



# a grave & growing THREAT

The poaching of Africa's rhinos and elephants continues to escalate and is feeding a US\$10-billion illicit industry, with negative ramifications that may be felt far beyond Africa's shores.

If 2011 was bad for African wildlife in terms of poaching, then 2012 was catastrophic. Rhinos and elephants in particular were targeted last year, with the worst incidents involving shockingly large numbers of wildlife being killed—such as when *Janjaweed* from Sudan (gunmen on horseback and one of the main players in the Darfur conflict) slaughtered between 300 and 400 elephants in Cameroon's Bouba N'Djida National Park in early 2012.

By year's end, South Africa had lost 668 rhinos to poaching, a 50 percent increase over 2011. Africa's elephant poaching numbers were higher still: A report submitted to the Tanzanian parliament, for example, was said to

have estimated the country's elephant poaching rate at 30 per day.

Together, these and other incidents underscore a grave and growing threat that governments across Africa are now scrambling to combat. "The dictionary defines 'poaching' as the illegal taking of game or fish. What is happening across Africa is not simply poaching. There is a widespread trend of illegal wildlife trafficking—harvesting, practically—that, if not stemmed, could result in the extinction of some of Africa's most celebrated fauna," declares AWF CEO Patrick Bergin.

## Multibillion-dollar industry

According to a 2012 report from wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC, the

illegal trade in wildlife is estimated to be US\$10-billion a year. Among illicit industries, it's smaller only than drugs, counterfeiting, and human trafficking. The trade in wildlife parts is considered a low-risk, high-reward racket, where ivory and rhino horn command top dollar in Asia and around the world—from one thousand to tens of thousands of U.S. dollars per kilogram—and the few poachers who are caught often get off with limited jail time

Increasing numbers of rhinos and elephants, among other African wildlife, are being poached, part of an illegal wildlife trafficking crisis plaguing the continent. Gabon recently announced that poachers had killed more than 11,000 of its elephants—up to 77 percent of its population—since 2004.

or a paltry fine. (A South African court did sentence the kingpin of a rhino horn smuggling syndicate to a 40-year prison term, but such sentences still appear to be the exception rather than the norm.)

Moreover, the business of illegal wildlife trafficking is a global one, involving heavily financed, highly sophisticated criminal syndicates. "Wild animals may be targeted and killed across Asia and Africa, but their furs, tusks, bones, and horns are sold all over the world," noted then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last November when she announced that the United States would add stopping illegal wildlife trafficking to its foreign policy agenda. The United States is one of the largest destination markets for illegally trafficked wildlife in the world.

The illegal wildlife trade has the potential not only to cripple Africa's wildlife populations, but also to jeopardize national security, destabilize economies, and ruin the biodiversity and ecosystems of countless countries.

Rhinos and elephants, after all, are being poached by individuals armed with the likes of AK-47s, night-vision goggles, and powerful veterinary drugs, and who may be ferried to and from sites in helicopters. These are not the acts of locals carrying out retaliatory killings in response to human-wildlife conflict, but of individuals—whether local or not—being paid by criminal enterprises to kill both wildlife and any game rangers who get in the way, and to help smuggle contraband out of the country and off the continent. In other cases, rebel groups are funding militant activities through the illegal wildlife trade.

## Staggering implications

Either way, these acts have widespread ramifications. Take the Bouba N'Djida example. This incident meant:

- The loss of hundreds of elephants;
- The compromised safety of citizens of three countries as the armed men crossed from Sudan, through Chad, and into northern Cameroon to conduct the poachings;
- The risk to the lives of rangers stationed in Bouba N'Djida and of Cameroonian troops later sent to the park (at least one soldier was killed during a battle between the *Janjaweed* and the army);
- Increased security issues and conflict in Darfur, given the likelihood of the *Janjaweed* using ivory sales to purchase more weapons;

- The redistribution of government resources in Cameroon to address the incident—and the siphoning away of these resources from other potentially critical areas;
- The loss of potential future tourism income in Cameroon;
- The loss of potential tax earnings or visa entry permit fees for the governments of Sudan, Chad, and Cameroon;
- The potential destabilization of Asian economies from increased activity in the ivory black market; and
- Long-term biodiversity effects in northern Cameroon, given elephants' roles as mega-herbivores that help disperse seeds and create trails for smaller fauna.

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—Patrick Bergin, AWF CEO

Multiply such effects by countless poaching incidents of countless wild animals in countless African nations, and the implications are staggering.

How, then, can we stop illegal wildlife trafficking? Just as arresting the small-time dealer on the street corner does little to hamper the overall drug trade in the Americas, neither will catching a handful of poachers on the ground be enough to stop this industry. A global effort is necessary. The efforts of a single NGO such as AWF, which is doing its own part to try to ensure security on the ground in several African countries (see "An African solution to rhino poaching," *Africa Geographic*, Fall 2012, page 8, and "The killing fields," *Africa Geographic*, Winter 2013, page 6) and to educate consumers in Asia about the consequences of their ivory and rhino horn demand (see "Reaching the consumers," *Africa Geographic*, Fall 2012, page 11) are simply not enough.

There have been some promising developments in the past year. Certainly,

having the weight of the U.S. government behind the war against illegal wildlife trafficking helps. Botswana and Zambia also announced they will be instituting bans on trophy hunting to stem declining wildlife numbers. Although this will mean losing money in permit revenue, the long-term impact of not halting such activities was obviously clear to these governments.

## The role of CITES

And then there is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Better known by its acronym, CITES (pronounced *SY-teez*), the international body tasked with overseeing the trade in endangered wildlife and plants meets every three years to discuss new proposals related to species sales and management. At the time of print, CITES' 16th Conference of the Parties (COP 16), scheduled for March 3–14 in Bangkok, Thailand, had just begun.

Despite initial worries that a country might request the legalization of rhino horn sales or permission to sell its ivory stockpiles, these fears did not materialize. (The Tanzanian government did submit a proposal late last year to allow a one-time sale of more than 100 tons of ivory to China and Japan, but later withdrew it.)

Critics point out that CITES lacks enforcement power and that only those nations that are signatories are required to follow its trade regulations. Even so, "178 countries have signed the treaty, and CITES protects roughly 5,000 animal and 29,000 plant species," observes Philip Muruthi, senior director of conservation science at AWF. "CITES cannot be the only way to prevent illegal trafficking of endangered wildlife species, but it is a start."

Just as important, CITES provides an ideal opening to start a global discussion on this critical issue. International public pressure going into this year's conference, for example, prompted host country Thailand to announce it would end its own legalized ivory trade.

And, together with the tide of public opinion, the actions of individual nations to protect wildlife, and the continued efforts of organizations such as AWF, perhaps CITES will be the flashpoint that turns this grave and growing threat into a success story on how we saved Africa's natural treasures—together. 🐘