



First ivory, now meat: Elephants face second threat to survival

BY DAN STILES

The little Cessna 206 cruised over the dense Ituri Forest in north eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) 100 metres above the tree tops. Wispy clouds rose from the forest like smoke from hidden fires. The forest stretched to all horizons and I wondered how many elephants were left down there after more than a decade of unrest and forest invasion by military forces.

The plane circled the village of Epulu, our destination, a slash of open land hacked from the forest, dotted with mud huts, small shops and the buildings of the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN). The Institute was there to manage the Okapi Faunal Reserve, established in 1992 with the goal of conserving the rare and dwindling Okapi population. I was there to meet

Jean Joseph Mapilanga, the warden of the reserve, and two research assistants from a local NGO who were going to collect information for a project that I was supervising for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The plane began its approach towards a narrow grass strip resembling a golf driving range and glided disconcertingly over half the strip before finally touching



PHOTO BY: KARL AMMANN

Left Page: Wispy clouds rose from the forest like smoke from hidden fires. The forest stretched to all horizons and I wondered how many elephants were left down there after more than a decade of unrest and forest invasion by military forces.

Top: These poachers are about to butcher the elephant for meat. If the meat trade became a serious economic proposition, elephants had a big problem. They could be wiped out for protein, like the Dodo of Mauritius.

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down. Mapilanga arrived with a car to pick us up. I was travelling with Karl Ammann, a noted wildlife photographer and film-maker. The warden gave us a warm welcome and drove us to a guesthouse, a simple cottage on the banks of the Epulu River.

Bushmeat was the reason for my visit, specifically elephant bushmeat. Central Africa has long experienced heavy elephant poaching. People have always assumed it was to supply the illegal

ivory trafficking networks, especially since East Asians prized the creamy hard ivory of the forest elephant. I carried out an undercover ivory trafficking survey of the region in 1999 and found abundant evidence of this illegal activity, particularly in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

But investigators who were looking into wildlife and bushmeat trade in the mid 1990s, including my travelling companion, Ammann, began reporting that they had seen elephants killed primarily for their meat. Before our trip started I visited Karl at his beautiful home on the slopes of Mt. Kenya and he showed me video footage and photos of elephants being butchered by poachers. The hundreds of kilograms of meat were smoked and transported to market, where the meat from one elephant could fetch several hundred dollars. The tusks would rarely bring in even a hundred dollars to the hunters.

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Some conservationists were already beginning to wonder about it, but no studies had ever been carried out on the question. IUCN's African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) is the first to investigate the importance of meat as a cause of elephant killing in Central Africa. The Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme of CITES is funding the project. We knew that the average size of tusks coming from the Congo Basin forests had steadily been decreasing due to heavy poaching of the big tuskers. Conservationists were hoping that there would be a threshold of tusk size below which poachers would no longer bother killing elephants. But if the meat trade became a serious economic proposition, elephants had a big problem. They could be wiped out for protein, like the Dodo of Mauritius.

Central Africa, because of its dense forests, does not have large populations of cattle, sheep and goats like other parts of Africa. Humans living there



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

Bushmeat is the primary source of protein in Central Africa. Unsustainable use leads to 'empty forest syndrome'.

have since time immemorial depended on wild animal meat trapped and shot in the forests to satisfy their protein needs. Many cultural beliefs linked with different species have become entwined with purely nutritional concerns, so the problem of unsustainable bushmeat harvesting is a very complex one. Already, conservationists are talking about the 'empty forest syndrome', in which all the larger species are being hunted and eaten, leaving behind an eerily silent, pristine forest.

I met Jean Joseph, the warden, and briefed him on the objectives and planned activities of the project. He agreed that elephant poaching was a big problem in the reserve and only a few days earlier three elephants had been shot within hearing distance of his rangers. When the rangers arrived, the poachers ran off. They set a trap and when the poachers returned for the tusks they arrested them after a shootout. They turned out to be soldiers from Mambasa, a town about

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50 km to the east where the Congolese army's 144th Brigade was based.

The African Elephant Database, managed by the IUCN AfESG, had been finding a steady decline in elephant numbers in the Okapi reserve as a result of this type of disregard for the law. In 1995 there were an estimated 7,300 elephants in the reserve area and by 2006 the number surveyed had dropped to approximately 2,700. Of the elephants lost over the past 15 years, how many had been killed for meat? "You will not find it easy to collect the kind of data you

want," Jean Joseph warned me. "People are very aware that selling something from an elephant is illegal. They will not tell you anything."

