

Elephant bushmeat: new threat to elephants

THE AUTHOR



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In December 2011 the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group published the results of a study funded by the CITES-Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme entitled 'Elephant Meat Trade in Central Africa'.¹ I supervised the project, and research teams undertook hunter and meat and ivory trader interviews around the MIKE monitoring sites of Boumba Bek National Park in Cameroon, the Dzanga-Sangha Complex in Central African Republic, Odzala-Kokoua National Park



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

Elephants are most often hunted in clearings in the forest.

in Republic of Congo (ROC) and Okapi Faunal Reserve (OFR) in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Bushmeat vendors and meat consumers were interviewed in regional towns and large cities (Yaoundé, Bangui, Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and Kisangani), and in some places ivory craftsmen, traders and vendors were interviewed (see Swara 2011:1 for background).

The purpose of the study was to find out the importance of meat as a cause of elephant poaching, as opposed to ivory or conflict with humans. The hunters (a.k.a. poachers) interviewed were in most cases local villagers, so the results of this study are inapplicable to professional poaching gangs such as the infamous Sudanese Arabs in Central Africa and Somalis in East Africa, who

travel very long distances. As suspected, local hunters confirmed that ivory was by far the primary purpose of a dedicated elephant hunt. Only three of 54 poachers interviewed said that their last hunt was primarily in search of elephant meat. But all the others stated that meat was the second most important reason for killing elephants.

Simple economics explains why meat is so important. Hunters around the four study sites sell smoked elephant meat to bushmeat traders for an average USD 2.60 a kg and directly to consumers for up to USD 5.0 a kg. A bull elephant can provide about 1,000 kg of smoked meat, which means up to USD 5,000 could be realised from a large elephant carcass. In reality, much less meat was usually taken, ranging

¹Summary report available at <http://www.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/SSC-OP-045.pdf>. There are also four country reports.



PHOTO BY: KARL AMMANN

Elephant meat is usually smoked at the kill site to preserve it.

from an average of 180 kg per kill at Boumba Bek up to 361 kg at Okapi. Only at Okapi did hunters report taking the full 1,000 kg, on one occasion. Some of the meat was consumed by the hunting party and/or shared out to others, but most was sold.

Five thousand dollars is more than can be earned by hunters from the ivory of a single elephant, except for the very largest of tusks. In Central Africa elephant meat is very popular, where demand usually exceeds supply. So why aren't more elephants killed for meat? There are basically three reasons:

(1) Logistics. One man can carry on average 40 kg in deep forest. It would therefore require 25 porters to haul a tonne of meat, which is almost impossible to find if the carcass is far from a village or

road, which is often the case.

(2) Security. Large hunting parties attract attention. Smoking meat takes two to three days, with smoke and the smell signalling the camp location. Rangers patrol protected areas, so poaching parties tend to be relatively small and keep on the move. Hunters in three of the study sites reported kills in which no meat was taken because of security concerns.

(3) Circumstances. In three of the study sites, 95% of the hunters were working for a *commanditaire*, a person who ordered and financed the hunt to obtain the ivory. Only in Odzala did most of the poachers (61%) hunt elephants for themselves, probably because they did not need to be subsidised. If the

poachers are paid to bring back tusks, they will kill many elephants on a single hunt and not be able to bring back large quantities of meat. Nevertheless, meat was an important part of the remuneration package for poachers.

In addition, ivory is a much more valuable commodity in terms of unit weight, at least ten times that of meat per kilo in price.

We also found that elephant hunts differ significantly from subsistence or small game commercial hunting. Smaller animals are more often caught with snares, nets or shot with shotguns. Except for Pygmy net hunts, small-game hunting parties are only one to three people, last only one to two days and travel short distances (<20 km).



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

Bushmeat is the most common source of protein in the Congo Basin. As wildlife is cleared out of the forests, elephants will increasingly be targeted for meat.

SINCE DEMAND FOR ELEPHANT MEAT EXCEEDS SUPPLY, THERE IS GREAT POTENTIAL FOR THE TRADE TO GROW, PARTICULARLY AS OTHER BUSHMEATS BECOME SCARCER AS A RESULT OF OVEREXPLOITATION PROPELLED BY HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH AND LACK OF PROTEIN ALTERNATIVES.

