

---

## The current elephant poaching trend

Iain Douglas-Hamilton

Save the Elephants, PO Box 54667, Nairobi-00200, Kenya; email: [info@savetheelephants.org](mailto:info@savetheelephants.org)

African and Asian elephants are in for tough times ahead. Their problems are complex. In southern Africa worries are still expressed about 'too many elephants' destroying woody vegetation in protected areas. In most of their range, crop raiding and conflict with human beings is reported every week. Currently, there are at least two horrendous droughts in Africa with negative effects on elephants—one in northern Kenya and another in Mali—perhaps related to widespread climate change but very much aggravated by habitat degradation caused by livestock overgrazing. Almost everywhere that elephants live, there is an ever-expanding, resource-hungry human population, with many who live hand-to-mouth. An enormous challenge lies ahead of reconciling conservation with poverty alleviation, and yet leaving adequate space for elephants and other wildlife.

However, arguably, a more urgent immediate problem for elephants in Africa is the increasing trend in elephant poaching, apparently fueled by demand in the East, a rise in the price of ivory, and proliferation of illegal uncontrolled markets. There have been an increasing number of reports, relayed by Melissa Groo's news service, of illegal killing and increased interceptions of illegal ivory hauls over the last year in Africa.\* Frequently these are reported as associated with Chinese commercial activity and demand. However, Asian elephants have also been affected. This is despite the resting period agreed for the ivory trade at the last CITES COP, where it was wrongly believed by many, that a nine year moratorium on ivory sales would follow the southern African offloading of ivory stocks. It was also feared at the time by many parties that the sale of ivory stocks would trigger new demand, stimulate a parallel illegal trade and risk a renewed elephant holocaust. In fact, the moratorium only applied to those countries that moved their ivory stocks and there is a real risk that these one-off deals will be followed by new demands for export of ivory stocks allowing yet more new shady ivory trading avenues to develop.

Sam Wasser has asserted in *Conservation Biology* that elephant poaching is worse than it has ever been before. Personally I am not convinced it is yet that bad, given the huge quantities of ivory that were moved out of Africa in the '70s and '80s, which averaged 700 tonnes annually for the '80s and which have been followed since 1989 by remarkable recoveries of the East African elephant populations and increases in southern Africa. The jury is still out on Wasser's statement, but there has been a rather embarrassing silence within the scientific community on whether his assertion is true or not and it needs to be discussed and analysed not ignored. Wasser's invaluable scientific contribution to the issue is showing the importance of using genetic markers to trace the origin of illegal ivory back to source, which is an extremely important contribution with great law enforcement potential.

In order to assess the current situation we need to look back to recent elephant history. There was a time up to the end of the 1960s when ivory prices were low, national parks thrived and elephant numbers built up both through natural increase and the tendency of elephants to concentrate in safe havens. This changed radically in the '70s and '80s, when the price of ivory soared, law and order declined, and elephant poaching developed in formerly secure areas, reaching quantifiably catastrophic proportions in East Africa. There is good reason to believe even larger crashes occurred in Central Africa, but where there was little effect on elephants in the wealthier countries of the southern Africa region.

It has been 20 years, almost to the month, since the first unilateral ivory trade bans were introduced by western countries. They were intended to remedy a situation that was perceived as being out of control. These 'temporary' ivory trade bans were made permanent by the international community in October 1989 by a decision of the CITES conference of the parties to ban all trade in ivory, which came into law in early 1990.

Many saw this ban as the most effective conservation decision taken in recent years, but others condemned the ban in a diametrically opposite point of view. The fault lines followed the divide between southern Africa and the rest of the elephant range. Though the ivory trade ban was contentious, the real point is what effect did it have on elephant population dynamics? For those of us living in East Africa there can be little doubt. The price of ivory dropped dramatically following the ban and in the two decades that followed, the formerly decimated key populations experienced a recovery in elephant numbers, tightly monitored in well-conducted aerial counts. Unfortunately, in Central Africa, successive surveys into the ivory trade and illegal markets suggest that there continued to be ongoing declines, backed by a few solid quantitative estimates in Garamba, Virunga, and northern Central African Republic. Central African estimates of elephant numbers, densities and distribution have continuously been revised downwards by regional experts. Nowhere has this been worse than in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, once thought of as the country supporting hundreds of thousands of elephants and more than any other country in Africa. Torn by strife and poor governance, and yet more civil war, the decline of elephants has been consistently reported for three decades, and estimates are now of the order of 20,000. The trend of elephants in this country and region are in urgent need of scientific re-assessment.

Now, with 20 years of cease-fire, we have grown accustomed to elephant populations recovering in East Africa; the southern African populations have shown an across-the-board increase, and the pendulum of world opinion has swung towards greater complacency about the effects of ivory poaching, as concern has increased about human elephant conflict.

