

Elephants and Ivory in the Congo since the Ban: The Lull before the Storm?

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Abstract

On average, the raw ivory from between 2,011 and 3,788 elephants was exported with documentation from the Congo every year from 1979 to 1988. The actual amount that left Congo is unknown, but it was undoubtedly much more than the official figure. There was also an active trade in worked ivory for which there is little documentation. It is evident that the Congo was an active participant in the rather anarchical ivory trade which resulted in a dramatic decrease in elephant populations almost throughout their range in the 1980s. Since the CITES decision to ban the trade in ivory in 1989 and subsequent collapse of the ivory market, we have seen significant decreases in both poaching and the ivory trade in Congo. This is due almost exclusively to the decrease in the price of ivory and the difficulty of export. The

Congo has made significant advances in the domain of conservation in the past two years which has resulted in positive results in elephant protection in some areas. It is our opinion that if the trade were opened again and a consequent increase in demand occurred, the situation in Congo, both on the poaching and trade fronts, would quickly revert to that before the ban, except perhaps in a few newly-created islands of protection.

Background

As were most countries in central Africa, Congo was heavily involved in the ivory trade before the ban in late 1989. There is a considerable discrepancy between the figures furnished by the Direction de la Conservation de la Faune (DCF) and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit (WTMU). According to DCF

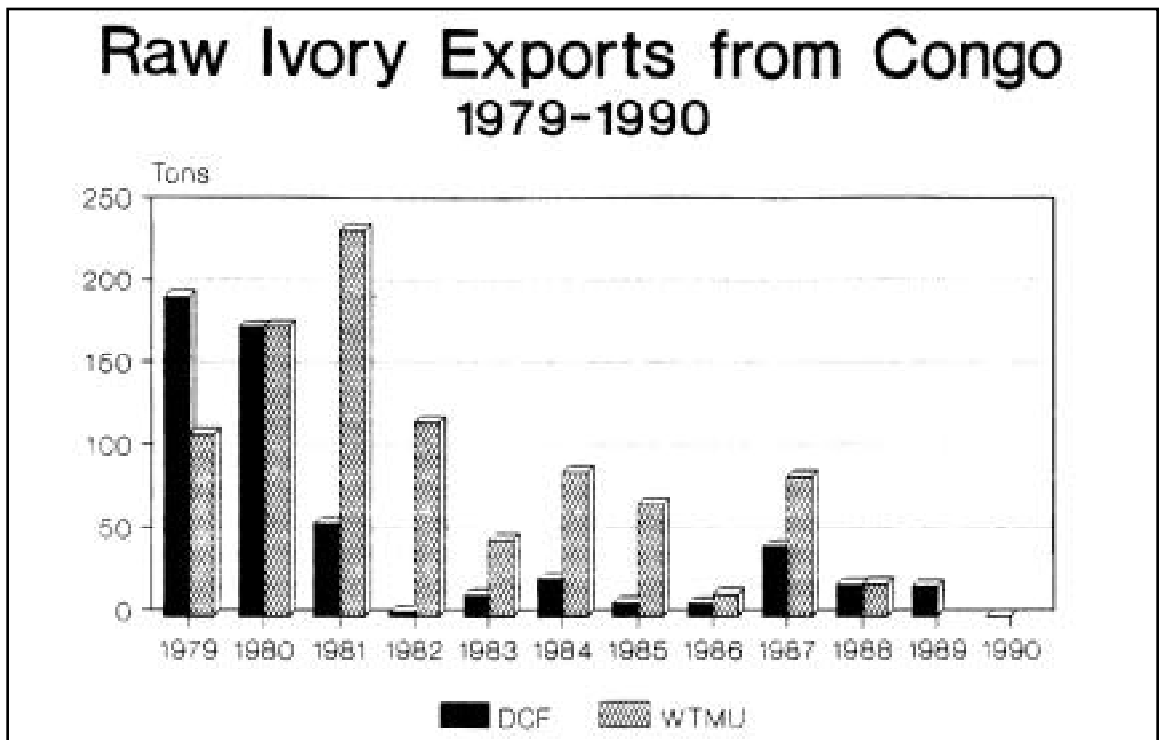


Figure 1: Raw ivory exports from the Republic of Congo between the years of 1979 and 1990 is recorded by the Direction of the Conservation of Fauna in Congo and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit

