

# On the Subject of Black, Pink and Grued Elephants<sup>1</sup>

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

18 August 2020

## ***More Creatures in the Menagerie with the Black Elephants***

Dear David,

I would first like to congratulate you on triggering an ongoing debate on Black Elephants<sup>2</sup> – the unlikely hybridization of a black swan with the elephant in the room. I was interested to read Bob Prieto’s article on this topic in the August edition<sup>3</sup>, and would like to comment on an additional concept that he presented – i.e., the existence of “red swans”. He uses this term to characterize situations that are considered as potential disasters and, as such, are addressed vigorously but then turn out, after the event, to have been a false alert. To integrate this concept into the Black Elephant menagerie, we also need a term to refer to a major concern that is initially treated in the same way as a black elephant, but later turns out not to be important – i.e., the outcome of the crossing of a red swan with the elephant in the room. The term “pink elephant” is ideally suited for this role, as it has traditionally been used to refer to strange hallucinations, sometimes brought on by alcohol or other drugs<sup>ii</sup>.

Some situations labelled as pink elephants certainly do justify the name. However, in other cases, it can be that the distant trumpeting from a genuine black elephant was detected in time and the corresponding response was timely and effective, thereby shrinking the black elephant down to an insignificant size. This category of situation does of course need its own descriptive term. I propose “Grued Elephants” – named after the anti-hero Felonius Gru in the film *Despicable Me* who stole the top secret shrink ray that had been used to reduce a fully-grown elephant to the size of a puppy<sup>iii</sup>.

The issue here is that, although analysis after the event can be instructive, it can also be deceptive. There is considerable debate around the potential “false alarm” raised by

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<sup>2</sup> Pells, D.L. (2020). Black Elephants and maybe Project Management; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June. Available online at <https://peworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj94-Jun2020-Pells-black-elephants-and-maybe-project-management-editorial3.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Prieto, R. (2008). Black Elephants, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VIII, August. Available online at <https://peworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pmwj96-Aug2020-Prieto-Black-Elephants-featured-paper.pdf>

the WHO in 2009 about the H1N1 virus<sup>iv</sup>, and the same might be said about the Millennium Bug – AKA Y2K – situation: was it a pink elephant<sup>v</sup>, or a grued elephant<sup>vi</sup>?

The challenge, of course, is to distinguish the actual category of the elephant in the room, and to work out whether the potential cost of feeding a pink elephant would be greater than the potential damage it would cause if it turned out to be a black elephant in disguise. How many pink elephants will you need to feed in order to ensure that you repel one black one? It is also too easy to let your guard down after confronting a number of pink elephants. This vigilance overload may one of the reasons for which the pandemic readiness plans turned out not to be adequately maintained or funded when the Covid-19 situation arose.

It is easy, after the event, to say to the driver in your car: “you did not need the swerve and brake; there was no risk of crashing into that elephant that you just missed in the road.” But how can you know? The best compromise, therefore, when dealing with black elephants, may be to make sure that you let them do some trampling and trumpeting, so that, once you have cleared them out, the mess they have left behind will serve as a permanent reminder to everyone of the major disaster you averted. This is also a very unsafe strategy as, if you leave it too late, you may have little chance of averting the worst.

So, in short, one of the personal risks associated with effectively resolving major risk situations is that it becomes very difficult to justify, after the event, the effort that was invested in avoiding the risk or in neutralizing the major potential impacts. It can be personally less risky, therefore, to close your ears to the sounds of an approaching elephant and find an alternative creature onto which to deflect<sup>4</sup> the risk: in this case, a scapegoat.

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<sup>i</sup> Term adopted by Gordon Woo, Calculating Catastrophe

<sup>ii</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoysQe-2HS4>

<sup>iii</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIV\\_r-C2W6g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIV_r-C2W6g)

<sup>iv</sup> See: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/was-swine-flu-pandemic-2009-really-false-alarm-132962>

<sup>v</sup> Harry Rosenthal, Risk Management Today, December 2014. Vol 24 No 10 - p. 239 &ff.

<sup>vi</sup> Peter de Jager: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/episode-01-why-did-it-matter/id1455676429?i=1000461145685>

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<sup>4</sup> Deflection is a specific risk strategy, in addition to the standard set of Avoidance, Mitigation, Transfer, Acceptance, and Escalation. Frequently used, but rarely acknowledged, Deflection represents an unethical version of Transference, in which the recipient is not given any notice or the opportunity to refuse the transfer.