Black from the brink

Figure 6. Poached elephants littered all three of Uganda's national parks in 1979 and 1980.

In the 1960's, three well-ordered national parks, Queen Elizabeth, Murchison, and Kidepo, existed in Uganda. They enjoyed firm political support, a sound economic basis, and an ecological problem of too many elephants. Then, in 1971, with the military coup of Idi Amin, tourism collapsed, the country's economy was wined, law and order deteriorated. High government officials and security officers sponsored elephant and rhino poaching in the national parks. By the end of the war with Tanzania in 1979, around all three parks automatic rifles had proliferated. Ex-military personnel, villagers, tribesmen, and poachers were all better armed than the rangers.

The 1980/81 aerial surveys sponsored by WWF showed that every species except Uganda kob declined markedly. In Queen Elizabeth, only 150 elephants were counted in the open areas where formerly there had been 3000. In Murchison, north of the Nile, only 1200 elephants remained out of a 1973 population of 5000, but in the isolated southern section the decline was even more catastrophic ——only 160 remained out of a population that had numbered 9000 seven years previously. Kidepo, censused a year later, still had a more or less intact elephant population of 411 but neither here nor in Murchison were any rhino, black or white seen from the air.

Furthermore, there were clear signs that poaching was still in progress. Heavy gunfire could be heard almost every week in all three Park headquarters, and fresh carcasses littered. the elephant's range.

Rangers lived without pay, transport, communications, uniforms and, in Kidepo in the north, under conditions of starvation.

For a year, the parks were run on a hand to mouth basis, with inputs from the FZS, AWF, WWF/IUCN, National Geographic Society, and expatriate volunteers. With this support from the outside world, by the end of 1980, elephant poaching in Kabalega had greatly decreased. This voluntary aid filled a vital gap from April 1980 to March 1981, while plans submitted by the government to UNDP and EEC for more substantial aid were coming to fruition.

The UNDP and EEC programmes covered material and technical aid including communications, transport, uniforms, food, air support, training and operational backstopping. VHF sets were installed to link ranger patrols to vehicles and airplanes, and a long-range HF system linked all the parks with Kampala headquarters.

Patrols were intensified on the ground, coordinated from the air, and supplied by newly opened tracks and air-drops. New rangers were recruited and trained.

In Murchison, where efforts were first concentrated, success can be measured in terms of elephants found dead and number of guns recovered.

	Elephants found dead	Guns Recovered
1980	120	14
1981	13	43
1982 (Jan.—Sept.)	1	23

A second series of aerial counts was made in 1982. Kidepo where 420 elephants were counted showed no significant change from the previous year. In Murchison 980 elephants were recorded north of the Nile, which may represent a drop from the estimate of 1200 two years earlier, but the elephants were found in areas of thicker bush than before, which may have lowered the estimate. In Queen Elizabeth, however, 428 elephants were counted, compared to 150 in 1980. Evidently, they have emerged from the forest or have immigrated from Zaire.

Both Murchison and Queen Elizabeth are now experiencing a massive regeneration of woody vegetation, triggered by the decreased elephant density. The recovery of habitat provides ideal conditions for the recovery of elephant populations, should their security continue to be guaranteed.

The Uganda National Parks have survived a period of catastrophe, largely due to "islands of dedication" within the organisation, and through the rapid and flexible aid which this has generated since the liberation war.

It may be concluded that unwavering international support for National Parks here and elsewhere is vital in times of adversity, instability and political turbulence.

I.Douglas-Hamilton