Elephant hunting parties are larger (mean=7), last longer (mean=15 days) and travel longer distances (>50 km). The two most common weapons used for elephants were the AK-47 and a 12-gauge shotgun using bullets moulded from melted down shot. Large-bore hunting rifles were used less often because they are very expensive (>USD 1,200), as is the ammunition (USD 18-36 a cartridge). AK-47s have been proliferating in places where there has been armed conflict (CAR, ROC and DRC). Elephant hunts therefore necessitate considerable investments

in time and money, explaining why so many are subsidized by *commanditaires*. *Commanditaires* are most often government officials of some sort: administration, military, or police, followed by businessmen. In the DRC, military men are often the poachers.

A surprising finding was the popularity and high demand for elephant meat in towns and cities. I have received reports that elephants have been wiped out in large areas around the northeast DRC and southwest CAR border and the meat transported to Bangui. In Bangui we

found that elephant was the most expensive meat in town, averaging USD 6.94/kg, more expensive even than beef. Three years earlier, before the trucks supplied the markets, Bangui elephant meat averaged USD 12.65/kg. This price disparity was echoed everywhere we looked, except for southwest CAR, where elephant meat was the same price as other bushmeats. We found out this was so because Sudanese Arab poachers were in the area at the time of our survey (July, 2010) flooding the market with elephant meat. In Brazzaville elephant meat averaged USD 12.76/kg and in Yaounde over USD 10/kg.

High demand seemed due more to cultural reasons than to taste. In most urban settings elephant meat is rare, as most of it is consumed in the vicinity of the kill location and it is risky for traders to transport it. The meat derives from an infamously illegal animal, and the elephant is respected for its size and potential danger. All of these factors render the meat a prestige item. Ironically, it is most often served at



PHOTO BY: RICHARD LOKOKA

A research assistant in Okapi interviews hunters at the site of an elephant kill.

gatherings of high-ranking government officials, who can afford it.

Meat and ivory trade follow different paths after the hunter or first middleman. Elephant meat disperses quickly to several middlemen (often women), who take it to sell in local or regional markets and restaurants using a variety of transport (e.g. motorbike, rented car, public transport). Those who command ivory hunts resell the tusks usually to international traders, who export the tusks, or they resell to local ivory workshops. Larger tusks are exported while smaller, poorer quality tusks sell for local use. Tusks were exported to West Africa, to Sudan and Egypt, or to the Far East via East Africa. Fewer than 10% of first middlemen traded in both meat and ivory, all of them women.

Since demand for elephant meat exceeds supply, there is great potential for the trade to grow, particularly as other bushmeats become scarcer as a result of overexploitation propelled by human population growth and lack of protein alternatives. The trade would almost certainly increase if logistical constraints were eased (e.g. roads were

built offering easier access and egress) and/or security concerns lessened (e.g. ranger patrols and road check points decreased).

Weak law enforcement, corrupt government and military officials and lack of means of earning a livelihood were found to be critical causal factors in elephant poaching, as well as other forms of natural resource over-exploitation. Most informants in this study cited abuses or collusion by the authorities in illegal wildlife exploitation activities. They expressed dissatisfaction in the way natural resources were managed. Poverty and lack of alternative sources of income were cited as primary reasons motivating illegal hunting and product trafficking.

Forestry concessions were another important indirect causal factor in elephant killing. The three case study MIKE sites in the western Congo Basin are virtually surrounded by forestry concessions, with consequent construction of logging roads, other infrastructure, truck transport, the promotion of bushmeat hunting by truck drivers and the influx of immigrants in search of employment,

all of which creates a demand for bushmeat. Those without employment are attracted to poaching for meat, ivory and other trade products. Immigrant shop owners finance ivory poaching.

Mining is currently a minor causal factor around the western MIKE sites, with illegal artisanal miners near Dzanga-Sangha and Boumba Bek. Large mining developments are under way that will have a major impact on the entire western Congo Basin over the next two decades. Illegal mining has been taking place inside the OFR for almost 20 years, but it does not appear to stimulate elephant poaching.

Human population growth around protected areas is a major negative factor, as a growing population raises demand for bushmeat and the greater number of destitute people living near protected areas increases the number of those who will poach to survive.

If good governance, rule of law, economic opportunities for the populace and effective natural resource management can be achieved, elephants and other species will have a chance of survival. If not, elephant meat and tusks will continue to flow.●