



Updated December 23, 2015

Wildlife Poaching in Africa: An Overview

Overview

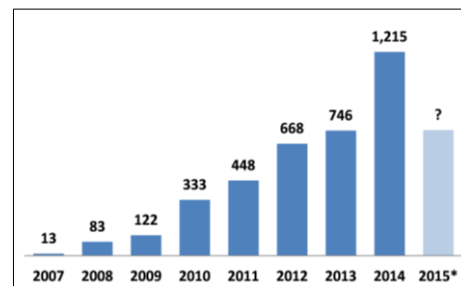
Wildlife poaching occurs in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region rich in biodiversity. Many African wildlife species are poached for their body parts or bushmeat. While poaching operations vary in complexity, scope, and scale, those that involve the illegal killing of elephants and rhinos are reportedly often carried out by sophisticated, highly organized, and well-armed criminal groups. In recent years, an increase in demand in Asia has driven a surge in poaching and trafficking of African elephant ivory and rhino horn, threatening the long-term sustainability of these species. These trends have contributed to growing international concern about the problem and a desire by some in Congress to reexamine existing approaches to combating wildlife crime.

African Elephants. African elephant populations range across 35 to 38 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with most known populations located in Southern and East Africa (home to 55% and 28% of the continent’s elephants, respectively). Global levels of poaching and illegal trade in ivory increased in the mid-2000s and peaked in 2010–2012, when an estimated 100,000 elephants were reportedly killed over a three year period. This trend followed a reduction in poaching in the 1990s, which was largely attributed to a global ban on the international trade in ivory. Since 2012, overall trends in elephant poaching levels have plateaued at an unsustainably high level. In 2013, poaching claimed at least 20,000 elephants, or two-thirds of total African elephant deaths. The current African elephant population is estimated to be between 400,000 and 600,000 elephants, down from 1.2 million in 1980.

Increasingly, however, East Africa has become a key source and transit point for ivory. Three countries in East Africa—Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—accounted for approximately 80% of all large-scale (i.e., 500 kg or larger) African seizures of ivory in 2013, indicating that these countries are major transit points for ivory. In June 2015, the Tanzanian government reported that its elephant population dropped by more than 60% in just five years—from 109,051 in 2009 to 43,330 at the end of 2014. These trends threaten the sustainability of regional and continent-wide elephant populations as well as conservation gains since the 1980s, when poachers killed as many as 100,000 elephants per year, according to conservationists.

Black and White Rhinoceros. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a public-private partnership, as of 2012 the black rhino population stood at 5,055 and the white rhino population totaled 20,405. Rhinoceros populations in Africa are largely concentrated in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The highest level of rhino poaching is in South Africa, which is home to roughly 80% of the African rhino population. An estimated 1,215 rhinos were poached in 2014, following a trend for South Africa that reflects a dramatic increase in poaching since 2007 (see **Figure 1**). The uptick in rhino poaching represents a major reversal of trends in the 1990s; observers assert that poaching had effectively been brought to a halt during that period, largely as a result of anti-poaching initiatives led by South Africa. In recent years, South Africa has intensified anti-poaching efforts, potentially contributing to the anticipated decline in rhinos poached in 2015.

Figure 1. Rhinos Poached in South Africa



Source: CRS compilation of UN, CITES, and South African Department of Environmental Affairs data.

***Note:** 749 rhinos poached in 2015 as of August 27, 2015.

Selected Elephant Poaching Incidents

Minkébé National Park (Gabon): The Gabonese government reported in early 2013 that more than 11,000 elephants (about two-thirds of the 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. 48 more have been poisoned in 2015 in Hwange and other parks in Zimbabwe.

Garamba National Park (Democratic Republic of Congo): 68 elephants were killed over two months in early 2014. Many were reportedly killed from a helicopter.

Gourma (Mali): 57 desert elephants, representing 20% of the remaining desert elephant population in Mali, were killed between January–October 2015, according to U.N. peacekeepers in Mali.

