

Monitor

Forest Elephant Surveys in Central Africa

A reconnaissance survey of the forests of Cameroun, Central African Republic, Congo and Zaire was made between January 1989 and June 1989. The purpose was to obtain preliminary information on the status of forest dwelling elephants. The survey was financed by the EEC through the EEC/WWF African Elephant Programme. The project was carried out by a team of ten biologists and wildlife officers, comprised of seven different nationalities, and organized by WCI.

In this report the results of the reconnaissance survey have been combined with those from previous work in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to provide a comprehensive picture of the status of elephants in the central African region.

There are still some forests with a high density of elephants but, with the exception of Gabon, numbers are falling.

In Zaire, elephants have suffered heavy poaching for 25 years, even in the National Parks of Salonga and Maiko situated in the remotest forests. The size distribution of exported tusks suggest that the situation is as bad, if not worse, than in Tanzania where elephant numbers have halved in ten years. If the present trend continues, few forest elephants will remain in Zaire by the turn of the century.

Central African Republic has already lost three quarters of its savanna elephants. Many forest elephants are still found in the Bangassou and Bayanga areas, but are threatened by poaching. In Cameroun, elephants have largely disappeared from south-central forests where human population density is high. Many elephants remain in the west, around Korup and the sparsely populated forests of the south-east, but they are imperilled by illegal hunting.

Poaching pressure appears greater in Congo than Cameroun, although there are still some remote parts of the northern forests of Congo with many elephants. As logging companies move into these areas their roads will provide easy access for ivory poachers and numbers will then fall rapidly.

Equatorial Guinea contains elephants in its southern half; there is some poaching.

The biggest undisturbed population of forest elephants is found in Gabon. There are vast areas of uninhabited forest and large-scale organized poaching has not yet started. However as elephant numbers diminish in neighbouring countries, poachers and ivory traders will turn their attention to Gabon.

Throughout the central African region, government officials, some very highly placed, are involved in ivory poaching and trafficking.

Automatic weapons are commonly used by ivory poachers. They are a threat not only to elephants but to national security. Some extrapolations were made using the data collected during the reconnaissance survey and by making many assumptions. These are not population estimates, but calculations based on the best data presently available and must be viewed with caution. The computations suggest a total population of perhaps 225,000 forest elephants in central Africa. About one third are in Gabon and not yet seriously threatened by ivory poaching; about one third are in Cameroun, Congo and CAR and are rapidly declining; the remainder are in Zaire and are swiftly disappearing.

EXTRAPOLATED NUMBERS OF ELEPHANTS IN THE FORESTS OF CENTRAL AFRICA

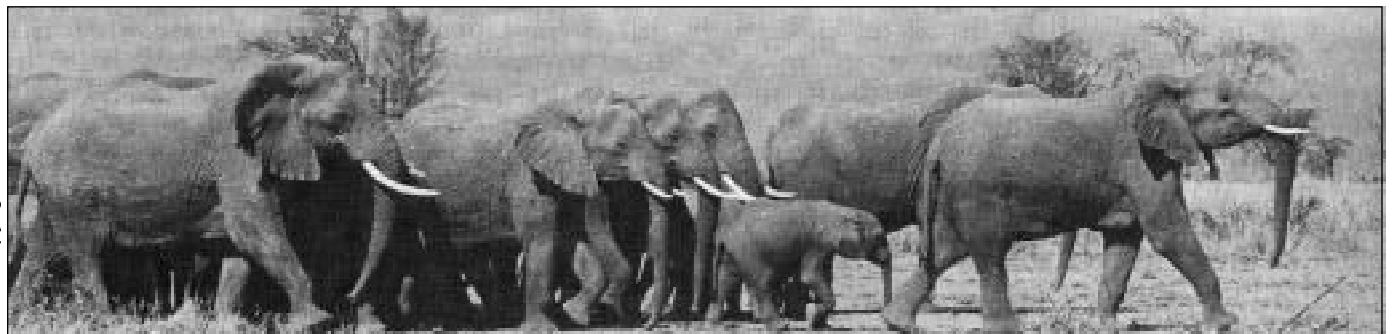
Country	Area of forest (sq. km.)	No. of elephants in forest
Cameroun	179,200	19,700
C.A.R.	35,900	6,400
Congo	213,400	24,900
Equatorial Guinea	12,950	1,800
Gabon	205,000	88,000
Zaire	1,056,000	84,500

Note: These are not population estimates but extrapolations based on limited data.

Report to EEC/WWF African Elephant Programme on behalf of the Wildlife Conservation International team, June 1989.

R.F.W. Barnes

Department of Applied Biology, Downing Street, University of Cambridge.



Elephants on the move