

Poachers turned gamekeepers protect Kenya's elephants

February 27 2013, by Daniel Wesangula



Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) anti-poaching squad perform a patrol in search of poachers and displaced elephants through the Kora National Park, on January 30, 2013. Wildlife protection groups have expressed concern that the amount of elephant poaching in the African continent is now at its highest for 20 years with an estimated 25,000 elephants killed in 2011.

As dawn breaks deep in the savannah of northern Kenya, Kuyaso Lokoloi quietly slips out his hut clutching his mobile phone and heads out stealthily into the bush.

Just a year ago he would have been on the lookout for game to poach in the thick acacia scrub that makes up the remote Samburu district, a key reserve for the increasingly threatened [African elephant](#).

Now, after risking death with armed wildlife rangers hunting him, the poacher has turned gamekeeper to go out patrolling to protect the animals he once killed.

"At that time, I would have been better armed...whenever we saw an elephant in the bush we would stalk it, and then shoot it," he says, pointing at a mock target with an imaginary rifle.

"I had a killer shot...I could put down a [bull elephant](#) with just one bullet."

But over the past months wildlife rangers, faced with a surge in elephant and rhino killing, have been adopting a shoot-to-kill policy towards suspected poachers.

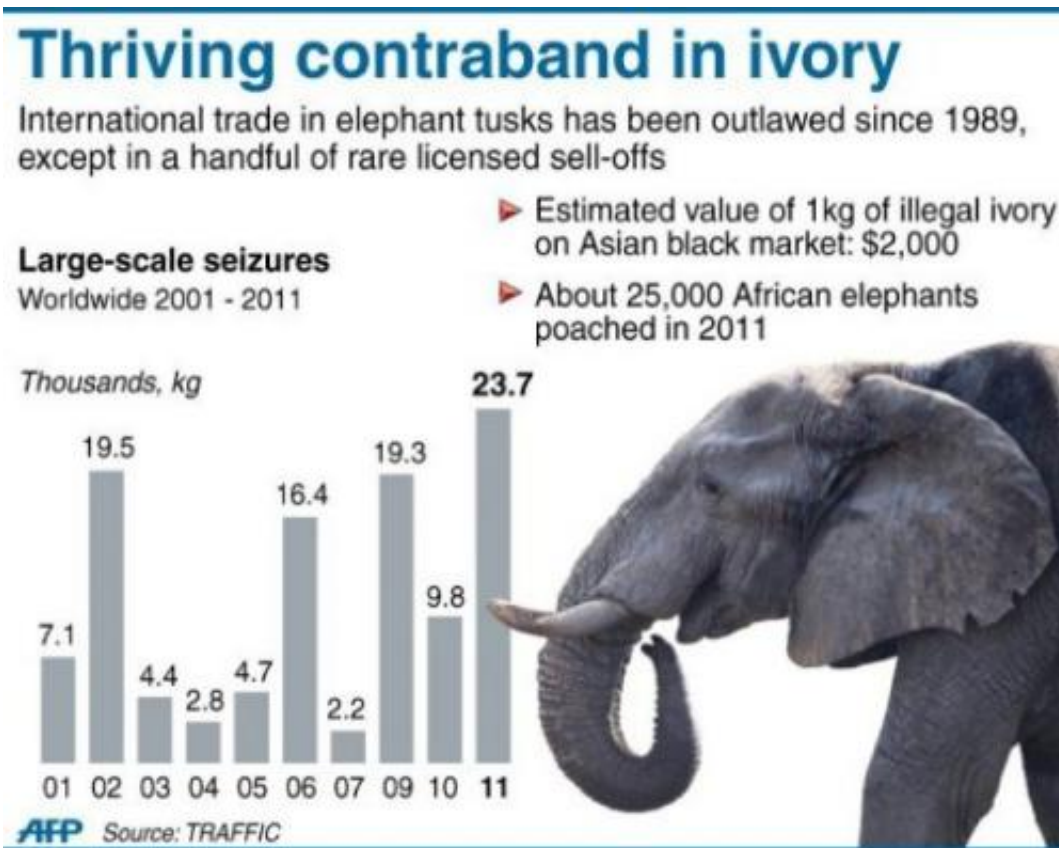
"The life of a poacher was too lonely for me... and leads only to death," added Lokoloi, aged 25, who spent the past decade as a poacher, killing his first elephant aged only 15.

