



Living with Giants: Community Perceptions of Elephants in the Nyerere National Park, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined community perceptions of elephants and elephant conservation in villages adjacent to Nyerere National Park in Tanzania, focusing on how human-elephant interactions shape these perceptions. A qualitative research design was adopted, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation conducted in 2025 in Kisaki and Mngazi villages. Thematic analysis was used to interpret participants' lived experiences and the meanings attached to elephants and conservation. The findings show mixed perceptions, where some community members view elephants as an important economic asset linked to tourism and national revenue. At the same time, the majority perceive them as a threat due to recurrent crop raiding, livelihood losses, and risks to human safety. These negative experiences significantly shape attitudes toward elephant conservation, leading some participants to feel fear and resistance. Perceptions are influenced by direct exposure to conflict, livelihood dependence, and experiences of institutional response. The study is limited by its qualitative design and focus on two villages, which may limit generalisability to other contexts. However, the findings highlight the need for conservation authorities to strengthen human-elephant conflict mitigation strategies, improve benefit-sharing mechanisms, and integrate community experiences into conservation planning to promote coexistence.

Introduction

Elephants are well recognised for contributing to ecosystems. They maintain biodiversity; their presence supports the persistence of other species in the ecosystem (Campos-Arceiz and Blake, 2011; Dash et al., 2025). Elephants are also important for wildlife tourism, supporting the economy of many African countries (Oommen, 2019). In Africa, elephants are a high-profile species and a symbol of wildlife conservation (Kamau, 2017). Again, elephants have been recognised for their cultural importance (Zhang et al. 2024).

Elephants have a long history of interacting and coexisting with humans (Oommen, 2019; Lamarque et al., 2009). Available evidence indicates that humans and elephants have interacted since humans began sharing the same habitat with elephants. Human-elephant interactions occur in areas where people and elephants coexist. The interaction occurs in communities neighbouring core wildlife protected areas (Mamboleo, Doscher, and Paterson, 2017).

Perceptions of elephants are complex; varied perspectives exist (Evans, 2019; Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009; Infield and Mugisha, 2013). Studies have indicated that perceptions of elephants are based on historical and current experiences in their day-to-day interactions with elephants (Kamau, 2017;



Mamboleo, Doscher, and Paterson, 2017). Studies, for example, have indicated that farmers who had suffered crop losses to elephants were more negative in their attitudes towards elephants than those who had not (De Boer and Baquete, 1998; Mamboleo, Doscher, and Paterson, 2017; Malley and Gorenflo, 2023).

Culture and societal values influence people's perceptions of elephants (Manfredo and Dayer, 2004). In his study of the Samburu, Kahindi (2001) found that cultural and traditional beliefs significantly shaped positive attitudes towards elephants. A study on human-elephant relations in Sri Lanka found that elephants are associated with spiritual symbolism and reincarnation, which can reduce hostility toward them even during conflicts (Klixbüll, 2016).

Studies also indicate that perceptions of elephants are never static. A study in Morogoro, Tanzania, for example, indicates a shift in residents' attitudes towards elephants. The change was from favourable to unfavourable (Malley and Gorenflo, 2023). According to this study, the change was influenced by increasing incidences of crop damage and a threat to human life.

Though studies in Tanzania have explored communities' perceptions of elephants (Munuo and Røskaft, 2020; Malley, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Kioko and Changwony, 2025), there is limited evidence of similar studies in Nyerere National Park. Additionally, available evidence indicates that the park has a higher rate of human-elephant interactions than other national parks in Tanzania (Swalehe and Yanda, 2023). Understanding community perceptions of elephants is vital for planning and implementing appropriate mitigation measures to conserve elephants and mitigate human-elephant conflicts. This study aims to explore perceptions of communities living adjacent to Nyerere National Park regarding elephants and their implications for elephant conservation. This study asks how community members perceive elephants and elephant conservation. What factors have been influencing their perception?