the legal raw ivory trade averaged 50,679 kg (S.D. 67,979 kg) per annum for the period between 1979 to 1989. The WTMU estimated that the amount averaged 95,475 kg (S.D. 68,466 kg) per annum (Figure 1). For ivory sold between 1986 and 1988 the mean weight was 12.6 kg (Barnes 1989). Extrapolating from this mean weight, the ivory of from 2,011-3,788 elephants worth of ivory was exported from the Congo with some kind of documentation every year for at least ten years. This represents 20,000-30,000 elephants. In addition, it is likely that considerable amount of raw ivory left the country which was not accounted for in export figures. It is impossible to estimate the amount that was smuggled out of the country with no trace that it originated in Congo.

The most likely explanation for the gaping discrepancy noted in the DCF vs WTMU figures above ($r=0.48$, on an annual basis) is the failure of the government to properly monitor and control the trade. The ivory market offered such potential for enormous profits that many people enthusiastically became involved in the trade ranging from the traditional peoples of the forests to highly-placed individuals in large cities. The network enabled tusks to pass easily from forest to exporters with enough profit for several middlemen.

In 1989 there were 80 ivory carvers in Congo. They produced sculptures, jewelry and other items. In principle their activities were controlled by the DCF. Each artisan was required to maintain a register of the certificates of origin and measurements for ivory worked, weights in and out of the workshop, as well as the characteristics of finished products. Subsequently all pieces of art were to be stamped by the Ministry of Forest Economy. In practice not a single step in this process was followed. In addition, because it was so difficult to obtain tusks from official sources, and because there was virtually no control, all of the ivory worked by artisans was illegal. Most of the tusks used by the artisans were small-tusks that were of little interest to the raw ivory exporters (Ndinga 1991). The amount of ivory that was worked and subsequently exported is unknown. One estimate put it at 2.5-3.0 tons per year (Ndinga 1991) but it could have easily been considerably more.

It is difficult to precisely determine what percentage of the ivory that was officially exported from Congo, or unofficially but traceable to Congo, actually originated in the country. The Republic of Congo

shares a 1,500 km long border with Zaire. It is downstream of the Central African Republic (CAR) and shares large borders with Cameroon and Gabon. Add to that the possibility of smuggling to and from Angola. All of its neighbors were major ivory producers during the 1980's. The Oubangui and Congo Rivers, which form the border with Zaire, were notorious crossing points for ivory. Much Zairian ivory found its way to Congo and was collected in Dongou, Impfondo, Moussaka and Brazzaville. The main impetus for this movement is that the Congo is in the CFA franc zone, a convertible currency. One village, Ndjondo, was particularly renowned. It is on the Oubangui River just upstream of the confluence of this river and the Kasai which drains much of central Zaire. It is said that Ndjondo was the major collection point for central Congo basin ivory. In addition to stationary buying points, there is an entire fleet of floating markets that travel up and down the rivers. The river boats are inhabited by merchants, and much of the ivory coming from Zaire was traded right from dugout canoes to the barges *en route* to Brazzaville. The trade was vigorous - one can only guess how much "Congolese" ivory came into the country this way.

Trade across borders was common throughout the region. The official export records for the CAR, nestled to the north of Zaire and Congo, revealed that in the early 1980s only 9% of the ivory exported from that country originated there. The certificates of origin for the rest originated from Zaire (65%), Sudan (6%), Chad (16%) and Congo (4%). It is thought though that in fact 70% to 90% percent of this ivory actually originated in the CAR (Froment 1985). This, of course, represented only the ivory legally exported. When the level of exports between 1976 and 1979 exceeded 450 tons, and after the fall of Bokassa, the trade in the CAR was shut down between 1980 and 1981. But during these two years 1-long Kong and Japan imported 263 tons of ivory originating in the Central African Republic. During the same period it is estimated that between 3,000 and 4,000 tusks entered the (Congo from the CAR (Froment 1985). Because the government found it impossible to control the trade and was receiving no revenue from illicit exports, it reopened the trade. CAR was able to produce official exports of 309 tons of ivory in the two years following the resumption of the trade (Froment 1985). Between 1971 and 1984 the CAR officially exported ca. 33,000 elephants' worth of tusks. It is estimated that in order for the CAR to

maintain the levels of official exportation that it achieved from 1982 to 1984 that it needed a population of 300,000-350,000 elephants. It is difficult to imagine how many tusks actually reached the world market and almost impossible to know their origin. This ignores all of the “objets d’art” which were exported with little or no control. The CAR also had a large complement of carvers.

