

Less elephant slaughter in the Okapi Faunal Reserve, Democratic Republic of Congo, with Operation Tango

Leonard Mubalama^{1,2} and Jean Joseph Mapilanga²

¹ Monitoring Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE/CITES)

² Institut congolais pour la conservation de la nature
PO Box 852, Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo
tel: +250 853 6620; fax: 871 762 213 326
email: mikedrce@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The Okapi Faunal Reserve in the Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the most biologically rich of the World Heritage Sites. Yet it is seriously threatened by the effects of war and armed conflict. Support from conservation non-governmental organizations has proved critical given the urgency these crises have caused. In addition, it has been proved through Operation Tango with impetus from these organizations that collaborative action between the local authority for the management of protected areas and the Uganda People's Defence Forces and Congolese military was effective in reducing heavy elephant poaching and coltanore exploitation within the reserve. Difficult choices must be made in attempts to balance the needs of still-fragile wildlife populations with urgent demands of the rural poor. Still, the experience of the Okapi Faunal Reserve gives hope to those working in neighbouring protected areas in Congo. Even as the forest has begun to regenerate, so too the elephant population has survived recent poaching ordeals and has started to show remarkable capability for recovery under today's difficult constraints.

Résumé

La Réserve de faune à Okapi (RFO) figure parmi les plus riches sites de patrimoine mondial en danger en République Démocratique du Congo. A ce jour, ce site est sérieusement menacé par les effets de la guerre et de conflit armé. L'appui des ONGs de conservation a été critiques étant donné l'urgence de besoins de conservation pendant la période de crise. Aussi, il a été démontré à travers l'Opération Tango et ce, avec l'impulsion desdites ONGs que la collaboration entre l'institution nationale de conservation au niveau local et l'UPDF et l'armée congolaise fut effective en réduisant le braconnage intense d'éléphants ainsi que l'exploitation du coltan dans la Réserve. Le processus de rétablissement est au prise avec le choix tragique opéré visant à balancer les besoins de la faune sauvage et ceux urgents de la population rurale démunie. Toujours est-il que l'expérience de la RFO donne espoir aux autres aires protégées en RD Congo. A l'instar de la forêt, la population d'éléphants a survécu l'épreuve du braconnage et a commencé à montrer une capacité remarquable de rétablissement en dépit de contraintes difficiles en cours.

Introduction

Situated in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Okapi Faunal Reserve (OFR) was created in May 1992 and proclaimed a World Heritage Site in December 1996 in recognition of its biological significance and in response to the increasing threats to its integrity. The reserve occupies about 20% of the Ituri Forest (60,000 km²) (fig. 1), which in turn is a small

part of the vast Congo Basin forest. The reserve provides a refuge for one of the largest populations of elephants in the Congo. J.A. Hart (pers. comm. 1998) estimated that OFR had 7375 elephants.

Like many African elephant range states, cannot protect its elephant populations under the current political and economic conditions. The high cost of protection is the single most important factor in the fail-