This study applies political ecology to explore community perceptions of elephants and elephant conservation. Political ecology is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how power relations, governance systems, and inequalities in the use of natural resources among different groups shape environmental issues. A key tenet of political ecology is the emphasis on how political, economic, and historical processes influence environmental outcomes (Blaikie & Brookfield, 2015; Bryant & Bailey, 1997). In the context of human-elephant interactions around Nyerere National Park, political ecology sheds light on the fact that community perceptions of elephants are not shaped solely by direct experiences such as crop raiding or safety concerns but are also shaped by how conservation policies are implemented, the degree of local participation in decision-making, and the fairness in sharing conservation benefits. Where communities feel marginalised, excluded from land access, or inadequately compensated, their perceptions of elephants may become negative, reflecting broader socio-political grievances. Thus, political ecology provides a framework for understanding community attitudes as products of both ecological realities.

Methodology

Study design

This is an explorative study. We applied a qualitative approach to explore the local community's perception of elephants in Nyerere National Park. This approach enables participants to assess everyday community life. It also stresses the importance of ethics in research and of taking the time to properly design and think through any research endeavour. The choice of a qualitative research approach was based on its ability to assess everyday community life from participants' perspectives. The idea was to explore their experience in the process. It was believed that such experience would help the researchers obtain in-depth narratives and local perceptions about wildlife conservation. The



philosophy holds that an actor's meanings, perceptions, and actions are situated within the actor's socio-cultural context and that reality is complex, subjective, and socially constructed. Data were generated in September and October 2025. The researchers relied heavily on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation for all data collection. Concerning data analysis, data are treated as socially constructed, so analysis focuses on how participants interpret and give meaning to their experiences with elephants rather than seeking a single objective “truth.

Study site

The study was conducted in two villages bordering Nyerere National Park. The villages are Kisaki and Mngazi. The villages are in the Morogoro District Council, Morogoro region, Tanzania. Kisaki village is located in Kisaki ward. Mngazi village is located in Mngazi ward. Nyerere National Park, located in southern Tanzania, is the largest national park in the country, covering approximately 30,893 km², and was officially gazetted in 2019 following the subdivision of the former Selous Game Reserve (Mkwizu 2024). In 2019, the Government of Tanzania re-gazetted part of this reserve as Nyerere National Park to strengthen conservation management and promote photographic tourism under the Tanzania National Parks Authority (Mkwizu 2024). The most recent reliable estimate of elephant numbers in the Nyerere National Park (within the wider Nyerere-Selous-Mikumi ecosystem) comes from the 2022 aerial wildlife census, which recorded approximately 20,006 elephants.

According to the 2022 census, the population of Kisaki ward is 28,414, and the population of Mngazi village is 13,708. Villagers in these wards are predominantly agriculturalists, with most households engaged in rain-fed farming of crops such as maize, rice, cassava, sorghum, and cowpeas. At the same time, sesame and sunflower serve as key cash crops. Customary systems mainly govern land tenure in the wards

The researchers were affiliated with the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, a Tanzanian public higher learning institution, which positioned them as perceived state-linked actors during fieldwork in Kisaki and Mngazi villages near Nyerere National Park. This positionality may have influenced participants' responses, particularly in a context where discussions involved grievances toward TANAPA, as respondents could have either amplified complaints, moderated criticism, or strategically framed their accounts in line with perceived power relations. The researchers remained reflexively aware of these dynamics throughout data collection and analysis and made efforts to minimise power imbalances through informed consent, confidentiality, and clarification of the study's academic purpose. It is therefore acknowledged that the findings are co-constructed through the interaction between researchers and participants, necessitating careful interpretation of narratives.

