

Mozambique's elephants under threat

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This file photo shows elephants, pictured at the Amboseli game reserve in Kenya, on December 30, 2012. Neighbouring Mozambique's elephant population risks being obliterated within a decade unless tight anti-poaching measures are introduced, conservationists have warned.

Mozambique's elephant population risks being obliterated within a decade unless tight anti-poaching measures are introduced, conservationists have warned.

The alarming scale of the poaching problem has become increasingly

apparent, with an aerial survey of the north of the country in 2011 tallying 2,667 elephant carcasses in the vast Niassa reserve alone.

Mozambique's pachyderms have seen little peace dividend since the nation's brutal civil war ended 20 years ago.

"If we work out the numbers, in eight years probably we will have no elephants left," said Carlos Lopes Pereira, a technical adviser for the global [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) (WCS).

It is left to an anti-poaching force dependent on funding from overseas to protect the elephants and preserve a resource that could draw vital tourist dollars.

The few game rangers that exist are ill-equipped to do their job, using bolt-action rifles dating back to [World War II](#).

In contrast the poachers, thought to be part of vast syndicates based in the Horn of Africa, use high-calibre military weaponry and advanced hunting techniques.

"They are able to shoot many animals at the same time," said Pereira, explaining that poachers know how to approach a herd, shoot the matriarch first and then hone in on five or six other animals amid the chaos that follows.

Already [wildlife authorities](#) are seeing changes in the composition of herds as a result of poaching.

There are now more orphans and calves falling prey to lions, said Pereira.

That is part of a broader trend seen across Africa, with the UN

Environment Programme and other wildlife groups reporting alarming declines in elephant numbers in parts of Central and West Africa.



This file photo, taken on July 20, 2011, shows a Kenya Wildlife Services ranger standing guard in front of an illegal ivory stockpile at Tsavo National Park, southeast of the capital Nairobi. Neighbouring Mozambique's elephant population risks being obliterated within a decade unless tight anti-poaching steps are introduced, conservationists have warned.

Previously secure populations in eastern and southern parts of the continent are now coming under threat as demand for tusks, particularly in Asia, heats up.

The [illicit trade](#) in ivory is estimated to have doubled since 2007 and more than tripled over the past 15 years, according to the Convention on

International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

A recent CITES report estimated that as many as 25,000 elephants were killed for their tusks across the continent in 2011.

In Mozambique, as elsewhere in Africa, the threat is seen as coming from across the border.

"Historically poachers come down from Somalia, through Kenya," said Francisco Pariela, the Mozambique government's conservation director.

But, he admitted, locals are easily recruited to the trade because the "money is tempting".

He also conceded that "state employees are involved, community members are involved".

So far the government, facing a plethora of other human-centred problems, has been slow to react.

Since poaching is listed as a misdemeanour under penal laws that date back to Portuguese colonial times, authorities are limited in the punishments they can mete out.

"We can only fine people, not jail them," explains Pariela. "We have caught many but often nothing happens to poachers. They pay a fine and go free."



This file photo shows elephants wandering around the bush at Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park in Gaza, Mozambique, on October 4, 2001. A recent CITES report estimated that as many as 25,000 elephants were killed for their tusks across Africa in 2011.

Mozambique has been singled out for its poor record in wildlife protection.

In 2012 the World Wildlife Fund said the country was among those doing the least to control the illegal trade in animal parts, along with nations like Laos and Vietnam.

Activists are furious.

"Government is not taking this poaching problem seriously. They are not capable enough of taking firm measures" at both a legal or an

administrative level, said Carlos Serra, programme director at the environmental lobby group Centro Terro Vivo.

The problem needs clamping down on at the highest levels, he said. "Some of the arms used are from the police. Everyone knows this."

Plans are afoot to toughen up Mozambique's laws, but conservationists worry it may be too little too late.

"The ivory trade is completely out of control. Ivory poaching is getting worse by the day," warned WCS adviser Pereira.

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