A conservative estimate of 30,000-40,000 elephants’ worth of ivory were exported from Congo in the period from 1980 to 1989. In the same period Congo issued 1,312 big game hunting licences (Ndinga 1991). Each hunter was allowed a quota of two elephants. This would account for just over 2,624 elephants, assuming that all hunters obtained their quota. It becomes evident that over 90% of the elephants killed in Congo were poached. The figure was considerably higher in the Central African Republic.

This introduction is to remind us of the total anarchy that existed in the ivory trade which resulted in significant population decreases in much of the range of the elephant in the 1980s. It should not be forgotten that most states in Africa were not only incapable of controlling the unsustainable trade and poaching, but in most cases were active partners in it officially, officiously and/or covertly.

In 1989 the world community shut down the ivory trade using two strategies. CITES placed the African elephant on Appendix I, and the media and a number of conservation organizations and governments mounted an intensive campaign to make ivory undesirable. Our colleagues from southern Africa look back on this as the end to an era of good game management for the region. To those of us living in central Africa it seemed the only chance for the elephants, even if common sense

economics would have never supported such a ban (Anon. 1989).

Elephant Population and Poaching Levels in Congo before the Ban

In January of 1989 the European Community (EC) and Wildlife Conservation International (WCI), undertook a survey of elephant populations in northern Congo (Fay and Agnagna 1992). Four sites were censused from east to west, from the Likouala swamps to the hills bordering Gabon. The major criterion of the study was to obtain data from a wide range of habitats with a stratification based on human population density. This survey, which included 401 km of line transects, revealed the presence

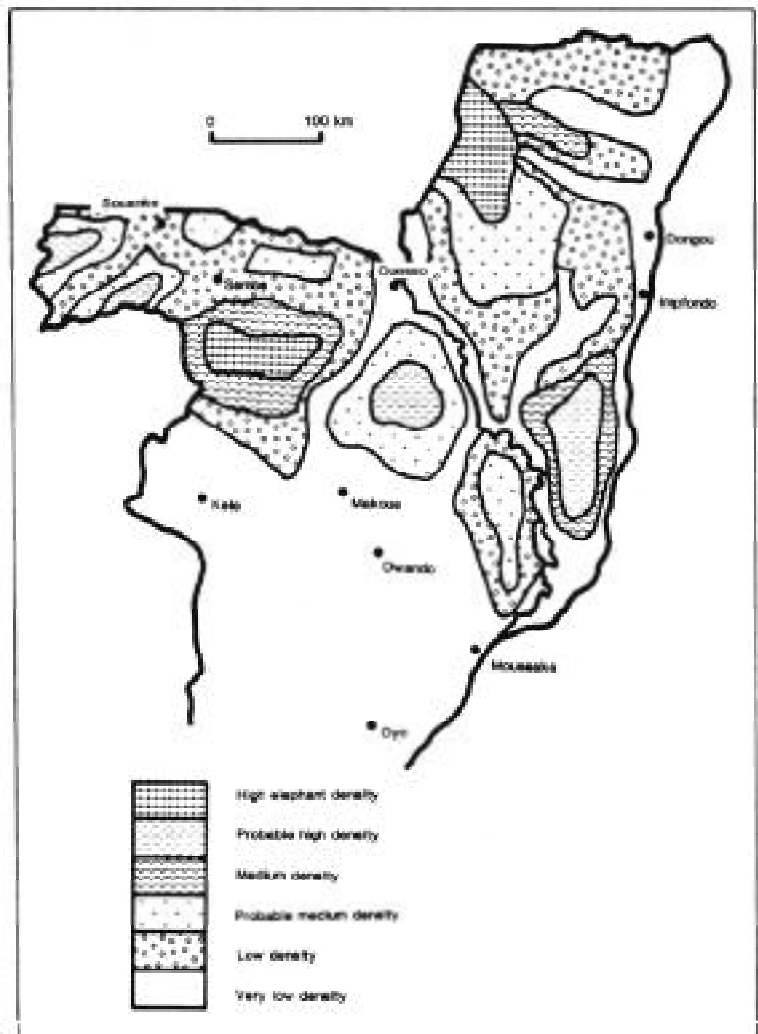


Figure 2: Known and putative elephant populations in Northern Congo (from African J. of Ecology 29:1 77-187)