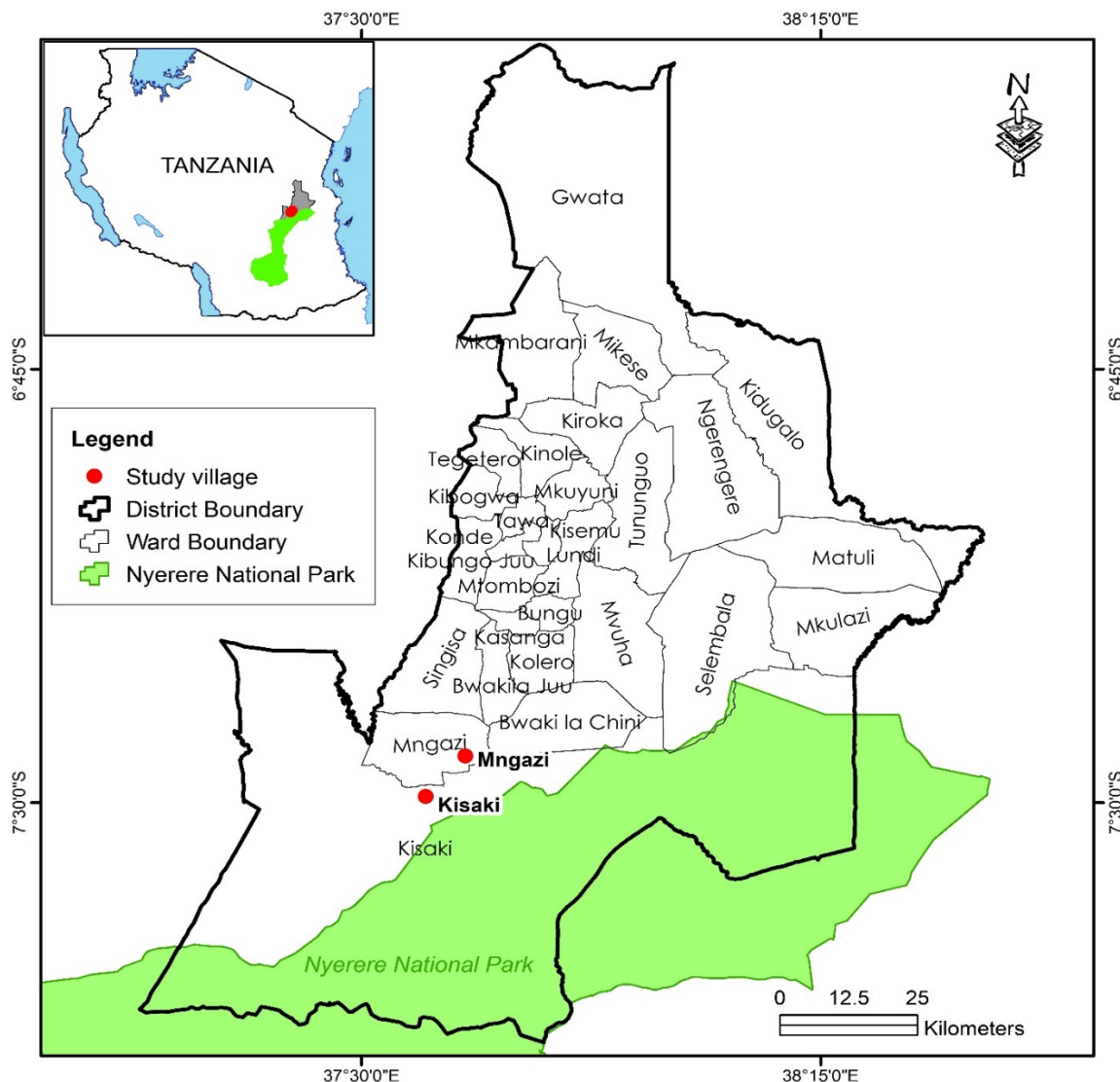


Figure 1: Map showing the study area

Study population

The study focused on community members in the selected villages along Nyerere National Park. The choice of Nyerere National Park is based on its higher rate of human-elephant interactions than other national parks in Tanzania (Swalehe and Yanda, 2023). On the other hand, the villages were selected because they had a higher rate of contact with elephants than other villages in the district. (<https://www.rufford.org/projects/lameck-mkuburo/assessment-of-human-elephant-interactions-elephant-dispersal-and-migration-and-community-attitudes-around-northern-selous-game-reserve-tanzania/>).

