

CENTRAL AFRICAN ELEPHANTS
AT THE TIME OF THE CITES MEETING IN QATAR
(Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild
Fauna and Flora)

** press release

As nations decide this week on whether to allow or to ban further ivory sales at the CITES meeting in Doha, Qatar, poaching is driving elephants to extinction in many parts of Central Africa. The situation is particularly catastrophic in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the third largest country in Africa and once a stronghold of the African elephant. A brutal civil war raged through the country from 1996 - 2005 during which many elephants were killed. Even through civil order has been restored throughout most of the country, the slaughter of elephants is ongoing and has dramatically increased.

New data compiled from 11 parks and reserves in D.R. Congo by national parks staff, researchers and NGO personnel show a steep increase in the number of illegally killed elephants from 2006 to 2009. Congolese military personnel were implicated in the poaching in 9 of the 11 sites. The scale of the military poaching exploded in 2009, and is comparable to levels in the 1980s which led to a major decline of Congo's elephants.

In three sites where good longitudinal data exists, Virunga National Park, Garamba National Park and the Okapi Reserve, at least 395 elephants were killed in the last four years. The military was responsible for 75% of the kills.

Virunga National Park is the oldest national park in Africa and is home to the mountain gorilla. There are now only about 300 elephants in the park; at least 182 were killed during the last four years. Garamba National Park's elephant population dwindled from more than 11,000 before the war to less than 3900 in 2007. Since then, 164 elephants were found killed in 2009 alone. The Okapi reserve has probably the highest density of elephants in Congo at present, but its population of 6800 was halved during the conflict and poaching has risen sharply again in 2009.

In the other sites, there is less data available, but the poaching may be even worse as there is little or no monitoring. In some cases, such as Kahuzi-Biega National Park poaching may have stopped, simply because there are no elephants left to kill. Surveys after the war found no evidence of elephants in the lowland forest where previously their population was estimated to be 3700.

The total elephant population of D.R, Congo is now thought to be less than 20,000 and continues to drop. It is estimated that there were at least 100,000 elephants 50 years ago. Only 6 areas are left with more than 500 individuals. If this trend continues, elephants will soon be eliminated from Congo.

In the rest of Central African forests including Gabon, Republic of Congo, Cameroon and C.A.R the frequency of elephant poaching reports is increasing and the elephant range is decreasing.

Unfortunately, the situation is no better in the northern savannas of Central Africa. In the last 35 years, elephants have been extirpated from large swaths of central African savanna and current populations are dangerously low and unlikely to persist. Population trends assessed from aerial censuses of five of the most protected Central African savanna national parks (in D.R.Congo, C.A.R., Chad and Sudan) demonstrate elephant declines in excess of 85% over the past 35 years. For example, ivory poaching between 2005 and 2009 has nearly eliminated elephants from Zakouma N.P., Chad one of the best protected and closely monitored populations in the region.

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