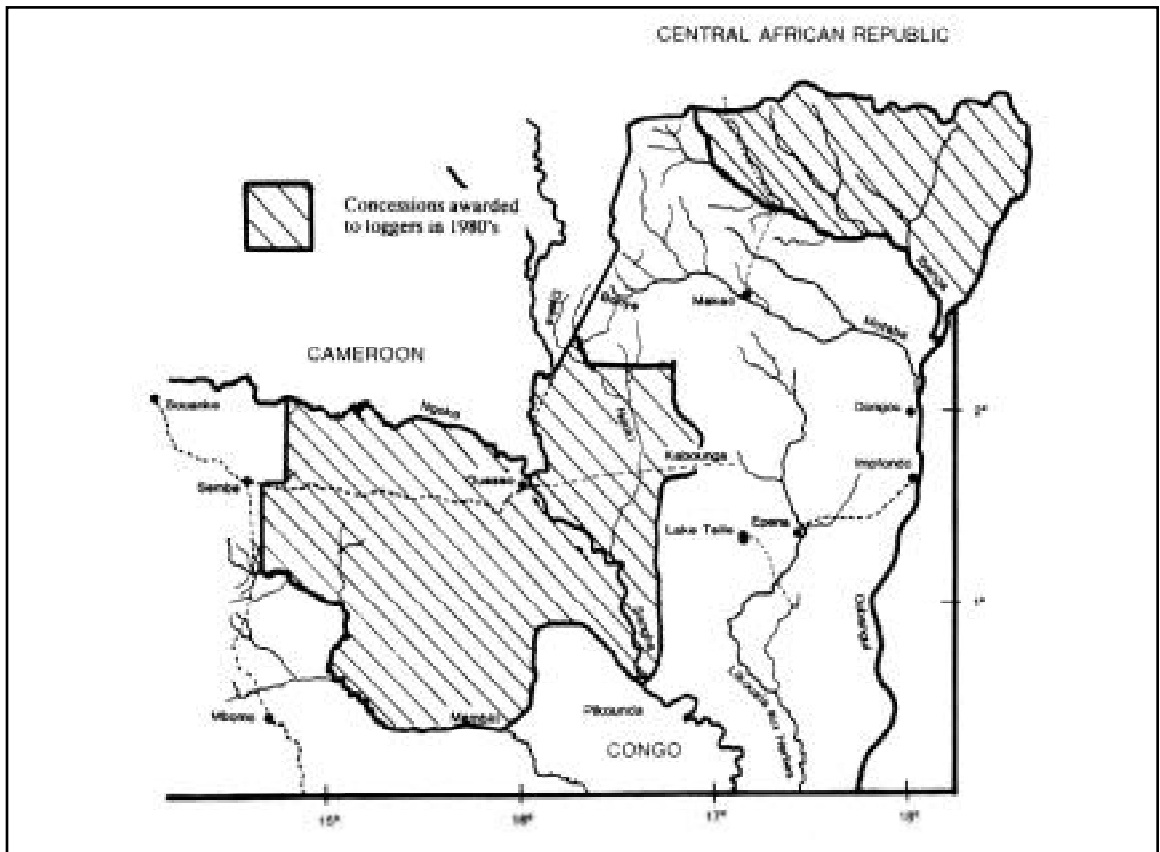


Figure 3: Forest area of Northern Congo awarded to logging companies in the 1980s

of high densities of elephants in two sites, one north of the present Parc National d'Odzala and the other in the proposed Nouabale-Ndoki Park. In addition medium and low densities were discovered in other sites. It was shown clearly that the density of elephants was correlated with the distance from the nearest village ($r=0.83$). Based on this correlation a hypothetical map of elephant density in northern Congo was produced (Figure 2).

The study also revealed, from interviews with local government officials, Moslem traders, resident expatriates, poachers and local villagers, that elephant poaching was proceeding on a large scale throughout the range of the species in northern Congo. Only those areas that were far from human populations were relatively undisturbed.

During the 1980s there was a number of large development projects in the north of the country. Often the employees of these projects had access to

chartered planes and boats which made the illegal export of ivory very easy. Two major road projects, the Dongou to Epena built by the Brazilians and that which linked Owando and Ouessou built by the French, appeared to have major impacts on the elephant populations in these areas. Also during this time more than half of the exploitable forest was awarded to logging companies (Figure 3). The dense network of roads and transportation infrastructure put in place by these companies greatly facilitated poaching and transport of elephant ivory.