Sampling and sample size

The study adopted a purposive sampling procedure. The first stage was selecting the villages to be involved in the study. Two villages were purposively selected. District wildlife officers assisted with the selection. The villages were selected because they had higher rates of interaction with elephants than other villages. The second stage was the selection of informants for the study. The in-depth



interview informants were recruited with the help of village leaders. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the informants. Village leaders assisted only in identifying individuals who had lived in the villages for a long period (at least 10 years). This was done at the initial stages, then snowball sampling was applied. Informants were selected based on the criteria that they have stayed in the village for at least ten (10) years. It is believed that such informants would provide a deep understanding of the human-elephant interaction in the area. Other informants were selected based on their positions and roles, such as community leaders, religious leaders, elders, district wildlife officers, and officers from Mwalimu Nyerere National Park.

A theoretical closure determined the sample size for in-depth interviews with informants, i.e., the point at which the researcher obtained no new information from additional informants (saturation). During interviews, saturation points were reached at 12 in Mngazi village and 15 in Kisaki village. Additionally, two (2) focus group discussions were conducted in every village.

Table 1: Thematic Saturation across interviews¹

Interview sequence	Crop damage & loss	Fear/safety concerns	Perceived benefits of conservation	Trust in TANAPA/government	Coping strategies
1-5	New details emerging	Repeated	New information	New information	New information
6-10	Repetition starts	Strong repetition	Slight new variation	Repetition	Repetition
11-12 (Mngazi)	No new information	No new information	No new information	No new information	No new information
13-15 (Kisaki)	No new information	No new information	No new information	No new information	No new information

Table 2: Number of interviews, distribution among study sites, and categories of informants

Location	Target group	Method	Gender of informants	
			Male	Female
Mngazi	Community members	Interview	7	4
	Elders	Interview		1
	Community leaders	Interview	1	
		FGD	8	5
Kisaki	Community members	Interview	6	6
	Elders	Interview	1	
	Community leaders	Interview	1	
	TANAPA officials	Interview	1	
	District wildlife officers		1	
		FGD	7	5

Data collection

Data was collected using interviews. A total of 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals from households; other key informants were selected based on their positions and roles, including community leaders, religious leaders, elders, and officials from the district wildlife department and Mwalimu Nyerere National Park. The interviews lasted for 50 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded. Again, the researchers took notes during each interview to

¹ “New information” implies that there were still new ideas coming in or emerging. No “new information” implies that there is repetitions in responses, no new response is coming in.



supplement the transcripts. All four researchers were involved in conducting interviews, FGDs, and analysing them.

Additionally, four FGDs were conducted, two from each village. Each FGD consisted of 6-10 participants. Members of each focus group were selected from those who did not participate in the interview section.

Observational techniques were also employed, with researchers observing major livelihood activities, community members' daily routines, community interactions, and other related activities in the villages. Observations were conducted throughout the data collection period.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using a thematic approach. Credibility was ensured through member checking with selected informants and triangulation of data from household interviews, key informants, and observation. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the study area and socio-ecological setting. Dependability was ensured through a clear audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures, including inter-coder agreement where applicable. Confirmability was strengthened by systematically documenting analytical decisions and by including a reflexive statement acknowledging the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation. The unit of analysis included individual informants and groups. Several steps were taken in analysing the data. First, the data collected was transcribed. The tape-recorded information was transcribed verbatim into Kiswahili to avoid loss of meaning during translation. The information was then translated from Kiswahili to English. Second, the analysis involved familiarising oneself with the data by reading the transcripts. The third step involved identifying themes that emerged from the data. The process of theme generation was advanced by reviewing the themes and codes, as well as the themes and transcripts, iteratively until the final themes and subthemes were defined. Finally, the data were summarised and synthesised while retaining as much as possible of the informants' key expressions. Additionally, community perceptions of elephants were cross-tabulated to understand the reasons for their differences.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics were observed throughout the research process to maintain the integrity of the community under study. A research permit was requested from the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, channelled through the Morogoro Regional Office, and then forwarded to the Morogoro Rural District Council. Researchers ensured informed consent from informants. The informants were informed of the study's objectives. When they were satisfied with the researchers' explanations, they agreed to participate in the study. Researchers ensured that informants voluntarily participated in the study after being satisfied with the researchers' explanations of the study's purpose. The researchers ensured that informants' information remained confidential and was used only for this study. Additionally, to protect informants' identities, pseudonyms were used.

