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WILDLIFE WATCH

How Chili Condoms and Firecrackers Can Help Save Elephants

A low-cost, low-tech method for scaring elephants away from fields could help people and elephants live in peace.



Crop protection teams use flashlights, chili powder, and fireworks to safely deter elephants from raiding crops.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FELIPE RODRIGUEZ

By **Rachael Bale**

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7



Fill a condom with chili powder. Mix in small rocks and sand for weight. Add a firecracker for a bang. Launch condom at elephant. Save elephant's life.

All it takes is one elephant rumbling through a field to destroy a family's food supply for an entire year, so it's no surprise that a farmer might turn to the only tool he has available—a spear.

But this [elephant warning system](#) gives farmers a low-tech way to scare these animals away from their crops without violence.

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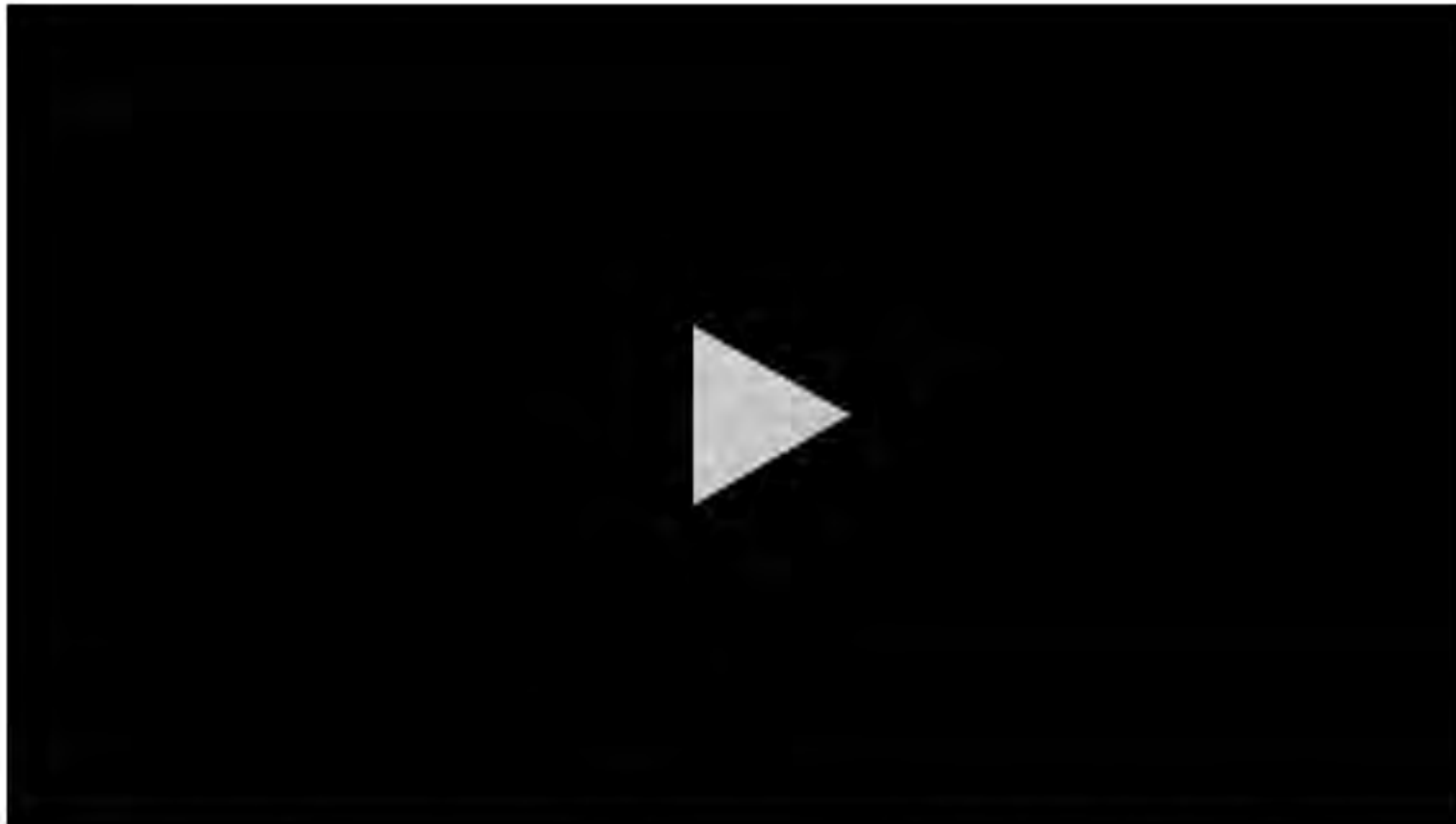