This I already knew, which is why I was working with a local NGO that already had a poaching and bushmeat monitoring project in the Okapi area. Richard and André arrived in the afternoon on a motorcycle on which they had ridden the 460 kilometres from Kisangani. That afternoon and the following morning we discussed the project.



PHOTO BY: KARL AMMANN

Top: Tusks confiscated from poachers in the Okapi Forest Reserve office of Jean Joseph Mapilanga.

Bottom: The provincial director of the Ministry of Culture and Arts tried to sell me Okapi and Leopard skins, along with ivory, totally illegal by local law.



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

In order to understand properly the meat and ivory 'commodity chains', we needed to follow both from the dead elephant as far as we could through the hunters, transporters, middlemen, vendors and consumers. I wanted to know how many of the elephant carcasses had been butchered and how many had had only the tusks removed. Had the poachers worked of their own volition, or had they been hired by someone to kill elephants? I knew from what informants had told me in Gabon and Cameroon that it was common practice for wealthy businessmen, government officials and army officers to provide weapons and ammunition to hunters to go after ivory. One hypothesis I wanted to test was that these 'commanditaires', as they were called in French, were only after ivory and that commercial hunters working for them were the ivory poachers, which



Richard and Andre set off to begin investigations on elephant meat trafficking.

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included soldiers. Those who killed primarily for meat should be part-time, subsistence hunters.

I also wanted to know prices of meat and ivory at various points in the commodity chain in order to analyse the economics of the trade and assess incentives and motivation of elephant killing. Price is a sensitive indicator of demand, if you have data on supply and past prices. Ivory prices had been rising almost everywhere over the past 15 years, though why was a disputed question. In almost all of the countries I and others had investigated for ivory, demand had fallen since 1990. Only the China market seemed to be growing, but was demand in China alone high enough to drive the dramatic price rises seen in recent years? Or, was it rather a constriction of legal raw ivory supply to the world caused by the international ivory trade ban imposed by CITES, which

came into effect in 1990?

I was hoping the IUCN project results would cast light on the question. We also had case studies in Cameroon, Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo.

That afternoon Richard and André jumped on their bike and headed for Mambasa to begin work. Richard has worked in the Okapi area for years and has established a network of informants, especially amongst the Mbuti and Efe Pygmies who inhabit the region. The elephant poachers are almost always non-Pygmy, but they are guided by Pygmies, who are expert trackers.

Our respective work completed, Karl and I left for Kisangani in a rented car. We visited bushmeat markets along the way and I collected information on the various meats that I saw, mainly duikers, larger antelopes and monkeys. It wasn't until Kisangani that I found elephant

meat, displayed discretely on one table in the Central Market.

Elephant meat is transported to Kisangani from surrounding forest areas in smoked lumps weighing 7-8 kg called *grume*. These retail for \$ 35 each, or about \$ 5 a kg. The vendors, mostly women, usually slice these lumps up into smaller pieces, as few people can afford to pay \$ 35. The slices are put into small *tas* (piles) of about 100-150 grammes each and sold for 500 Congolese francs (\$ 0.55). Depressingly, I found that elephant meat was very popular.

We also visited the local ivory carvers and vendors. They were finding it very difficult to get their hands on raw ivory, as Chinese were buying up all the tusks they could find and shipping them to China.

I asked the ivory carvers in Kisangani about this, but they had never heard of CITES. I explained what CITES did and they said, 'We don't need CITES, the Ministry of Culture and Arts provides buyers with export certificates.'

I decided to visit their office in Kisangani, a ramshackle colonial era building. Jonas, the man in charge, tried selling me ivory and an Okapi and Leopard skin, all illegal to sell under Congolese law and to export by CITES. I managed to photograph permits that he had issued to a Frenchman and to an Israeli to export worked ivory pieces to Europe. Jonas claimed that his permits were sufficient to get 'art' objects into Europe or America.

There was obviously a lot of work to do to clean things up in the DRC. But first, I wanted answers to my questions in order to understand how all the wildlife product smuggling worked. The investigations are under way. ●

DAN STILES Dr. Daniel Stiles has been coordinating a study into the dynamics, scale and impact of the elephant meat trade throughout the Central African sub-region for the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG), funded by CITES MIKE. The study will be published by IUCN in 2011.