Nor, despite the potential huge money made in the sale of [ivory](#) by poaching kingpin bosses, did the illegal hunting bring him riches. Lokoloi still lives in poverty in a mud hut with little to show from his hunting days.

"We always knew that we were being fleeced... but the middlemen were our only connection to the outside world," Lokoloi said sadly.

"There's no way in hell I would have walked out of the bush with my ivory and taken it to someone who might offer me more money."

The little money he did get he used to support his mother and siblings.



Graphic showing global elephant ivory seizures from 2001 to 2011, the worst year on record.

Now he spends his mornings patrolling in the bush on the lookout for poaching [gangs](#).

Untrained and unpaid, they patrol for two hours in the early morning and say they have already caught several poachers. Once they've proved themselves, they hope to get jobs with the local wildlife conservancies.

"We call them whenever we encounter something out of place in the

bush," Lokoloi says. "We are not paid for it, but we know that eventually the benefits from tourism in the region will trickle down to us."

Kenya's Samburu district, some 400 kilometres (250 miles) north of the capital Nairobi is an elephant belt boasting some of the largest herds of wild elephants in the entire east African region.



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Poaching has spiked recently in Africa, with whole herds of elephants massacred for their ivory. One kilogramme (about two pounds) of ivory is currently estimated to be worth around \$2,000 (1,500 euros) on the Asian black market.

The United Nations wildlife trade regulator CITES estimates at least 25,000 African elephants were massacred in 2011, with the death toll for 2012 expected to be as bad, if not worse.

"This is nothing short of a holocaust," said Iain Douglas-Hamilton, founder of conservation group Save the Elephants.

"At this rate, after 10 years, we will have no more elephant populations. This is a problem bigger than Kenya ... bigger than Africa. We cannot end it because the causes are external and there is very little we can do about it."

In 2012, poachers in Kenya killed some 385 elephants, a rise of a third from the previous year, when 289 were shot.

Lokoloi was responsible for at least one of those deaths, killing a bull elephant in July 2012.

But it was a dangerous game and poachers did not emerge unscathed: at least 40 were killed—as well as four government wildlife rangers—in bush battles last year.

The international trade in elephant ivory, with rare exceptions, has been outlawed since 1989 after elephant populations in Africa dropped from millions in the mid-20th century to some 600,000 by the end of the 1980s.



Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) warders stand in front of tusks recovered from poachers, on January 16, 2013, at their headquarters in Nairobi. With increases in price and demand of ivory in South-East Asian countries, poaching activities have increased with KWS reporting the highest ever recorded loss in a single year of 384 elephants.

"A total ban in ivory trade is the only thing that has been proven to work, nothing else. We have tried having one-off sales, and our herds are being decimated," Douglas-Hamilton added.

The illegal ivory trade is mostly fuelled by demand in Asia and the Middle East, where elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns are used to

make ornaments and in traditional medicine.

While southern African nations are pushing for the legalisation of regulated ivory sales, the prominent conservationist warns them that Kenya's struggling herds are a grim example of what they could soon face.

"The southern African countries should know one thing, the only thing standing between poachers and their herds is our elephants," he said. "If they go, poachers will head south next en masse."

Turning poachers into gamekeepers helps protect the wildlife, but with little money in the task and few employment opportunities elsewhere, there is always the temptation to return.

Joining Lokoloi on his patrols is 20-year-old Nicodemus Sampeere, happily noting that in the past few months they have "saved a few elephants already from direct danger from [poachers](#), as well as those caught in snares."

But despite being one of the few people here to complete high school, Sampeere despairs of finding a job.

"I am among the few educated people in my community but I cannot get a job even at the wildlife conservancies," Sampeere said. "From childhood, elders always tell us never to harm wild animals but what options for survival do I have?"

Lokoloi, fresh back from his patrol, must head out searching for manual work in exchange for food for his family.

"It is hard, but I am determined to give back to a world I have taken so much from," said the former poacher, who gives his tally of [elephants](#)

killed only as "many".

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