Results

This study aimed to explore local communities' perceptions of elephants in the Nyerere National Park. During interviews, community members expressed diverse views on elephants and elephant conservation. Findings from this study revealed perceptions of elephants and their conservation. These perceptions include "elephant as an economic asset", "elephant as a threat", and "people and elephant conservation".

Elephants as an economic asset

In interactions with informants, some perceived elephants as a crucial natural resource. Although it was widely observed that elephants were viewed negatively (as will be covered in detail in the



following sections), some community members considered them an important resource. This view was attributed to elephants' contribution to national income through the tourism industry. During interviews, one informant had the following to comment;

“Elephants indeed pose a threat to our community, but still, we understand that they are important to the nation at large. We have heard that millions of dollars are received through tourism in the Nyerere National Park” (IDI/community member/Mngazi/ September 2025).

The quote above suggests that some community members viewed elephants as an important natural resource that generates income and facilitates national development. This statement reflects a dual perception: elephants are seen as both a local threat and a national asset linked to tourism in Nyerere National Park. It highlights a perceived imbalance, with communities bearing the costs while benefits accrue mainly at the national level.

Despite the above-mentioned value of elephants. This study also sought to understand whether community members derived other benefits from Nyerere National Park, particularly from elephant conservation. It was noted that the villages in this study benefited from Nyerere National Park, as revealed in focus group discussions. In the discussions, one member had the following to comment:

“We have benefited a lot from Nyerere National Park. The national park has provided grants to several groups in the village (tunanufaika na vikundi). For example, some groups have been offered milling machines, grants to ten beekeeping groups, grants to poultry farming groups, and grants to women groups that engage themselves in buying and selling rice” (FGD with men/Kisaki/ September 2025)

Another member of a focus group discussion commented that:

“It is important to acknowledge the efforts made by our neighbours, Nyerere National Park. We all know that some of our children have been sponsored to attend secondary schools, colleges, and universities. To me, this is a valuable assistance, especially when we consider that some of us cannot afford to pay school fees” (FGD/women/Kisaki/ September 2025)

The quotes above imply that community members in the study area considered elephants a valuable resource and benefited from them. In conversations with the village chairperson of Kisaki Kituoni, it was noted that over the past three years, Nyerere Park had spent about Tzs 350 million to cover the fees of about 60 students. It was noted that in Mngazi, the village benefited from the installation of desks in the primary school. Other benefits the community received include the construction of a dispensary in the Nyalutanga suburb.

The elephant as a threat

As indicated in the above section, some community members perceived elephants as an important resource and therefore had a positive attitude toward them. In this section, the study presents the negative perceptions held by some community members toward elephants. During conversations with informants, it was revealed that most villagers in both Mngazi and Kisaki held negative perceptions of elephants. This perception was mainly due to elephants raiding crops.

In Kisaki and Mngazi, agriculture is the main livelihood activity. The villages cultivate food crops. The main food crops cultivated are paddy, maize, millet, and peas. In recent years, villagers have been experiencing crop raiding by elephants, as Gula commented:

For more than 20 years, I have been living in this village. We had a peaceful life. Elephant invasions began about 5 years ago and are increasing over time. (IDI/ community members/Mngazi/September 2025)



The above quote implies that people have been interacting with elephants for quite some time. There had also been a limited negative impact from this interaction. However, changes began recently with an increase in instances of elephant invasions involving crop raiding. In conversations with informants, it was revealed that crop raiding was a big challenge in both Mngazi and Kisaki villages. These events were mentioned as contributing to changes in how people perceived elephants. In the villages, most people considered elephants enemies. Juma, a farmer from Kisaki, had the following comments:

“If you ask me about how I consider elephants, I would tell you that they are enemies. They are not important at all (sio mali hawa). They are not important to us; they are making our lives vulnerable. Look at me, elephants have eaten my four acres of paddy. Nothing was left for me. My life is miserable, no food, no money” (IDI/ community members/ Mngazi/ October 2025)

This quote represents the feeling of most community members in the study area. This account uses strong emotive language to portray elephants as “enemies,” with repetition and phrases such as “sio mali hawa.” In discussions with informants, it was revealed that crop raiding in the study villages was a serious problem. The majority of villagers experienced crop raiding on their farms. When the researchers, for example, visited the Kisaki village office, they found a list of 1,055 people whose crops had been raided between 2022 and 2024. According to the village executive officer, over 80% of their crops were eaten by elephants. It was noted that community members’ dislike of elephants was generally linked to elephants’ crop raiding behaviour. During a conversation with the ward wildlife officer, he acknowledged the problem and noted that TANAPA was planning to provide a token of compensation to farmers for the loss.

