

Study documents decimation of critically endangered forest elephant

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African forest elephants are being poached out of existence. A study just published in the online journal *PLOS ONE* and supported in part by San Diego Zoo Global shows that a staggering 62% of all forest elephants have been killed across their range in central Africa, for their ivory over the past decade. The severe decline indicates what researchers fear is the eminent extinction of this species.

"Saving the species requires a coordinated global effort in the countries where elephants occur, all along the ivory smuggling routes and at the final destination in the Far East. We don't have much time," say [Wildlife Conservation Society conservationists](#) Fiona Maisels, PhD, and Samantha Strindberg, PhD, the lead authors.

The study—the largest ever conducted on the African forest elephant—includes the work of more than 60 scientists between 2002 and 2011, and an immense effort by national conservation staff who spent a combined 91,600 days surveying elephants in 5 countries (Cameroon, Central African Republic, the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), Gabon and the Republic of Congo), walking over 13,000 kilometers (more than 8,000 miles) and recording over 11,000 elephant dung piles for the analysis.

The paper also shows that almost a third of the land where African forest elephants were able to live 10 years ago has become too dangerous for them. Results show clearly that forest elephants were increasingly uncommon in places with high human density, high infrastructure

density such as roads, high hunting intensity, and poor governance as indicated by levels of corruption and absence of law enforcement.

Bethan Morgan, PhD, head of [San Diego Zoo](#) Global's Central Africa Program, stressed the importance of this study. "This is the largest collaborative study of its kind across the whole of [Central Africa](#) and really highlights the plight of this ecologically important species. Forest elephants are integral to a functioning forest in Africa, opening up the forest floor and acting as a vital part of the life cycle of many plant species through their role as seed dispersers. We have increasing evidence of a decline in certain tree species as a result of the local extinction of forest elephants."

Distinct from the African savanna elephant, the [African forest](#) elephant is slightly smaller than its better-known relative and is considered by many to be a separate species.

Research carried out by the CITES-MIKE program has shown that the increase in poaching levels across Africa since 2006 is strongly correlated with trends in consumer demand in the Far East and that poaching levels are also strongly linked with governance at the national level and poverty at the local level. This has resulted in escalating elephant massacres in areas previously thought to be safe.

Provided by Zoological Society of San Diego

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