In 1990 and 1991 several other sites in the south, the Lefini Reserve in the large savannah area called the Plateau, and a fifth site in the north were surveyed. About two thirds of the forests in the south (Mayombe and Chaillu) are devoid of elephants and elsewhere in the more isolated parts of the forested region of the south, in particular along the Gabonese border, low densities of elephants were found. This is the result of decades of development projects, such as

the construction of the railroad (CFCO), intensive logging and a relatively high human population density (Agnagna *et al.* 1991).

The savannah block of the country, which represents about 30% of the land surface is practically devoid of elephants (World Bank 1991a),

The results from the site in the NW followed the basic premise of the original correlation of human population density, but this turned out to be quite different from what was predicted by the hypothetical map (World Bank 1991). As a result of gold mining there are large numbers of people in the forests of the northwest, Survey results revealed that the density of elephants was extremely high in the not too distant past, based on scars on the trunks of trees, This population, according to numerous informants, was severely depleted in the late eighties for the ivory market, The major perpetrators were said to be the Bangombe Pygmies working in complicity with Moslem traders, Apparently a very efficient means of killing was discovered, Boards with large spikes through them are placed on an elephant trails, Elephants step on these and are immobilized waiting for the hunter to come along to "check his traps" and shoot the elephants.

The Ivory and Hunting Situation in Congo after the Ban

In the conclusion to the paper resulting from our 1989 survey, which was submitted in 1990, it was stated: "The CITES ban on the trade in African ivory and subsequent price decreases have had a limited dissuasive impact on the level of poaching in the forests of northern Congo (Fay and Agnagna 1992)." An economic argument was presented for why the ban had not worked totally . Elephants were free to poachers in the Congo because there was a negligible chance of being sanctioned for the traffic of illegal ivory. Many people had guns which were still perfectly functional and which represented considerable capitol investment, and people were still paying for ivory. At the same time the country was in the troughs of a terrible economic slump thus profit margins on any activity could be very low and still have participants. The recommendation in the conclusion was as follows: "In order for poaching to decrease, even further profits must disappear. This will take place if the bottom falls out of the ivory market and/or with dramatic increases in the all but

non-existent antipoaching effort to control the trade. This, in economic terms, will add a cost factor to the poachers for the elephants being killed. Profit margins since the CITES ban have decreased significantly. Added effort in controlling the trade and massive antipoaching effort throughout Africa will go a long way toward slowing the rate of poaching."

The overall impression that we have today from "the forest, the smallest village, the middlemen, right up to the major players in the market is that poaching has slowed considerably and that the market for ivory has diminished to a very low level. The price of ivory to producers for tusks in the 8-10 kg range in the field has gone, in some areas, from about 48.00 USD/kg down to 8.00 USD/kg (Fay and Agnagna 1991, Fay 1991). This means that the actual shooters, who are often Pygmies that do not own guns, now get some of the meat whereas before they got radios, clothing, shoes, etc. The price to the buyer in Brazzaville is down to 24.00 USD/kg for tusks in the 10-15kg range. There is absolutely no doubt that the differences in prices for raw ivory are due to the ban. This has led to a lackluster market which has resulted in significant decreases in poaching. This does not mean by any means that the trade in ivory, or the hunting of elephants, has stopped, but only slowed considerably.

Information that we have obtained from five levels in the trade in September and October of this year illustrate this.

In September we undertook the first crossing of the proposed Nouabale-Ndoki Reserve. We traversed 200 km of forest from the Sangha basin to the Oubangui basin. The general trend in elephant populations along the walk, while truncated, followed the trend of increase away from human population (Fay 1992). In 1989 we surveyed the western area of the proposed reserve and discovered four elephant carcasses in a cursory search around the main forest clearing there, including one large elephant that had been killed only a few days previously. This year we found no recent carcasses, yet there has been a great deal of elephant activity around the saline. This is a very positive indication that poaching activity has slowed significantly. Throughout the trip we discovered no elephant carcasses. On the eastern boundary of the reserve elephant dung density decreased precipitously. This is because we entered the hunting range of the village of Makao.