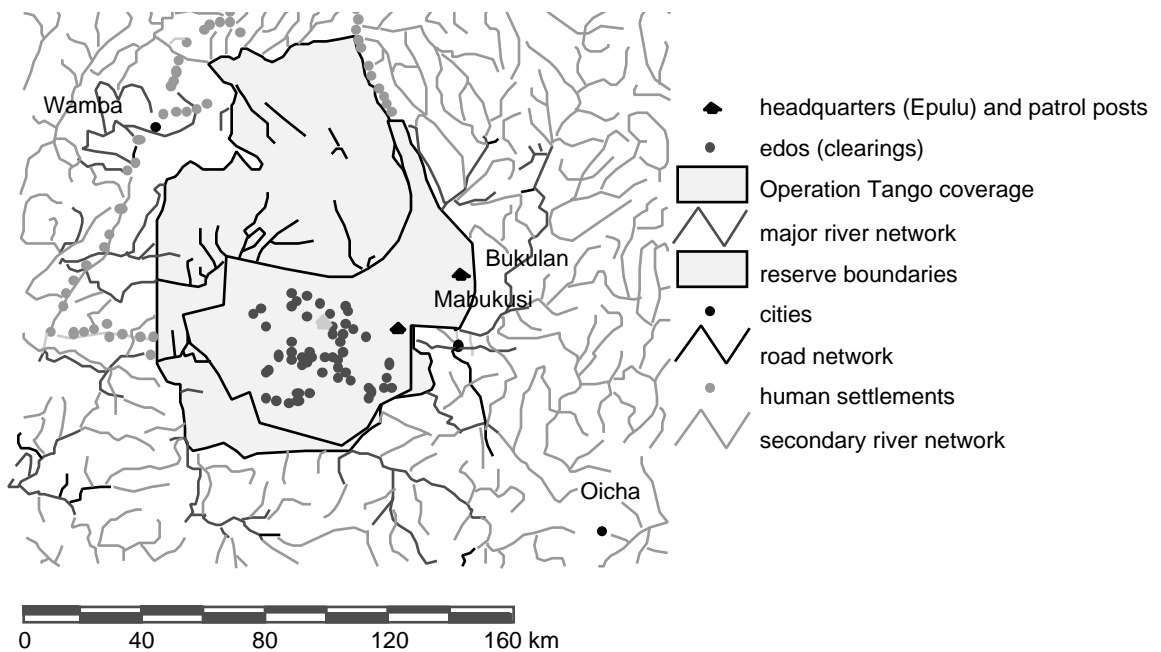


Figure 1. Operation Tango and law enforcement in the Okapi Faunal Reserve.

ure to halt elephant poaching. Today poaching remains the main cause of falling elephant populations, and efforts to save the elephant are a dominant part of discussions of conservation in Africa. Poaching is the most urgent threat to wildlife, and in eastern DRC it is exacerbated by armed conflict. These conservation threats need to be properly addressed.

The correlation between the availability of firearms and ivory poaching, described by Douglas-Hamilton (1987), was also observed in Ituri Forest. Furthermore, with the problems of indisciplined soldiers, the breakdown of authority in national parks, a continued demand for ivory in global markets, and easily obtained profits in ivory, the declining elephant population in Ituri Forest, as well as in other protected areas of DRC, remains a major concern.

Throughout the troubles of the 1990s, local and international conservationists struggled against the odds to maintain the integrity of OFR and its wildlife populations. They have learned to lobby support from an unfamiliar set of national and international players, including local militia, whose objectives generally conflict with those of conservationists.

Threats to elephants in the reserve

Since the 1996 outbreak of civil war, OFR has been

under great pressure. The civil crisis in DRC, the arrival of foreign military personnel, and an increased market for bushmeat and ivory all led to increased killing of wildlife. The increased number of weapons in local circulation has exacerbated the increase in hunting. Neither the park authority nor government legislation has proved effective in curbing hunting. Most conservation activities were halted, paving the way for an increase in poaching activities (Mubalama 1999). With only 50 guards patrolling 13,700 km², strict control was impossible. In addition, as a new reserve, OFR did not have an adequate protection system and the ill-equipped rangers were often forced to fight fierce battles in and around the reserve.

Congolese National Parks Institute (ICCN) funding for OFR stopped before war broke out. The government's response to the reserve's funding problems was ineffective and ICCN partners, including the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Gilman International Conservation (GIC), increased their funding for conservation efforts and paid ICCN staff salaries. The security situation in OFR, however, required even greater intervention. WCS raised further funding of USD 50,000 from GIC and USD 4000 from the Cincinnati Zoo to support security measures. This funding enabled the establishment of a programme, known as Operation Tango, to provide joint training

in paramilitary and anti-poaching operations for Ugandan and Congolese military personnel.

The civil war in 1996 toppled Mobutu's government and brought Kabila to power. After a short lull in fighting, further violence broke out in 1998, resulting in increased illegal exploitation of natural resources and effective division of the country into a government-controlled area in the west and a rebel-controlled area in the east supported by neighbouring states. The presence of automatic weapons in the area provided easy means of illegal hunting, and severe wildlife poaching followed the fighting. Law-enforcement agencies monitoring conservation efforts found that local populations, including traditional chiefs and military personnel, were responsible for poaching in OFR. A stone's throw away from the reserve's headquarters in Epulu, elephant meat was easily obtainable. Although poaching began in earnest in 1996, the heaviest slaughter of wildlife occurred between 1998 and 2000.

