

North Carolina Zoological Society

Satellite telephones have been an integral part of our elephant research field operations for more than ten years. We work in some very remote spots in Cameroon, a nation in equatorial western Africa. The work can be dangerous at times, but there are also a number of important day-to-day tasks that could not be accomplished without the satphone.

We occasionally find ourselves using the satellite phone in emergency situations. In March 2008, while working in the Mintom region of Cameroon, Desire Dontego, a long-time member of our research team, was badly injured by a charging elephant. The closest hospital was in Yaounde, a twelve-hour drive. We knew that it would take a long time to simply evacuate Desire from the forest (ultimately that alone required 36 hours of hiking), and then there would be administrative delays in getting him admitted to the Yaounde hospital. Using the satellite phone, though, we were able to contact the Yaounde facility immediately and prepare it for Desire's arrival, thus ensuring that he would get the medical attention he needed right away. The satphone has also been critical in other difficult circumstances, including communication with the U.S. and German embassies during a period of civil unrest in Cameroon in March 2008.

Things aren't so dramatic on a day-to-day basis, however. We depend on the satellite telephone for a lot of basic communication, both within Cameroon and back to the United States. Our field practices require that I check in with a State-side contact daily while in the field. We share information about the previous day's activities, discuss any short-term changes or needs for the program, and relay information from colleagues and families. Updates to the Zoo's "FieldTripEarth" website (<http://fieldtripearth.org>) are also exchanged on a daily basis, which allows us to keep schoolchildren around the world aware of what we are doing.

Our long-term goal of limiting destructive human/elephant interactions in Cameroon would be far less attainable without dependable communication. Satellite phones are an important tool for this project, and we depend on them in all sorts of situations.

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