Why should we be worried now? There has been no major alarm sounded by the IUCN or the AfESG. The periodic publications of the well-organized and authoritative African Elephant Status Reports up to 2007 do not indicate any major continental decline. In fact, data-rich southern Africa showed a significant increase in the number of elephants, whilst East Africa's populations also seemed to be mostly stable or increasing. Even the Red List of IUCN has recently been revised to demote elephants continentally from being 'Vulnerable' to 'Near Threatened'. Some of the iconic elephant popula-

tions, such as those of Tsavo, Samburu/Laikipia and Amboseli, have shown steady increases over the last ten years, poaching notwithstanding. It seems that a moderate level of poaching can co-exist with a stable or gently increasing population.

The answer is that recent reports of dramatically increased poaching over the last year are a serious cause for concern. In Kenya, MIKE results in Samburu and Laikipia are detecting a continuous year-to-year increase in the proportion of illegally killed elephants in all dead elephants found from 2003 to 2008. The first half of 2009 is showing even higher numbers of freshly killed elephants in this MIKE site. This could be a tipping point. The Kenya Wildlife Service in their annual report says that illegal killing for ivory in 2008 across the country was double the level of 2007. They openly blame the CITES decision to allow the sale of ivory stocks from southern Africa.

Another key piece of rare quantitative data from the relatively data-deficient Central African region comes from Zakouma, Chad. A recent survey has shown that elephants have declined from 3800 in 2006 to just over 600 in 2009. This is not an artefact of changing counting techniques—for during that time elephant carcasses increased while other species showed no comparable (or indeed significant) population decline. This is a clear indication that elephants are being selectively and drastically poached for ivory. With a multi-million euro conservation project in this park, one might have thought that these elephants in Chad were safe. Now one must ask if such a poaching surge is a failure of management, or the irresistible suction of Asian markets? Once again the scientists conducting the censuses blame a surge in demand following the sales of southern African ivory stocks.

Obviously, these two examples are not comprehensive, but linked to reports in the news and from TRAFFIC, and others, of ivory smuggling and poaching in different parts of the range, and on two continents, and linked to sharp rises in the price of ivory detected by Martin and Stiles, they are reminiscent of the sort of early warnings that preceded the elephant holocaust of the 1970s and 1980s.

Additionally, there has been a significant shift in the world's perception of Africa's elephants, which in turn affects perception of the importance of different regions as a reservoir for the species. It has had an important bearing on policy. In the earliest

estimates of continental elephant numbers and distribution much of the information was based on the best-informed guesses of the time, with some good survey data and extrapolations based on assumptions of elephant range and density. Although quality of data has changed over the years the perceptions of the time guided the policies of each decade, and realistically identified massive corruption of the ivory trade and uncontrolled killing of elephants in Central Africa.

In 1979 East Africa and Central Africa between them were thought to have a 77% share of the continent's elephants with southern Africa contributing 22% with a small balance of less than 2% from West Africa. In successive continental estimates made by the African Elephant Specialist Group, in its various manifestations, the perception steadily changed to a lesser proportion for Central and East Africa combined and a growing proportion for southern Africa, with West Africa's still remaining a mere 1-3%. By the latest continental estimate made by AfESG in 2007 it was judged that southern Africa's contribution had overtaken the rest of the continent with between 50 % and 58% of the total due to real decreases which had taken place in the rest of Africa and increases in their own region.

The fall in East and Central African populations as a proportion of the continental whole, coupled with strong lobbying of some states (to allow the sale of their ivory stockpiles) has resulted in southern African elephants being given far greater priority in policy-making. The status of elephants on the Red List has been affected by the perception that southern Africa's elephants are more than half of the total and are of 'Least Concern'. It would be ironic if the official overall status of the African elephant is improved because those already eliminated in Central and East Africa are not part of the equation any more.

Yet current reports of increasing poaching should provoke elephant scientists into wondering if history is repeating itself. Indeed, the early warning signs are strong: in ground data from Chad and Kenya, and from the plethora of news reports of elephants experiencing a new epidemic of poaching and new results and analyses coming out of Central Africa. Experience from the past shows that-by themselves-large numbers and a positive population trend, are no safe-guard. What seems like a healthy secure population can swiftly translate into one that is collapsing; witness Tsavo's transition where a healthy and increasing population of some 45,000 elephants in 1970 were by 1988 reduced to some-