Other factors contributing to increased ivory poaching were the high market price for ivory, the poverty of local populations and corruption. Barnes et al. (1995) noted that poorly paid officials were susceptible to bribery. In less than three months before the launching of Operation Tango, the retail price of a kilo of raw ivory doubled from USD 10 to USD 20. In July 2000, a kilo of elephant meat was sold for USD 5 in Mambasa, Beni and Bunia. In June 2000, a local informant reported that raw ivory was plentiful in eastern DRC. Smuggled into Uganda and Kenya, a kilo of raw ivory could fetch as much as USD 30 per kilo (Martin and Stiles 2000). According to reliable trade sources, much of the tooled ivory on the Ugandan market is being smuggled from Ituri and Garamba.

OFR scouts carried muzzle-loaded rifles with limited amounts of ammunition and proved no match for the groups of well-armed poachers. Consequently, morale among wildlife staff was severely eroded. According to observers, efforts to patrol the reserve were minimal, with each guard patrolling on as few as eight days per month. Records show that at least 41 elephants were killed by poachers between January and September 2000, and this number is thought to be only a fraction of the actual number of elephants killed since the area under surveillance by wildlife personnel was but one-third of the total OFR area.

Elephants respond to heavy poaching by concentrating in 'safe' areas (Douglas-Hamilton 1987),

mainly a few kilometres from the human settlements, where they stand a higher probability of meeting people and thus coming into conflict with them (Kangwana 1995; Mubalama 2000). In fact, many reports on wildlife poaching stress that elephants are usually killed a few kilometres from roads where human settlements occur. Elephant hunting with AK47 automatic rifles proliferated, apparently spear-headed by a small number of unaligned groups of military, now poachers.

Effectiveness of a joint military–wildlife guard operation in the midst of political unrest

This critical situation with regard to elephants in the reserve was brought to the attention of the international nature conservation community. The aim was to alert the world community to the 'ecocide' taking place and to put pressure on those able to take the necessary steps to halt the destruction. The response to this upsurge in wildlife poaching, in the form of Operation Tango, came from an institutional capacity developed through the long-term commitment of locally-focused international conservation projects where the Congolese National Parks Institute had been unable to carry out its own mandate (Hart et al. 1996).

By rallying support from the donor community, and providing soldiers and park guards with both equipment and financial bonuses, WCS, GIC and MIKE/CITES hope to encourage conservation efforts by the reserve authorities. It must be remembered that these efforts are taking place against a background of declining government budgets to wildlife authorities. This shortfall is being met by increased assistance from external donors, with the United Nations Foundation and the UNESCO Conservation in Crisis Programme providing financial support for reserve guards and facilitating cooperation between the higher authorities and the military when there have been problems.

As a result, the fight against wildlife poaching is today carried out by wildlife authorities endowed with the power to protect and manage wildlife and protected areas. They also have political support from authorities at the highest levels of the Congolese Rally-Gathering Liberation Movement (RCD/ML). A written agreement between the RCD/ML authorities and OFR management stressed that any confiscated weapons would remain the property of the re-

serve. A concerted effort was made to enforce laws at every level of the trade, and on the strength of intelligence network records, patrol teams were deployed in hot-spot hunting zones. The patrol teams were armed and supplied with adequate ammunition to ensure that they were on an equal footing with the heavily armed poachers or were even more powerful.

By 18 October 2000, after several contacts between a wildlife management team and RCD/ML authorities in Bunia, it was possible to initiate the intensive military-wildlife guard anti-poaching operation called Tango (akin in sound to *tembo*, 'elephant' in Swahili) in an attempt to wipe out elephant and bushmeat poaching and illegal coltan mining. (Columbite/tantalite is one of the ores from which tantalum powder is made. It is used in the manufacture of tiny tantalum capacitors, which withstand the heat of ever-faster computers and ever-smaller mobile phones.) Baseline data were provided by the findings of the MIKE monitoring teams.

Large-scale poaching activities were evident, with 17 new or recent poaching camps reported. Twenty poachers were caught red-handed and 111 kg of raw ivory and 215 kg of elephant meat were recovered. Three months before the launch of Operation Tango the area under control of the wildlife management authorities was less than 10% of the reserve (fig. 1). Importantly, 17 weapons, most of them small machine-guns, along with 331 rounds of ammunition were confiscated by a joint 34-man team of UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Forces) and APC (Armée Populaire Congolaise) personnel.