Notwithstanding, people's dislike of elephants was also due to the aggressive behaviour of elephants, which resulted in the deaths of some village members. It was reported that several people had been killed by elephants in both villages. Maria, a farmer in Mngazi, had the following comments:

“Villagers currently consider elephants to be a dangerous animal because they not only eat our crops, but also kill us. We are now living in fear. Last year, some people were killed by elephants in this ward. You know, when elephants enter our farms, we normally make noise to chase them away. However, this annoys elephants, leading them to chase people and kill. We have come to the point where we see them, we run away to save our lives instead of chasing them away to save food. (IDI/women/ Mngazi/ September 2025)

The quote above suggests that elephants may pose a serious threat to humans. During an interview with the ward wildlife officer, it was revealed that the incidents had been reported, and TANAPA intervened by killing one elephant to deter further encroachment by elephants into the village.

People and Elephant Conservation

This study aimed to understand how community members perceived elephant conservation. Informants were asked to explain how they considered elephant conservation. Informants expressed diverse views on elephant protection. In the study communities, however, there was generally the view that protecting elephants was not in human interests. Community members considered elephant conservation a threat to their well-being and, therefore, something they should not support. In interviews, Pula, a farmer, had the following to say:

“To be honest... nowadays, people do not have a motive to preserve elephants. I don't know if you understand me well. In the past, people preserved elephants because they did not reach the fields. Elephants used to live in the forests; they ate and stayed there, and in the villages, we farmed peacefully. Nowadays, elephants like to stay in our farms. Even now (12 noon), if you go to the farms, you are likely to find them” (IDI/farmers/Kisaki/September 2025)



Some community members expressed their fear of conserving elephants. They considered protecting elephants as endangering their future well-being. In a focus group, some members had the following to comment:

Mmmmh! If elephants continue to be protected in this way, we farmers will have problems: we will no longer have crops, and agriculture will no longer be viable in this village. There are only a few of them now. What will happen to the situation in this village in 3, 4, or 5 years? (FGD/women/Mngazi/October 2025)

Another added that;

"We have noted that elephant behaviour has changed, as you have heard from my colleague; elephants nowadays like to eat food crops. That's why they keep coming to our village. This is creating fear in us (tunatishika sana). Imagine the number of elephants keeps increasing, what do you expect from us? Our future is likely to be more vulnerable than today. We don't know how life will be in the coming few years" (FGD/women/Mngazi/October 2025).

Some community members were not in favour of elephant conservation due to fear of injuries and deaths from elephant attacks. They mentioned that they could be attacked when farming or travelling. Monde, who has been living in Mngazi for over 30 years, had the following to comment:

"It is not that we do not want elephants, but we are afraid of being attacked. Elephants are very aggressive, especially when they are herding to farms. Once they see you, they think you want to prevent them from accessing food, so they become angry and attack. So, conservation means they will increase in numbers. What then do you expect of our lives?" (IDI/community members/Mngazi/September 2025)

Some villagers in both Kisaki and Mngazi also mentioned fear of losing crops and income. As noted in the methodology section, farming is the main livelihood activity in the study communities. Thus, an increase in elephant numbers means more elephant invasions. This created fear among some villagers of further crop losses and, therefore, income losses. Some also feared becoming more vulnerable in the future, as elephant numbers keep increasing, their lives and livelihoods will be even more at risk. During interviews in Kisaki, one woman had the following to say:

"Farming is what we depend on, so once elephants invade our farms, it means we don't have food and income. We have very limited alternative sources of livelihood here. It is elephants that make our lives vulnerable here. Last year, I lost 4 acres of paddy to elephant crop raiding. You cannot imagine how miserable my life was" (IDI/ community members/ Kisaki/September 2025).

