

Climate changes effects on wildlife

And how elephants benefit us

By Abbie Foley

African elephant populations have fallen dramatically from an estimated 12 million a century ago to some 400,000. In recent years, at least 20,000 elephants have been killed in Africa each year for their tusks alone. This statistic is alarming as elephants propose many important benefits to wildlife society. They help maintain forest and savanna ecosystems for other species and are integrally tied to rich biodiversity, which contributes significantly to natural carbon capture.

Studies have shown that elephants plant trees and fight climate change. Because they roam over such great distances, they distribute the seeds of trees and spread them out far and wide. As it turns out, these species are environmental engineers, as they increase the amount of carbon stored by the rainforest by tilting the biological balance in favour of certain types of trees. Keeping these forests healthy ensures that trees will continue to store carbon in their trunks, roots and soils, which helps reduce the effects of climate change.

Asian elephants are affected by climate change in various ways. Their population has shown to decline as they are sensitive to temperature—which has increased by an average of 0.13 degrees Fahrenheit per decade since 1880 according to NOAA's 2020 annual climate report. Draughts throughout the region results in loss of freshwater sources which heavily threatens the elephant species.

A study by ecologist Fabio Berzaghi in July 2019 estimated that “if forest elephants were to disappear, African forests would lose 7% of their biomass—3-billion-ton loss of carbon.” As climate change worsens, economist Ralph Chami says elephants will become more valuable in terms of their carbon sequestration role—“*The loss of their habitats has the impact of causing them stress and to have fewer babies.*”

Ways to help prevent and restore habitat loss in the elephant species can be found on the worldwildlife website, with the options to donate to the organisation and support their global conservation efforts; adopt an elephant; or shop at amazonsmile as 0.5% of each purchase is donated back to WWF.