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The [Honeyguide Foundation](#), a Tanzania-based conservation group, with support from the United States-based [Nature Conservancy](#), is training teams of volunteer “crop protectors” in dozens of villages throughout northern Tanzania to implement the system.



Watch: Using Firecrackers, Chili Powder, and Condoms to Deter Elephants

Video: Kilimanjaro Film Institute

Each night, a member of the team will keep watch over the crops, looking out for elephants. If one is spotted, the volunteer begins the four-step warning system.

First, there are the strobe lights. Shining a bright, flashing light at an elephant in the dark is sometimes enough to make it turn around and leave. If that doesn't work, the volunteer will sound an air horn. Step three is the chili-firecracker condom. Elephants are extra sensitive to smells, so a cloud of chili powder is usually unpleasant enough to make them leave.

And as a last resort—Roman candles. The loud sound and bright light can go a long way in scaring the elephant.



Omberu Isaya, a member of a crop protection team in northern Tanzania, holds a launcher that shoots fireworks to scare away elephants.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FELICE ROSSINI/VEZ

Chili has been used for decades as an elephant deterrent. [Chili-powdered ropes](#), [chili-plant buffer zones](#), and even [smoke bombs](#) made from dried elephant dung and chili powder have been known to keep elephants away. Honeyguide and the [Big Life Foundation](#), a nonprofit conservation organization with operations in Kenya and Tanzania, [began experimenting with chili grenades](#) made from chili powder, sand, firecrackers, and condoms several years ago.

Elephants are critical to Tanzania's tourism industry, but for farming communities located near elephant populations, there's often little choice but to kill them.

"We have really stepped up our crop protection program this year and seen some changes in attitudes with communities and wildlife, especially tolerance for elephants," Honeyguide's Damian Bell said in an email.



A "chili cloud," made from chili powder, sand, and a firecracker, won't harm an elephant—it just makes him uncomfortable enough to turn around and leave.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NI IMANJARO FILM INSTITUTE

Elephants can eat 990 pounds (450 kilograms) of food a day. And they uproot and scatter almost as much as they eat. Crop raiding, as its called, puts the livelihoods and lives of people in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Botswana, India, Indonesia, and other countries at risk. Each year, elephants cause millions of dollars in damage to crops and trample people to death. But with the elephant population under pressure from the ivory trade—some 30,000 are poached each year—protecting them is crucial. Bell said crop destruction can even encourage farmers to turn to poachers because poachers can "sort out the problem for them."

The chili condom grenades are just one tool in a growing arsenal of elephant deterrents. [Fences made of beehives](#), tobacco dust, [recordings of tiger growls](#), and advance-warning [text messages](#) are just a few of the ways people are working to help farmers and elephants in African and Asia peacefully coexist.

This story was produced by National Geographic's Special Investigations Unit, which focuses on wildlife crime and is made possible by grants from the BAND Foundation and the Woodtiger Fund. Read more stories from the SIU on [Wildlife Watch](#). Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to ngwildlife@ngs.org.

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Since Rupert Murdoch bought the magazine and web site it has turned into a pop-up advertising hell-scape. Every photo in Photo of the Day is obscured by an annoying pop-up video (or other solicitation)...Every One. There are incessant survey requests and other intrusive media that ruin the experience of the web site.

Maybe, if enough of us complain, the ads will be reduced and the NG managers will realize that this is not a place for such crass commercialism. Let NG know how you feel. It might make a difference. Thanks.

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