

Human greed endangers elephants

By Barbara S. Moffet

Elephants -- the largest living land animals -- are dying at abnormally high rates in Africa, squeezed between an insatiable world demand for their ivory and the march of human encroachment.

In much of their 35-nation African habitat, elephants are being killed faster than they can reproduce. Spurred by a 1,500 percent rise in ivory prices in the last decade, poachers are claiming 50,000 to 150,000 elephants a year -- by poisoned arrows in Kenya, fires in Sudan, pitfalls in Zaire, horse-men's spears in Chad, and a newer technique of laying poisoned fruit along elephant's pathways.

The greatest slaughter, though, has been by guns -- high powered rifles and automatic weapons used by poachers, soldiers, guerrillas, and even the rangers paid to protect the animals. Mountains of ivory are leaving Africa -- much of it illegally -- and being used for currency, jewelry, and art objects, writes Oria Douglas-Hamilton in the November *National Geographic*.

She helped her husband, African elephant authority Iain Douglas-Hamilton, direct the first census of the animal, surveying by air and on foot from the continent's southern coast to the forests of central Africa and the northern deserts of Mali and Mauritania.

The survey, made from 1976 to 1979, concluded that only about 1.3 million elephants survived in Africa. Once widespread south of the Sahara, they have been nearly annihilated in western and extreme southern Africa and are in trouble in their last strongholds -- central and east Africa.

The census, financed by the World Wildlife Fund, the New York Zoological Society, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, showed elephants numbers to be dropping in three-fourth of their 35 countries.

Major declines were reported in 10 of them -- Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire, and Zambia. A few countries -- Zimbabwe, Malawi, Senegal, and South Africa, for example -- are trying to enforce strict conservation laws.

Kenya lost an estimated half of its elephants between 1970 and 1977 before banning hunting and the sale of wildlife trophies. Poachers still roam Kenya's wildlife parks, many of them well-armed Somali tribesmen who have fled severe drought areas and turned to ivory for survival. Sophisticated poaching also has spread to neighboring Tanzania.

Elephants in Uganda have fared worse, first under the rule of President Idi Amin and then at this overthrow. At one point troops retreating through the country's Kabalega Falls National Park gunned down scores of elephants and other animals. A later count in the park's southern half found that a 1966 population of 8,000 elephants has been reduced to a tiny terrified herd of 160. The herd has since disappeared.

Another massacre took place two years ago in Zaire, apparently aided by high officials evading ivory trading laws. Military personnel shot elephants and killed whole families of them by placing fruit laced with battery acid or insecticide on elephant trails.

Even after Zaire's president declared a moratorium on ivory exports, trade continued across borders. The country remains a leading ivory producer.

Besides heavy losses to poachers -- for the precious ivory and sometimes for the meat -- elephants are being crowded off territory by a growing human population in search of land for cultivation.

An elephant consumes about 400 pounds of vegetation a day, sometimes destroying whole trees of a farmer's crop. For the hungry African farmer as well as the affluent rancher, the simplest solution is to kill the offender. And there is great economic incentive: a pair of 22-pound tusks may fetch \$500, more than the average year's income for many Africans.

Not considered an endangered species, the African elephant is listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act as threatened, which means its products can be imported, but only with a special permit. A



Africa's white gold - elephant tusks - gleamed alongside rhinoceros horns in 1975 in Kenya. The country banned private ivory sales two years later, but tons are still shipped illegally from Kenya and other African nations.

further U.S. restriction allows importation of ivory only from nations adhering to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials acknowledge that ivory importation laws are hard to enforce. Raw and worked ivory passes through so many countries before reaching U.S. ports that the origin is often impossible to determine. False export papers are readily available in most African nations.

A bill pending in the U.S. Senate, the Elephant Protection Act of 1979, would allow importation of ivory only from nations that, in the opinion of the U.S. Government, manage their elephants properly.

The United States imports about 1 percent of the world's raw ivory and about 20 percent of the worked product -- worth a total of about \$6.25 million a year. Most ivory working is done in Hong Kong and Japan, but Singapore, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, West Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Great Britain, and the United States also have ivory industries.

The American industry is a small but flourishing one of about 3,000 carvers of scrimshaw, jewelry, knife handlers, and trinkets, according to a report by the New York Zoological Society. It is based primarily in New England, Alaska, Washington, and Hawaii.

Some of the world's ivory goes to cover the keys of fine pianos, even though plastic substitutes are available. Ivory is believed to absorb perspiration, enabling the fingers to glide over the keys without slipping.

Elephants tusks -- actually enlarged incisors -- are not the only source of ivory. It also comes from the teeth of the sperm whale, the hippopotamus, walrus, and narwhal. The elephant tusk can weigh as much as 200 pounds, although one weighing more than 200 pounds is considered large.

As much as gold or diamonds, ivory is a hard currency and has been centuries. African ivory trading first blossomed in the 15th century as the continent gradually opened to European traders.

By the 19th century the ivory trade had spawned a sideline -- an increased use of slaves. Virtual armies of Africans were forced by Arab traders to haul the hulking tusks from the jungles overland to seaports. Slaves that survived the journey often were sold along with the ivory.

Later, when European powers secured and partitioned Africa, they used the ivory trade to subsidize colonial administrations. Parts of Africa that had teemed with elephants at the beginning of the 19th century were nearly void of them by the close of it.

Before World War I, about 1,100 tons of ivory left Africa every year. Between the two world wars exports plunged and ivory values were relatively low. Then, in the inflation-ridden 1970s, ivory's value shot upward, even faster than that of gold. Its prices rose from about \$2.30 a pound to about \$45 a pound, eventually leveling off around \$35.

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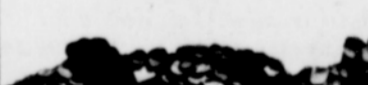
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