

Elephant Poaching



by Richard Pallardy

No one knows for sure how many elephants exist in the wild in 2013. Even the agencies that monitor them will not issue official population estimates and will venture unofficial counts only with the greatest of trepidation. Some projections, however, suggest that the rapid surge in poaching could lead to the extinction of the African species within a decade. Fueling that threat is a precipitous escalation in the ivory trade in Asia.

Counting Invisible Giants. Estimates do exist for the three species. The African savanna, or bush, elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), is the largest living land animal, with males, known as bulls, weighing up to nine tons each. Its cousins, the African forest elephant (*L. cyclotis*)—considered by some authorities to be a subspecies—and the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*)—comprising three subspecies—are not much smaller. A comprehensive 2013 report compiled

by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the wildlife-trade-monitoring network TRAFFIC suggested a combined population of 420,000–650,000 African savanna and forest elephants spread across 35–38 African countries. Some 80% of the population—comprising solely savanna elephants—is concentrated in southern and eastern African countries, with 50% living in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Central Africa and western Africa, home to both forest and savanna elephants, host the remaining 18% and 2%, respectively.

The IUCN estimates that 40,000–50,000 Asian elephants are spread across 13 countries in Asia: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand,

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Garamba National Park, a group of soldiers and park rangers in July 2012 examine the remains of an African elephant that was slaughtered by poachers for its tusks.

and Vietnam. India is likely home to more than 50% of all Asian elephants. Data are difficult to gather on both continents owing to the political volatility of some regions, the expense of aerial and ground surveys, and unsystematic data collection.

Blood Ivory. Tusks, the enlarged incisor teeth that are the raw material for worked ivory, are sawed off at the base by poachers, often while the elephant is not yet dead. The valued part of the tusk comprises dentin covered by cementum. The dentin component is carved into the often-intricate ivory confections demanded by the Asian market; the cementum is usually discarded.

The African elephant, at greatest risk from the uptick in ivory poaching, is protected in only 20% of its range. That leaves a huge proportion of the pachyderms unprotected even by the porous boundaries of national parks and other conservation areas. These populations—which oftentimes overlap areas inhabited by humans—are thus harder to monitor. Populations that cannot be monitored cannot be defended. Despite their physical size and strength, elephants are in increasing need of protection. Stealthy local hunters, thought to be responsible for most elephant deaths, sell ivory to criminal syndicates via a variety of murky channels. They may also harvest flesh for the bushmeat trade. Poachers harvesting ivory at the behest of military leaders and warlords—who sell the valuable material to fund their operations—pose an additional threat in some national parks in central and eastern Africa. The armed guards tasked with the protection of the elephants are often no match for the poachers' sly maneuvering and heavy artillery. Park rangers themselves have been implicated in poaching incidents.

A 2011 report estimated that some 17,000 elephants had been killed in regions surveyed by the CITES Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) program alone. That figure then constituted more than 7% of the total; perhaps 8,000 more are thought to have been taken elsewhere that year. In western Africa, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon have faced particular threats; Cameroon saw major slaughters in 2012, as did Chad in 2013. Poaching is at its most in-

tense in central Africa. About 60% of the forest elephants that remained in 2002 have since been killed. Even eastern and southern Africa, where savanna elephant populations are robust, have seen increased elephant deaths. After a period of respite, major slaughters occurred in Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2013.

The trade in Asian elephant ivory is less extensive, mainly because only some Asian elephants have tusks, and when present, they are far smaller than those wielded by their African cousins. Nonetheless, Asian elephants are also killed for their ivory. In Myanmar wild baby elephants are captured for sale as performance animals in Thailand. Additionally, about 13,000 Asian elephants are thought to be kept in captivity on the Asian continent, employed either as entertainment or as service animals. It is unknown how many of that number were captured from the wild.

Eastern Demand. According to the IUCN, the illegal ivory market is thought to have tripled since 1998 and doubled since 2007. Seizures of major shipments of ivory to Asian markets have doubled since 2009. The years 2009, 2010, and 2011 saw among the highest volumes of ivory seized since monitoring began. Buyers in China, the primary market for illegal ivory, along with those in Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines, have increasingly clamored for sculptures and trinkets carved of the precious substance.

In China ivory objects—from Buddhist devotional tokens to elaborate statues—have recently become attainable gifts and status symbols among the booming middle class. The country is thought to

provide a market for upwards of 70% of illegal ivory traded annually. Thailand is another major market; its legal trade has provided cover for illegal ivory. There Buddhist trinkets are in high demand. The Philippines is thought to be home to a flourishing ivory market as well.

Guarding Behemoths. Large-scale hunting of elephants in Africa in the late 1800s posed the first major threat to the millions of animals that once roamed the continent. Populations became more stable as a result of protective measures in the 1900s; up to five million elephants may have trod the plains in the early decades of the 20th century. In the 1960s new national parks allowed populations to further recover. A decade later, however, rising demand in Japan, Europe, and the U.S. put significant dents in elephant populations. Central and eastern Africa saw intense hunting in the 1970s and '80s. The African elephant was categorized as CITES Appendix II in 1977; a 1979 population estimate put the species at 1.3 million individuals continentwide. It was upgraded to Appendix I in 1989. The reclassification, which went into effect in 1990, made international trade in their tusks illegal, largely halting the legal ivory trade. A subsequent decline in hunting pressure allowed populations to stabilize and slowly increase in eastern and southern Africa. Ivory harvested prior to 1990, however, is still legal to sell, and the difficulty in ascertaining when ivory was taken allows for illegally harvested ivory to be passed off as "pre-ban." New carbon-14 testing techniques may be able to more accurately determine the age of ivory, but they remain prohibitively expensive.

The recent threats to elephants were acknowledged in March 2013 at a CITES conference in Bangkok, where it was determined that a so-called "Gang of Eight"—China, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda—must submit detailed plans for stemming the ivory trade by May 15 and implement them by July 2014. Though the publicized destruction of confiscated ivory stockpiles by Kenya in 2011, Gabon in 2012, and the Philippines and United States in 2013, were intended to deter further poaching, some observers feared that the gestures would in fact encourage it by signaling the decreasing availability of "white gold."

An artist works on an ivory sculpture at a factory in Beijing in March. China provided a market for much of the illegal ivory traded annually.