Because of poor communication, it was decided that all active law enforcement be vested in a closely supervised rapid-deployment strike force based at headquarters in Epulu. The strike force mounted regular armed patrols on an unpredictable basis throughout the reserve. Patrols also manned semi-permanent observation posts at strategic vantage points. The force responded rapidly on short notice to intelligence reports or calls for assistance forwarded by the various outposts.

After five months of Operation Tango, no new signs of poaching were found, which correlates with information gained from law-enforcement monitoring of poaching levels during the latter part of 2000.

Results

Although we cannot say that the operation has led to

an absolute cessation of elephant poaching, the hope has been that the protection levels gained would be consolidated with the deployment in May 2001 of a new group of 28 park guards trained by joint UPDF and APC forces. Armed OFR personnel are recruited among individuals in the local population who demonstrate qualities of leadership and commitment; they then receive regular hands-on training that empowers them to take responsibility for managing their natural resources—the formula proved to sustain long-term conservation efforts under today's difficult conditions (Adams and McShane 1992). The idea of investment in joint patrol forces with locally based conservation institutions is not new. What is clear, however, is that such site-based initiatives must be tied to an international structure that endures through cycles of civil strife (Hart and Hart 1997).

Results from Operation Tango are far better than had been hoped, and the relative lull in poaching gives time to build up other types of support for OFR. Elsewhere, publicity on the plight of elephants has proved effective in reducing the demand for elephant products; therefore, production and dissemination of written information materials in local languages should be intensified. The lessons from these recent operations indicate that a greater level of support, collaborative effort with more partners, and innovative, sustainable means of funding are necessary for the long-term future of OFR. Unless the substantial levels of funding that will be required to run this operation effectively are regularly and reliably forthcoming, the whole strategy will collapse.

We believe Operation Tango has been a success. However, there is still much to do to consolidate these results. Although the operation did not bring poaching to a complete end, it is obvious that the joint military and strike force's basic patrol strategy brought increased protection to the reserve, and international community support helped to boost the morale of reserve staff. Optimized law-enforcement operations have led to optimizing the level of deterrence and hence reducing illegal off-take to earlier levels (Jachmann 1998). Combined with an improved regime of foot patrols carried out from headquarters, and existing and planned outposts, OFR will provide appropriate protection for the elephant population and other wildlife. Nevertheless, as formal armed forces are being withdrawn from the region, exploitation is again a threat; conservation personnel have been attacked and robbed, as have many others. Much of this current increased instability seems

to be associated with the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of troops, which is being exploited (Hillman Smith and Mafuko 2001).

The important question remaining is whether the great reduction in elephant slaughter in the reserve and surrounding areas will in time be reflected in the price of ivory and what effect this will have on African elephants and poaching. Is the current extent of the coltan trade likely to have an adverse effect on the protection of the remaining wildlife? These questions must be addressed before a situation develops in which commercial ivory poachers work with disenchanted local communities—a situation that could have serious ramifications for the elephant population (Dublin et al. 1995) in the OFR. The answers will have important implications for future decisions on world ivory trade (Vigne 1991). Further, elephant numbers may increase within the reserve in the short-term, but it may be unrealistic to expect that elephants will ever recover to historical levels, even with effective control of all levels of illegal elephant killings (Dublin et al. 1995). Current human demographic trends across the reserve indicate such a recovery may be rare.

Proposed management strategy

Ensuring the success of law-enforcement efforts is probably the most important management objective for the future conservation of elephants (Leader-Williams 1993). A large component of the work of wildlife managers in OFR relates to law enforcement, particularly with regard to large species with valuable trophies like the elephant (Bell 1983; Cumming et al. 1984; Leader-Williams 1993), and it is of paramount importance that monitoring the enforcement of those aspects of the law is accorded a very high priority. Monitoring of law-enforcement efforts in actual encounters in the field will provide vital indicators of the rates of encounter in the various classes of illegal wildlife use to guide field operations and optimize their efficiency.

We believe that a strategy to win the battle against poaching in OFR needs to include the following measures:

- Ensure that there is continued political will for wildlife conservation laws to be properly enforced. This political will can be maintained by adaptation of national legislation and by collaboration between local people and the local administration.