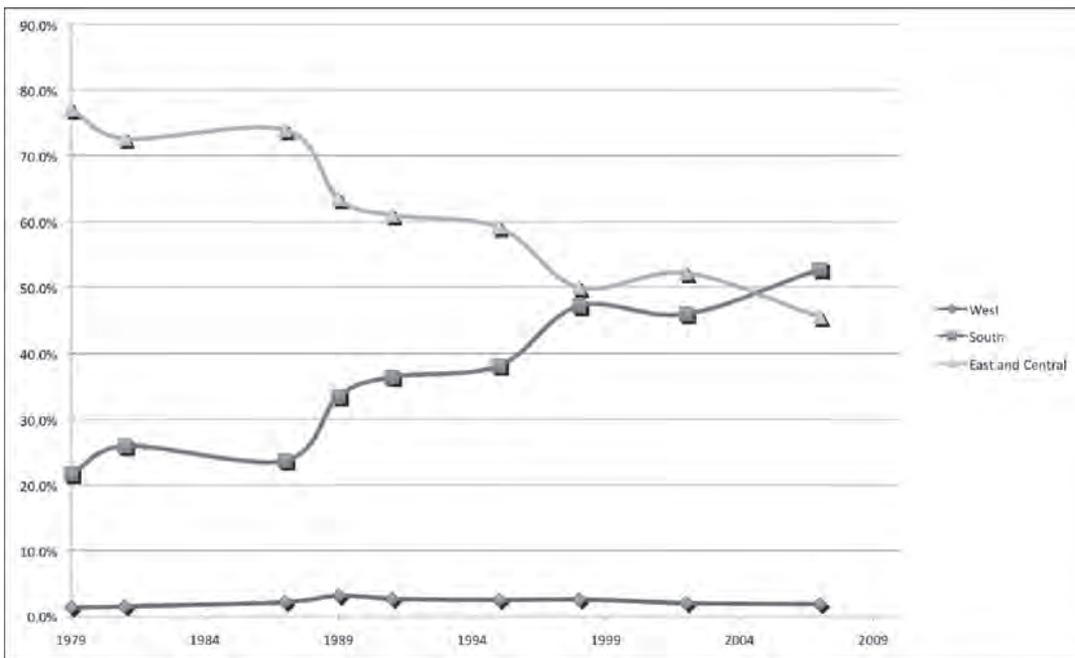


Figure 1. Perceptions of regional proportions of Africa's elephants.

where between 6000 and 7000 individuals, partially by droughts but mainly by illegal killing. In effect, this well studied population only began to recover after the 1989 ivory trade ban and with the vigilance of the newly founded Kenya Wildlife Service. Are the southern African elephant populations going to remain immune to the pressures that operated elsewhere forever?

Ultimately policies are derived from counting elephants. Conservation priorities for data-deficient areas risk getting neglected. Counts should be conducted comprehensively and the results should be disseminated in the public domain.

The CITES-MIKE programme is the only systematic international attempt to monitor elephant populations and it has shown real positive movement in recent months. Covering both Africa and Asia it is of paramount importance, not as an academic exercise for parties to score debating points at the CITES conferences, but as a means for accurate and timely information on elephant population dynamics on a bi-continental scale. MIKE must be sensitive enough to pick up the initial stages of an ivory holocaust were it to recur, in time for parties to take pre-emptive action, and to bring clarity and balance to often confusing lines of evidence of different trends in different parts of the continent. The base-line data has been coming in for some time and changes against it can be monitored. But it is up to elephant scientists, such as the readership of *Pachyderm* and membership of the two continental SSC elephants specialist groups, to reinforce this process, and to bring relevant research into the public domain through timely publication, to react, in order to judge and react to trends before any more disasters occur. This has not happened in previous times, but there is every possibility it can happen now with a new openness for academic collaborations to discover what is really happening to the elephants from illegal killing.

References on which Fig. 1 is based:

- Barnes RFW, Craig GC, Dublin HT, Overton G, Simons W, Thouless CR. 1998. The African Elephant Database. Occasional Paper, 22. IUCN Species Survival Commission. Blanc et al. 2002. African Elephant Status Report.
- Blanc JJ, Thouless CR, Hart JA, Dublin HT, Douglas-Hamilton I, Craig CG, Barnes RFW. 2002. African Elephant Status Report 2002. An update from the African Elephant Database. Occasional Paper of the IUCN Species Survival Commission No. 29. IUCN. Gland, Switzerland.
- Blanc JJ, Barnes RFW, Craig CG, Dublin HT, Thouless CR, Douglas-Hamilton I, Hart JA. 2007. *African Elephant Status Report 2007. An update from the African Elephant Database*. Occasional Paper of the IUCN Species Survival Commission No. 33. IUCN. Gland, Switzerland.
- Douglas-Hamilton I. 1979. The African elephant action plan. Typescript Report to IUCN.
- Douglas-Hamilton and Michelmore. 1996. *Loxodonta africana*; range and distribution, past and present. *The Proboscidea*. Eds. Shoshani, J. and Tassy P Oxford University Press.
- Cumming and Jackson. 1981. The Status and Conservation of Africa's Elephants and Rhinos, (Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of IUCN/SSC African Elephant and African Rhino Specialist Groups at Hwange Safari Lodge, Zimbabwe 30 July–7 August 1981.
- du Toit and Cumming. 1987. The Conservation Status of Africa's elephants and Rhinos in 1987. Proceedings of a meeting of the IUCN/SSC African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group.
- Said MY, Chunge RN, Craig GC, Thouless CR, Barnes RFW, Dublin HT. 1995. African elephant database 1995. IUCN/SSC, Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge.

\*To subscribe to this service please send an email to [groo@elephantnews.org](mailto:groo@elephantnews.org) with the subject 'Request African/Asian (as appropriate) Elephant' or 'Request Both'.