springs, removing trash, mud build-up, and algal overgrowth to ensure access to fresh water.

With donor support, the rangers now receive monthly stipends, proper field boots and uniforms, smartphones equipped with data-collection applications, and improved transport capacity. Currently, the program operates with one vehicle donated by WWF Namibia and four operational motorbikes donated by Rally for Rangers. While these

resources have improved response times, conservancy leaders continue to highlight the need for additional vehicles, particularly in remote areas where responding on foot is too slow.

Importantly, 30% of the Kunene Elephant Walk Rangers are women, and all rangers come from the communities they serve—strengthening local ownership, trust, and long-term sustainability.

The Kunene Elephant Walk itself is a 362-kilometre awareness walk undertaken by the rangers to highlight human–elephant conflict and raise funds for equipment and operational support. In 2026, the initiative plans to increase these walks to two per month, offering both three-day and five-day routes through conservancies. These walks provide supporters with first-hand insight into the daily realities faced by rural communities, while directly funding ranger stipends, equipment, and transport.

Through the Kunene Elephant Walk Rangers program, IRDNC demonstrates that peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife is not only possible but achievable when communities are empowered to lead the solution.