

Elephant highways of death

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A new study coordinated by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society and other groups found that Central Africa's increasing network of roads – which are penetrating deeper and deeper into the wildest areas of the Congo Basin – are becoming highways of death for the little known forest elephant.

The study, which appears in the journal *Public Library of Science*, concludes that forest elephants are severely impacted by ivory poachers who use roads to gain access into their remote jungle home. In addition, roads serve as conduits of advancing human settlement fragmenting previously intact forests where elephants live.

The authors walked over 6000 kilometers (3,700 miles) in five countries, and covered more than 68,000 square kilometers (26,000 square miles) in systematic surveys. They found that elephant abundance plummeted near roadways, largely due to heavy poaching for the ivory trade. Using elephant dung counts to tally individuals, along with counts of elephant carcasses killed by poachers to estimate illegal killing rates, the authors concluded that elephants are being pushed into the remote depths of large national parks. Forest elephants differ from savanna elephants both genetically and in appearance, having shorter straighter tusks, and smaller size, and are restricted to the forests of west and Central Africa,

An almost perfect juxtaposition exists in many areas between the distribution of elephants and of people, and in many areas elephants are lost as encroachment into the forest increases. The surveys were conducted under the auspices of MIKE (Monitoring of the Illegal Killing

of Elephants) – a program authorized by a resolution from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) to look at poaching trends.

“Unmanaged roads are highways of death for forest elephants,” said Wildlife Conservation Society biologist Dr. Stephen Blake, the study’s lead author. “It is not the physical effect of the road that is the issue – forest elephants actually like roadside vegetation – rather it is the fact that unmanaged roads bring people, with their guns and ammunition. They also become direct pipelines into pristine forest areas for both human settlement and distant bushmeat markets.” A booming illegal ivory trade to nations such as China is driving poaching in these remote forests.

While the study shows that unmanaged roads are clearly detrimental to forest elephants, it also found that protected areas are critical to elephant survival. Even in protected areas with road access, incidents of poached animals dropped off, while the overall abundance of elephants increased dramatically. For example, in Gabon’s Minkébé National Park and its buffer zone, the largest wilderness area remaining in the Congo basin, an estimated 22,000 elephants may survive. The authors note, however, that logging roads are quickly eating into this last great elephant territory. Even in war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, protected areas are proving to be the last strongholds for elephants, despite decades of poaching.

The study is the first major scientific survey of forest elephants since 1989, when their population was estimated at approximately 170,000 individuals. Since then, no further region-wide surveys have been made, despite dramatic increases in logging, road building, and human populations, not to mention civil unrest that often leads to increases in poaching and other illegal activities.

The authors state that forest elephants will continue to decline unless immediate actions are successfully implemented. A region-wide approach to conservation in the remaining elephant strongholds is needed to both halt the spread of poaching and control settlement and range fragmentation associated with road development. The authors further warn that the illegal ivory trade must be brought under control in elephant range-states, transit countries and destination nations. Lastly, they conclude that private logging and mining companies must work to reduce illegal hunting in their concession areas, especially those near protected areas. “In African savannahs, both elephant populations and illegal killing can often be monitored through aerial surveys, whereas elephant massacres in the depths of the forest can remain undetected,” said Dr. Blake.

The study was funded by the European Commission, WWF, WCS and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service African Elephant Conservation Fund which plays an essential role in supporting the some of the most important conservation projects in Africa. As funding for conservation declines across the Congo Basin (the USAID funded Central African Regional Program for the Environment stands to be cut by one-third in the coming year), studies such as this, and more importantly, park management and protection of elephants at a time when the threats they face are increasing dramatically.

“Without focused and timely assistance of elephant specific programs like the African Elephant Conservation Fund, projects critical for the conservation of this species would simply not be possible” said Dr. Blake. “The funding for elephant management in central Africa is much smaller by comparison to those that are available in other regions such as South Africa, where elephants can be adequately protected.”

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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