In 1989, when we visited Makao, which is 225 km from the nearest town, there were at least 5 west African merchants based there. The atmosphere of the village was one of a frontier boomtown. There were many strangers and one could purchase beer, radios, guns, shells, .458 and .375 ammunition, and an abundance of other consumer goods. At least one motorized dugout arrived daily from the regional capital. One of these was named "La flèche de Makao" (the arrow of Makao) and was owned by one of the biggest ivory dealers in the area. In the forest within 30 km of Makao we found a number of poaching camps, many of which we were told had been inhabited not only by Bantu and Pygmy hunters but Moslem buyers. The majority were for hunting ivory. The general impression was of a village experiencing the euphoria of the ivory boom. Upon our arrival in September of 1992 we discovered a completely different place. The Moslem merchants were all gone except one. He stayed on because he was out of money and had married and had children in Makao. He had no goods for sale. The village was very quiet and empty of strangers, even the most basic of consumer goods such as kerosene and cigarettes were unavailable. Motorized pirogues were a thing of the past. The village now gave the impression of precipitous decline. A merchant showed up on the only boat that had arrived in village in the past month. He had great difficulty peddling his soap and salt, the ultimate basics. A man while we were there had to send someone downstream to buy shotgun shells, they were no longer available in Makao. The boat which normally would have carried thousands of shells of all descriptions previously had brought none. Elephants were still being hunted, however. We found out about two elephants which had been killed in the previous couple of weeks in the area. Our impression that these were being killed primarily for meat. Elephant meat was readily available in the village. When we traveled down the river on the boat, however, only a few pieces were loaded on board. There was no evidence of traffic of either elephant meat or tusks on this boat. Three years previously we encountered a very large cargo of elephant meat coming down the river to Dongou. On a recent visit to Pikounda, on the Sangha River, in August 1992 Mokoko Ikonga, one of our collaborators and ex-Directeur of DCF, met with an ivory trader/hunter whom he knew from the days of the trade. Pikounda, a PCA capital, at the height of the ivory trade was

one of the primary locations where large amounts of ivory from the entire Sangha basin was bought and sold. This trader/hunter said that he was still engaged in hunting and was now stock-piling the product. He admitted that the market had dried up and that it was now difficult to get rid of the tusks at a reasonable price. His collection/hunting strategy had gone from an all out blitz to get as much as possible in as short amount of time, to very selective hunting and buying. This individual said that he was optimistic that the trade would open back up and that he would be in a good position to enter the market with a stock of quality ivory. It is not out of the question that he is currently selling some ivory.

On the 8th of October 1992 Fay visited Ndjondo, the famous ivory trading post on the Oubangui River. This again is a village in precipitous decline. The makeshift bars, of which there were about five, all with paved dancing pads and electric wires and different colored fluorescent bulbs were idle and had fallen into disrepair. The three thousand people on the boat that we were on disembarked more as a curiosity, certainly not to cut deals. While it is impossible to know the past and present levels of ivory traded through this village, it is very obvious that its economy has folded and this is entirely due to the crash in the ivory market. We can only assume that the amount of ivory passing through Ndjondo has plummeted.

On the 11th of October 1992 Fay interviewed Mr. Frank Ebatha, who held the largest ivory quota issued by the government. In 1989, before the ban and closure of elephant hunting in Congo, Mr. Ebatha held a quota of 562 tusks. During the trade, Mr. Ebatha only traded heavy tusks, averaging between 10 and 15 kg with many in the 20 kg range, and a few in the 30 kg range. He said because he only had a limited number it was much better for him to only purchase the best of the product. At the height of the trade he paid anywhere from 100-150 USD/kg for ivory. He then had to pay the service of DCF 20.00 USD/kg and customs the same. He indicated that his average profit was about 30.00 USD/kg of ivory. If we take an average weight of 12 kg we can estimate that Mr. Ebatha was making over 200,000 USD a year on legal ivory. There is no way to verify if he exceeded his limit through the illicit trade. Given the ease of illicit trade before the ban, and his very good position in the business, this is quite likely. Since the ban came into place Mr.

Ebatha says that he is no longer in the trade. His evidence is that he has all the tusks, 10 tons worth, that he bought for the 1989 campaign sitting in the house. He estimates that there are currently about 40 tons of ivory stockpiled in Brazzaville waiting for a buyer.

