
ELEPHANT POACHING IN KENYA

There has been much speculation over the number of elephants poached in Africa since the CITES meeting held in Harare in June 1997 when elephant populations from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe were downlisted to Appendix II to allow limited trade in ivory. Kenya in particular was the target of adverse press reports that elephants were being “massacred” at rates reminiscent of the holocausts of the 1970s. The reports continue to be widely publicised internationally, despite lack of corroborative evidence from the field. In response to these reports, KWS convened a meeting for all interested parties in November 1997 to scrutinise the KWS elephant mortality database and get authenticated reports from the field security network and private landowners. This meeting was attended by over ten local and international organisations, KWS and landowners, and each expressed concern about the unsubstantiated claims of high numbers of poached elephants.

KWS established an Elephant Mortality Database in 1992 for monitoring all incidents of elephant deaths to enable the relevant departments to respond appropriately to each particular circumstance. The database has information on poaching, illegal trafficking of ivory, patrols, surveillance, problem animal control, etc. The information obtained from the data enables KWS to organise effective anti-poaching operations and wildlife protection and monitoring strategies through its widespread security network.

A strong collaboration and information dissemination network exist between KWS and landowners in all the elephant range within the country. Information in the

database indicates that there has been a decline in elephant poaching in the 1990s compared to the over 7,000 that were being poached annually in the 1970s and 80s. The number of elephants poached between 1992 and 1997 were 35, 75, 61, 34, 29 and 44 respectively. This indicates that 1997 was not different from other years. Even upon examination of the monthly data for 1997 there appears to be no evidence to support claims for an upsurge in ivory poaching since the CITES meeting. The authenticated poaching figures for elephants in 1997 are: January 4, February 4, March 5, April 5, May 10, June 1, July 2, August 0, September 12, October 0, November 1 and December 0 (Total 44). In future, these figures will be submitted to AfESG on a monthly basis for prompt and independent evaluation of elephant poaching trends in Africa.

The current picture of poaching in Kenya must be seen in the proper context. Elephant numbers have grown from 19,000 in 1989 to 27,000 in 1997 and continue to increase at over 1,000 per year. Elephants are also re-establishing their former migratory routes outside parks, some trekking over 200 kilometres away. By June 1997, the number of elephants outside parks exceeded the number inside. This creates a growing threat, requiring greater vigilance and a wider security effort.

Kenya is committed to the conservation of elephants and accurate reporting of poaching incidents. Recently, more elephants have been poached by the pen than by the poacher. This situation must be guarded against as these alarmist tendencies may send the wrong signals and awaken potential poachers.

Source: John Waithaka, Kenya Wildlife Service Species Programme, P O Box 40241, Nairobi, Kenya.