Fear of unfairness and injustice -Some community members believed that the government valued elephants more than human beings. As a result, the government invested heavily in protecting elephants and did not consider the welfare of the human beings living adjacent to the national park. In other words, there was a view that there was an overemphasis on elephant protection to the extent that protection of human beings was jeopardised. In a focus group discussion, some members had the following to comment.

"What I see is that the government is interested in elephants and not human beings. No one cares; it is just a normal thing to find people killed by elephants or get disabilities, and Nyerere National Park is doing nothing about it. They have failed to manage elephants, and they don't care about people. To them, it is ok for human beings to die and not an elephant (bora afe binadamu sio tembo)" FGD/women/Mngazi/September 2025.



This statement presents a strong critique of conservation, portraying authorities as prioritising elephants over human life in Nyerere National Park. The use of absolutes and the phrase “bora afe binadamu sio tembo” emphasises perceived neglect and injustice. Overall, it reflects mistrust in institutions and frames human-elephant conflict as a social injustice rather than just an environmental issue. Another member of FGD added that:

“What I can say is that the elephant is the property of the government,...The government greatly values them. The government does not care about villagers. Because when the elephants come to destroy the farmers' property,.....and even if you report to the government, no action is taken, that's why I say the government does not care and does not value the farmer” (FGD/men/ Mngazi/ September, 2025

In conversations with informants, it was also noted that some community members feared the consequences of elephant conservation, including strict penalties for harming elephants. During interviews, it was noted that TANAPA imposes serious penalties for those who harm elephants, as Neema, a farmer, makes it clear:

“Once an elephant invades our farms, we are only supposed to make noise or use fire to chase them away. We were told not to use any weapon to attack elephants. If a person uses a weapon to harm an elephant, serious penalties would follow. Two years ago, a man hit an elephant with an arrow. TANAPA was informed about it and caught the man. He has been imprisoned” (IDI/community members/Mngazi/October 2025).

To broaden our analysis of communities' perceptions of elephants. We decided to cross-tabulate to understand why the perception varied. This has been summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of Community Perception of Elephants

Variable	Positive Perception	Negative Perception
Landholding size	Smallholders with minimal crop losses or diversified plots sometimes viewed elephants as “important for tourism”	Large-scale farmers with extensive paddy/maize fields reported high crop destruction and strong fear/hostility
Livelihood diversification	Households with alternative income (business, fishing, employment) showed more tolerance	Purely subsistence farmers, heavily dependent on crops, showed strong negative perceptions
Benefit receipt (compensation/tourism awareness)	Those who had received compensation or understood tourism benefits expressed conditional acceptance	Those who had never received compensation felt neglected and viewed elephants as harmful
Distance from park boundary	Households farther from Nyerere National Park reported fewer incidents and more neutral/positive views	Villages closer to the park boundary experienced frequent crop raiding and expressed strong fear and hostility
Gender	Some women acknowledged conservation value, but with concern for household food security	Women in FGD expressed stronger emotional responses due to responsibility for food provision and safety concerns

Discussion

This study aimed to understand local perceptions of elephants in Nyerere National Park. Through conversations and interviews with community members in the study villages, we found that community members have long-term interactions with elephants. This interaction had shaped their perceptions of elephants. As indicated in the findings, community members expressed various perceptions of elephants. One key perception is that elephants are an important resource. Informants mentioned that elephants contributed to the growth of tourism in Nyerere National Park and, in turn,



to government revenues. Thus, despite elephants occasionally invading farms, they still had positive feelings toward them. Other studies have also revealed that some community members may have positive feelings about elephants despite negative interactions with humans. A study by King et al. (2011) revealed that as community members interacted with elephants, they gained knowledge and coping skills, thereby reducing unwanted interactions.