- Increase the number of staff and patrols involved in law enforcement and provide sufficient funding, resources and equipment to enable them to carry out their work with input from well-established intelligence records.
- Improve the awareness of the population with regard to wildlife and habitat laws, particularly those relating to protected areas.
- Produce and, where possible, implement the outcome of the OFR Zoning Plan Initiative as part of an integrated development policy that will provide sustainable economic alternatives to poaching and the bushmeat trade. The initiative is a project involving local communities and indigenous peoples that aims to guarantee the Mbuti people that they will be able to continue their low-impact hunting and gathering throughout a large area of OFR and at the same time guarantee the long-term integrity of the natural resources of the reserve.
- Ensure the availability of information on elephant status and numbers, which is vital for the effective conservation and management of OFR's remaining elephant populations.

To monitor law enforcement, conservationists should learn to lobby for support from an unfamiliar set of national and international players, including military bodies and humanitarian agencies, which have very different objectives and agendas.

If the reserve is to consolidate the positive results of Operation Tango, the consortium of partner institutions needs to make a long-term commitment to local conservation problems with the ultimate aim of building national capacity to promote conservation.

Acknowledgements

First, we would like to thank all the sponsors that made Operation Tango successful: Gilman International Conservation, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the White Oak Zoo and the Cincinnati Zoo. We are grateful for the support of the staff of the Okapi Faunal Reserve, particularly the wildlife scouts who participated in most of the operation along with the UPDF and APC soldiers. Gratitude is also extended to the MIKE field team for providing us with additional information on poaching activities within the reserve.

We are indebted to Dr Kes Hillman Smith, Dr John Hart and Mr Karl Ruf for valuable comments and guidance. Helen van Houten was kind enough to read

the draft of the paper as it emerged and to make helpful and constructive criticisms. She has devoted many hours to seeing the work through the press.

References

- Adams, J.S., and McShane, T.O. 1992. *The myth of wild Africa: conservation without illusion*. W.W. Norton, New York and London.
- Barnes, R.F.W., Blom, AB., and Alers, M.P.T. 1995. A review of the status of forest elephants *Loxodonta africana* in Central Africa. *Biological Conservation* 71:125–132.
- Bell, R.H.V. 1983. Law enforcement in Malawi conservation. *Pachyderm* 3:7–8.
- Cumming, D.H.M., Martin, R.B., and Taylor, R.H. 1984. Questionnaire survey on the management and conservation of elephant and rhino. In: Cumming, D.H.M., and Jackson, P., eds. *The status and conservation of Africa's elephants and rhinos*. International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Gland, Switzerland. p. 46–62.
- Douglas-Hamilton, I. 1987. African elephants: population trends and their cause. *Oryx* 21:11–24.
- Dublin, H.T., Milliken, T. Barnes, R.F.W. 1995. *Four years after the CITES ban: illegal killing of elephants, ivory trade and stockpiles*. IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group Report, Gland, Switzerland.
- Hart, T.B., and Hart, J.A. 1997. Conservation and civil strife: two perspectives from central Africa. *Conservation Biology* 11: 308–314.
- Hart, T.B., Hart, J.A., and Hall, J.S. 1996. Conservation in the declining nation state: a view from eastern Zaïre. *Conservation Biology* 10:685–686.
- Hillman Smith, K., and Mafuko, G. 2001. The deteriorating situation for conservation and security in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. UNESCO/UNF/DRC Report, June 2001. Nairobi.
- Jachmann, H. 1998. *Monitoring illegal wildlife use and law enforcement in Africa savanna rangelands*. Wildlife Resource Monitoring Unit. ECZ, LIRD, NPWS, Lusaka, Zambia.
- Kangwana, K. 1995. Human–elephant conflict: the challenge ahead. *Pachyderm* 19:11–14.
- Leader-Williams, N. 1993. Cost of conserving elephants. *Pachyderm* 17:30–34.
- Martin, E., and Stiles, D. 2000. *The ivory markets of Africa*. Save the Elephants, London. 84 p.
- Mubalama, L. 1999. Fighting in the forest, biodiversity conservation amidst violent conflict: a view from eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. In: Naughton, L.T., ed., *Conservation and development forum*. University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA.
- . 2000. An assessment of crop damage by large mammals in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, with special emphasis on the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), Ituri Forest, Democratic Republic of Congo. *Wildlife and Nature* 16(2):3–18.
- Vigne, L. 1991. The collapse of India's ivory industry. *Pachyderm* 14:28–31.