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Wildlife Poaching in Africa: Overview for Congress

Overview

Wildlife poaching has been a longstanding challenge for many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, a poor region rich in biodiversity. Recent large-scale poaching activity is affecting the sustainability of elephant and rhino populations. Trafficking is fed by high demand for ivory and rhino horn in Asia, and proceeds may fund armed groups. These trends have contributed to growing international concerns about the problem and a desire by some in Congress to reexamine existing approaches to combating wildlife crime.

African Elephants. The African elephant population is estimated to be between 420,000 to 650,000. Most known populations are located in Southern and Eastern Africa, where some countries report increasing elephant populations. The most significant recent elephant declines have occurred in Central Africa, a region that suffers from ongoing security challenges and limited law enforcement. In total, some 25,000 African elephants or more may have been illegally killed in 2011 alone.

Selected Elephant Poaching Incidents

Bouba Njida National Park (Cameroon): In early 2012, poachers on horseback traveled from Chad to kill at least several hundred elephants, devastating the park's elephant population.

Tikem (Chad): More than 80 elephants, including 33 pregnant females and 15 calves were poached in a raid reportedly conducted by the same group on horseback from early 2012.

Garamba National Park (Democratic Republic of Congo): At least 22 elephants were killed over a short period in 2012. Many were reportedly killed in a manner consistent with aerial head-shots, possibly from a helicopter.

Minkébé National Park (Gabon): The Gabonese government issued a report in early 2013 stating that more than 11,000 elephants (about two-thirds of park's population) had been killed since 2004.

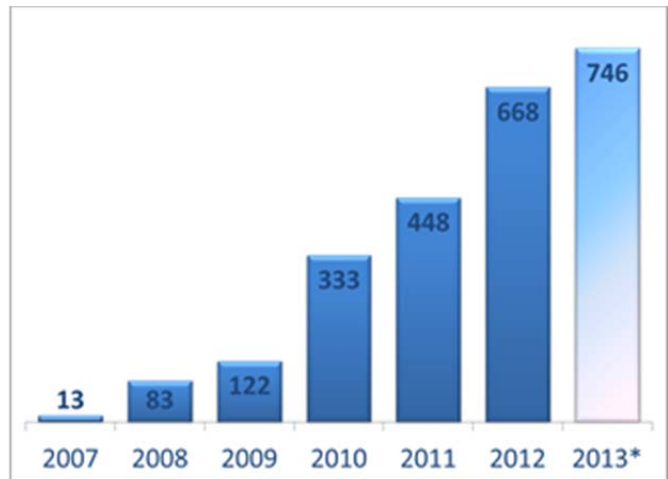
Hwange National Park (Zimbabwe): Poachers poisoned water wells with cyanide in mid-2013, killing potentially more than 300 elephants.

These trends could threaten the sustainability of African elephant populations, as well as conservation gains since the 1980s, a period when conservationists estimated that poachers killed as many as 100,000 elephants per year. At that time, the international community banned the international trade in new ivory. Observers widely attribute this policy response as having curbed the scale of ivory trafficking and allowing some populations to recover.

Black and White Rhinos. At the end of 2010, the black rhino population stood at 4,880 and the white rhino population totaled 20,165. In the mid-1990s, the black rhino population was roughly half as large and the white rhino population roughly one-third as large.

Conservation gains were largely the result of initiatives from South Africa—home to some 40% of black rhinos and 90% of white rhinos. However, 668 rhinos were illegally killed in 2012 in South Africa alone, a record since authorities first began tracking such information in 1990 (see **Figure 1**). Rhino poaching trends appear to be driven primary by surging demand for horns in Asia.

Figure 1. Rhinos Poached in South Africa



Source: CRS compilation of UN and CITES data.

*Note: 2013 statistics current as of October 11, 2013.

Policy Responses

The international community has established a global policy framework to regulate and sometimes ban exports of selected species, in order to support sustainable conservation, effective resource management, and enforcement of relevant laws and regulations.

International Responses. The flagship international mechanism to control wildlife trade is the 1975 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). 178 states, including the United States, are parties to CITES. Through it, approximately 5,000 animal species and 29,000 plant species are subject to trade restrictions, depending on the extent to which they are at risk of extinction.

African elephants, for example, are generally prohibited from international trade. A limited number of elephants from Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe may be hunted for the purposes of noncommercial export of personal sport trophies. Similarly, all rhino species are subject to the strictest bans on international trade, with the exception of white rhinos from South Africa and Swaziland, for which limited trade in live animals and the export of hunting trophies are permitted.

Common Questions

Who are the poachers? A mix of illicit actors are involved in poaching elephants and rhinos, including local subsistence hunters, professional poachers, and off-duty security forces. Some reports suggest that certain non-state armed groups are involved in poaching, including the Sudanese *janjaweed* in Darfur, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa, and the Al Qaeda-linked Somali insurgent group Al Shabaab. Poachers may also include members of some African militaries. Poachers, however, represent only one link in a complex web of transnational criminals who are capable of sourcing large-scale volumes of illicit wildlife products to consumer markets worldwide.

How much is the illegal wildlife trade worth? The U.S. government estimates that the illegal trade in endangered species is worth at least \$7 billion to \$10 billion annually. A pound of raw ivory can be worth as much as \$1,000, while a pound of rhino horn can be worth as much as \$30,000.

Why does poaching persist? Wildlife trafficking is largely driven by the prospect of economic profit and a sense that the risk of detection is likely low. A wide range of security, governance, and environmental management challenges are associated with protecting wildlife. Additionally, inconsistent national and local laws relating to wildlife prohibitions can be exploited by traffickers. Long-term structural conditions of conflict, corruption, poverty, demand, lack of public awareness, as well as other environmental pressures can contribute to wildlife losses.

What are the consequences? Large-scale poaching reduces biodiversity and may eliminate “keystone” megafauna that are crucial for ecosystem health. Poaching can affect the national economies of some countries, particularly in Africa, that are reliant on ecotourism as a source of government revenue. Profits from wildlife trafficking can sustain non-state armed groups and criminal organizations that undermine the rule of law and regional security. Poachers have also killed park rangers and game wardens, who may interfere with their operations.

U.S. Responses. The United States addresses the international illegal wildlife trade through domestic law enforcement, as well as through foreign policy. U.S. efforts to prohibit aspects of the wildlife trade are addressed through the Lacey Act and its amendments, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and several other conservation laws, collectively referred to as the Multinational Species Conservation Acts (including the African Elephant Conservation Act and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act).

U.S. agencies involved in anti-poaching efforts in Africa include the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Department

of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Justice.

Recent public announcements and actions from the Obama Administration include the:

- Planned FWS destruction of the U.S. ivory stockpile (initially anticipated for October 2013);
- Establishment of a presidential task force on wildlife trafficking (September 2013);
- Issuance of Executive Order 13648 on combating wildlife trafficking (July 2013); and
- Release of a State Department and USAID Strategy on Wildlife Trafficking (November 2012).

Congressional Role. The U.S. Congress has played a role in evaluating and shaping U.S. policy to combat international wildlife trafficking. In recent years, Congress has also held hearings and events that have addressed the growing problem of wildlife crimes and raised key questions for next steps. Continuing questions for policymakers include whether existing policy responses are relevant and achieving sufficient progress; whether legal tools and authorities are over- or under-utilized to respond to wildlife trafficking; and whether new programs, resources, funding, and authorities are warranted or feasible.

For more information, see CRS Report RL34395, *International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy*, by Liana Rosen and Pervaze A. Sheikh; and CRS Report RL32751, *The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Background and Issues*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh and M. Lynne Corn.

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