Some community members also held negative perceptions of elephants. As indicated in the findings, most people in the study areas considered elephants as enemies. When asked whether they liked elephants, they said they hated them. Such feeling could reflect their experiences with encountering elephants. Findings from this study indicated that community members whose crops were eaten by elephants were more negative toward elephants than those whose crops were not eaten. This shows that crop raiding by elephants contributed to the negative perception of elephants. The findings of this study are consistent with other studies. A study by Malley and Gorenflo (2023), for example, shows that crop losses to elephants contributed to negative perceptions and attitudes towards elephants. In some areas, elephants have been described as enemies of rural development due to their invasions of farms (Mamboleo, Doscher, & Paterson, 2017)

Findings from this study also revealed that people generally held negative perceptions of elephant conservation. Informants expressed their fear of conserving elephants. They considered elephant conservation and threats to their well-being. Informants expressed several fears, including the loss of crops and income, death and injury, and future vulnerability. According to informants, these fears contributed to their negative attitudes towards elephants. This study aligns with other studies on communities' fears about elephant conservation. A study by Røskaft et al. (2014) illustrates how water and fertile soils in the Chobe National Park have become a stage for a battle between humans and elephants. The study shows that such a situation contributed to little support for elephant conservation among community members.

Findings from this study also showed that community members felt that the government valued elephants more than villagers did. In other words, community members felt less important than elephants. Such perception led some community members to be less supportive of elephant conservation. A study by Nyumba, Emenye, and Leader-Williams (2020) in the Maasai Mara National Reserve found an imbalance between elephant protection and human welfare and called for conservation policies that balance ecological goals and human well-being.

Studies have also shown that negative perceptions of elephants are closely linked to livelihood losses and weak institutional response. Research in Tanzania and elsewhere indicates that frequent crop raiding and inadequate compensation reduce tolerance and increase hostility toward both elephants and conservation authorities. More broadly, studies highlight that perceptions of injustice and exclusion from conservation benefits are key drivers of conflict-oriented attitudes. This finding resonates with critical political ecology scholarship that links negative community perceptions to broader power dynamics in conservation. Fairhead and Leach (2012) argue that “green grabbing” involves the appropriation of land and resources for conservation, often marginalising local livelihoods – an issue reflected in perceptions that benefits accrue elsewhere. Similarly, Duffy (2014) highlights how conservation can entail forms of coercion and neglect that foster resentment and mistrust among affected communities. In the same vein, Neumann (1998) critiques the imposition of “wilderness” ideals that exclude local people, reinforcing feelings that human lives are devalued relative to wildlife. Together, these perspectives help explain why narratives of injustice and hostility toward elephants and conservation authorities emerge in high-conflict settings such as those surrounding Nyerere National Park.



Despite providing valuable insights into community perceptions of elephants, this study had some limitations. Since the data were collected using a qualitative approach, generalisation to the broader population is limited. Additionally, time and financial constraints limited the ability to explore other communities with similar experience in human-elephant interactions.

The application of political ecology was valuable in this study because it situated community perceptions of elephants around Nyerere National Park within broader power relations, governance structures, and unequal distribution of conservation costs and benefits (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Bryant & Bailey, 1997). It helped explain how perceptions are shaped not only by direct human-elephant interactions but also by historical land-use changes, exclusion from decision-making, and perceived inequities in conservation benefits (Robbins, 2019). This approach, therefore, linked local experiences to the wider political and institutional dynamics that shape conservation outcomes.

Conclusion

This study has shown that community interactions with elephants around Nyerere National Park elicit diverse perceptions, ranging from appreciation to fear, which, in turn, shape attitudes toward elephant conservation. These perceptions are socially constructed through lived experiences, including crop damage, safety risks, and perceived benefits. They are therefore closely linked to livelihood realities and governance structures, thereby contributing to the political ecology and human-wildlife conflict literature by demonstrating how local experiences reflect broader power relations and conservation inequalities. The findings suggest a need for a policy to strengthen community-based human-wildlife conflict mitigation and benefit-sharing mechanisms, including improved compensation schemes and participatory conservation approaches under TANAPA, to enhance trust and reduce conflict. Future research should examine how perceptions change over time and across different ecological contexts, particularly through longitudinal and comparative studies that integrate ecological and social data to inform more effective adaptive conservation strategies.

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