The last of the levels of the circuit is a discussion that we held with one of the larger volume carvers in Brazzaville. Before the ban this individual operated out of the hotels and his home and had a monthly volume of about 8,000 USD. Post ban times have been extremely bad for business. He still does some carving but only gets the occasional client, mostly French. Otherwise he has now gone back to fishing which was his occupation before he took up carving. He says that his income has decreased precipitously and does not have much hope that the trade will open up again. All of his colleagues, he says, have gone on to other endeavors.

While the efficiency of the DCF has not increased, conservation is on the upswing in Congo. In 1991 there were only 28 official game guards in the entire country or 10,000 km² of elephant range per guard. In 1990 the budget for the entire game department, to manage all game reserves, and enforce hunting regulations and the trade in wildlife products was 35,900 USD (Ndinga 1991), or about 10 cents per km². Needless to say the game department did not possess a single vehicle. At the present time there are several projects afoot. In particular in the past year two conservation projects have started in the north of the country. The Nouabale-Ndoki Reserve project funded by WCI and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Odzala National Park project funded by the European Community. It has become evident that it is totally feasible to put in place an infrastructure, in protected areas, which adds a cost to hunting elephants. In the Nouabale-Ndoki forest we have realized that only a minimum of protection has been needed to make it too expensive for poachers to hunt in the area. In the next year or so the German government and the World Bank, through the Global Environment Facility, will contribute to conservation in Congo. Once these two organizations are in place we will have gone from an annual budget for game and reserve management in the country of 35,900 USD to ca. 4 million USD, an increase of two orders

of magnitude. While it is far from sufficient, it will certainly help to bring us closer to the point where key elephant populations will be afforded protection.

Conclusion

How has our economic argument for continued poaching and trade in ivory held up since we last wrote about it in 1990 (Fay and Agnagna 1991)? Since that time profit margins have continued to deteriorate. The export market, while there is still the possibility to export to west Africa and there is a small amount of ivory that leaves as carved products, has largely collapsed. Poaching continues for three reasons:

- 1) Elephant meat is still a highly prized, and pricey commodity in Congo. This is still an important incentive for people to kill elephants. In isolated areas the costs of getting the meat out—exceed that paid for the meat so meat poachers do not reach extremely isolated areas.
- 2) There are a certain number of speculators who are optimistic that the trade will open up again. These people are stockpiling, but are very selective in what they buy.
- 3) The price of an elephant to a poacher is still only the very minimal costs of shells, portorage, etc. The system of protection is still not in place that would add a significant cost to an elephant, except in isolated areas such as Odzala and Nouabale-Ndoki where there are now conservation projects. Because of the very deteriorated economy in Congo people are willing to work now at very low profit margins, significantly lower than in 1990.

Prognosis for the Future

Congo is in the fortunate position to have exported mostly other people's ivory during the boom years, especially that of Zaire. The elephants of Congo are also naturally protected by the forest where it is very difficult to kill herds of elephants. This has left the country with a significant elephant population. This is in contrast to the CAR which lost most of its elephants during the late seventies and early eighties. If the ban is maintained, and prices remain low, it is doubtful that the hysteria which once dominated the

market will recommence. If the significant progress that has been made in the domain of conservation in Congo in the past year continues until there is a viable system of reserves, as well as stepped up control of poaching in general, the cost of killing an elephant will continue to rise. The end result, even in the short term, may be increasing elephant populations in Congo.

If the trade is resumed in the short term or relatively short term and it becomes acceptable to buy ivory again we would probably see a rapid return to pre-ban poaching and trading levels.—The trade ban though is not a long term solution. The long term solution will ultimately be to make elephants an economically viable commodity through whatever means: photo tourism, hunting safari, meat, ivory, or even for traction. Elephants must also be an integral part of land use management planning, and a proper management infrastructure must be in place that would permit rational exploitation of the resource.

The current reality of central Africa is very far from the ideal. It is very doubtful that these countries will put in place proper land use management practices with proper control structures even in the medium term. More likely we will continue to see deterioration in the state of the economies, law and order, and land use management in the region. On the regional level this leaves us with no option other than to continue with an inadequate short term solution. This does not bode well for a unified front on elephant management in Africa. Ultimately countries capable of management, such as Zimbabwe, will refuse to carry the burden of mismanagement elsewhere. When this happens central African elephants will most likely

face a new onslaught of poaching. We can only hope that before the short term solution is no longer effective that we will reach a sufficiently sophisticated level of management in central Africa to exploit what could be a significant economic resource for the region. This will take considerable investment in land use management, including the creation of protected reserves, training and education.

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