Recent significant declines in elephant population levels have occurred in Central Africa, a region that suffers from ongoing security challenges and limited law enforcement.

Common Questions

Why does the 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. Structural conditions of conflict, corruption, poverty, demand, lack of public awareness, as well as other environmental pressures can contribute to wildlife losses.

Who are the poachers? Profits from wildlife trafficking can sustain non-state armed groups and criminal organizations that undermine the rule of law and regional security. Poachers reportedly include militias operating in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR); Congolese, Ugandan, Sudanese, and Tanzanian militaries; and the Sudanese Janjaweed and related gangs operating between Sudan, Chad, CAR, and Niger. In September 2015, National Geographic reported that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed group active in Central Africa, is resupplying its forces, in part, through elephant ivory sales. Observers have also debated the possible role of the Somali terrorist organization Al Shabaab.

How much is the illegal wildlife trade worth? According to estimates by conservation groups, a kilogram of raw ivory can be worth as much as \$2,100, while a kilogram of rhino horn can be worth \$65,000.

International Responses

The primary international treaty that regulates wildlife trade is the 1975 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). 181 states, including the United States, are parties to CITES. Roughly 5,000 animal species and 29,000 plant species are subject to permitting requirements under CITES, depending on the extent to which they are at risk of extinction.

African elephants are generally prohibited from international trade under CITES, with some exceptions. For example, a limited number of elephants may be hunted for the purposes of noncommercial export of personal sport trophies in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. 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.

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Washington, D.C. in September 2015, China and the United States jointly committed to "enact nearly complete bans on ivory import and export" and to take "significant and timely steps to halt the domestic commercial trade of ivory," according to a White House Fact Sheet about the visit. In October 2015, U.S. officials announced that the Chinese ban on commercially traded ivory could be in place within a year.

Selected U.S. Responses

In July 2013, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13648 on combating wildlife trafficking. It directed federal agencies to enhance efforts to address the problem, established an interagency Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking to address wildlife trafficking. In February 2014, the Obama Administration released a National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking, which

prioritized domestic and international responses to wildlife trafficking related to law enforcement, demand reduction, and cooperation. The Administration also released a plan to implement the Strategy with 24 core objectives, several involving steps specific to Africa. In July 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposed changes to regulations in the Endangered Species Act (ESA) concerning African elephants that would limit imports of sport-hunted trophies and restrict the forms and amounts of ivory that can be legally imported, exported, and traded domestically. Several U.S. airlines have stopped transporting selected African big game hunting trophies.

In December 2015, FWS announced the listing of two subspecies of lion under the ESA: *Panthera leo leo* (located in India and western and central Africa) and *Panthera leo melanochaita* (located in eastern and southern Africa). Concurrent with the final listing rule, published in the *Federal Register*, FWS also issued a Director's Order to strengthen enforcement of wildlife permitting requirements.

U.S. support for anti-wildlife trafficking efforts abroad focuses on species range countries, including in Africa; trafficking transit hubs; and countries with high demand. U.S. agencies involved in such programs include the Departments of State, Interior, Justice, and Defense, as well as FWS and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Efforts support international conservation and biodiversity goals, including law enforcement and prosecutorial activities. For FY2016, Congress appropriated \$80 million to combat wildlife trafficking in State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations (Div. K, P.L. 114-113).

Congress has held hearings addressing wildlife trafficking in Africa, and several poaching-related bills have been introduced. Such bills in the 114th Congress include the Wildlife Trafficking Enforcement Act of 2015 (S. 27); the Targeted Use of Sanctions for Killing Elephants and Rhinoceros Act of 2015 (H.R. 1945); the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act (S. 2385); and the Global Anti-Poaching Act (H.R. 2494), which passed the House in November 2015.

For more information, see CRS Report RL34395, *International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy*, by Liana W. Rosen and Pervaze A. Sheikh; CRS In Focus IF10274, *Status of the African Lion and Sport Hunting*, by Pervaze A. Sheikh and Liana W. Rosen; 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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IF10330

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