

## Elephants are vanishing from DRC's best-run reserve

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This shows guards from the Okapi Faunal Reserve in DR Congo with confiscated elephant tusks from poachers. Credit: Okapi Conservation Project

The Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) largest remaining forest elephant population, located in the Okapi Faunal Reserve (OFR), has declined by 37 percent in the last five years, with only 1,700 elephants now remaining, according to wildlife surveys by WCS and DRC officials. WCS scientists warn that if poaching of forest elephants in DRC continues unabated, the species could be nearly extinguished from Africa's second largest country within ten years.

According to the latest survey, 5,100, or 75 percent, of the reserve's [elephants](#) have been killed in the last 15 years. These numbers are particularly shocking as the OFR is considered the best protected [conservation area](#) in DRC. According to WCS, the primary reason for the recent decline in forest elephant numbers is ivory poaching.

The survey comes in the wake of another grim report earlier this month from Gabon where 11,000 elephants were slaughtered in Minkebe National Park over a ten-year period. WCS continue to sound the alarm that rampant poaching is decimating elephant populations throughout Africa, and more needs to be done before populations vanish from many areas.

"The global poaching crisis for elephants is at [epidemic proportions](#)," said WCS Executive Vice President for Conservation and Science John Robinson. "The world must come together to recognize this problem and to stop the killing, trafficking, and demand, or we will lose elephants in the wild in our lifetime."

In the early 1990s, before the civil war of 1996-2003, DRC was relatively calm. In a 1995-1997 survey of the OFR – a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) – WCS found that there were approximately 6,800 forest elephants living in an area of almost 14,000 km<sup>2</sup> (8,682 square miles).

After the civil war, WCS carried out a second survey in 2005-2007, and found that elephants had suffered heavy losses to poaching with numbers having dropped by 60 percent to approximately 2700 elephants. Despite this dramatic decline, OFR had fared much better than did other protected areas during the civil war. For example, in Salonga National Park, a huge area that once held the largest elephant population in DRC, WCS found that elephants had been decimated to less than 1,000 individuals. Thus, by 2007, OFR had DRC's largest remaining forest [elephant population](#).

During the war, park guards could not protect much of OFR but were able to document elephant kills and ivory poaching. Since the end of the civil war, five years ago, park rangers have reduced the decline from approximately 400 to 170 elephants annually.

Despite this success, the park rangers cannot keep up with the dramatic increase in demand for ivory that is being fueled by economic growth in Asia, particularly China, and facilitated by increased access to previously remote forests. Ivory poaching is increasingly undertaken by highly organized, heavily armed criminal cartels.

Since this last census was conducted, insecurity in the OFR has become far worse. Rebels launched a deadly attack on the park headquarters in June 2012, killing park rangers and villagers and destroying park administrative buildings and equipment. The insecurity continues across the entire Ituri landscape with many villages, including Mambasa the largest and closest town, being attacked, dozens of people killed, and 30,000 displaced.

Despite these hard realities, OFR remains the most important site for the conservation of forest elephants and other large mammals in DRC. Additional results from recent surveys show that other wildlife in the reserve fared much better, including the highly important eastern chimpanzee population (approximately 6,000 individuals), okapi, and duikers (small forest antelopes), with almost no change in their estimated populations between 2007 and 2011.

WCS, in partnership with the DRC government's wildlife department (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature – ICCN), is committed to ensure the viability of the Reserve for the wildlife and people of DRC, the fifth most biodiverse country in the world.

James Deutsch, WCS Executive Director for Africa Programs said: "We

salute our partners at ICCN for their dedication and commitment to protect wildlife under the most difficult circumstances. We remain stalwart in our partnership with them and will continue to work in their country to protect elephants and the landscapes where they live. We urge the international community to support the DRC in the fight against the threat of extinction of the forest elephant."

WCS works to stop the killing by collaborating with partners to prevent criminals from slaughtering elephants in Africa's worst killing fields. WCS recruits, trains, and supports eco-guard patrols, focusing their efforts through local intelligence networks and aerial surveillance, and ensuring they get the backup they need from the police, army, and courts.

To stop trafficking, WCS works with governments to detect smuggled ivory at key ports and airports at different points in the trade chain in Africa and East Asia. Techniques are varied and include sniffer dogs to detect ivory, and working with judiciaries and other agencies to increase the number of cases taken to court and rates of successful prosecutions. On both the political and technical sides, WCS aims to ensure that future large ivory shipments are sampled for their DNA, to allow the point of origin of the ivory to be determined, thereby facilitating increased protection of those populations.

Stopping the demand will involve focusing on Chinese social media platforms to encourage public engagement and influence how Chinese government agencies respond to the illegal ivory trade. WCS plans to support the creation of a social media hub, run by a team out of Beijing, that focuses on information sharing, opinion mapping, monitoring and calibration, building partnerships, engagement and mobilization – all based on the real and immediate impacts of poaching and illegal ivory trade.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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