

Over 300 elephants poisoned in Zimbabwe park

October 21 2013



An African elephant is pictured on November 19, 2012, in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe

More than 300 elephants and other animals have died of cyanide poisoning by poachers in Zimbabwe's largest game park, a wildlife conservation group said Monday.

"In July, around 300 [elephants](#) had died from [cyanide poisoning](#) in

Hwange and were discovered by a group of hunters who flew over the area," Johnny Rodrigues, chairman of the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force told AFP.

He said other animals that have also been killed include lions, vultures, painted dogs and hyenas.

"The authorities only stepped in in September and by then the numbers had escalated. As at last week, about 325 had died altogether."

Government officials were not immediately available to confirm the figure.

The parks and wildlife authority said last week that the [death toll](#) from poisoning was 100. Four poachers have been jailed for at least 15 years each for the crime.

Rodrigues accused the authorities of downplaying the toll, adding that poaching masterminds often got off scot-free.

"The problem is that a big cover-up is going on," he said.

"Those who have been arrested and convicted are the small fry who are being used as scapegoats while the big and dangerous fish are untouched. These include politicians and big business people," said Rodrigues.

Police have given villagers living around the park until the end of October to hand over any cyanide they might have or risk arrest.

However, some traditional leaders from areas bordering the park have pleaded with the authorities to pardon those arrested for poaching, saying they were driven by poverty not greed.

Just 50 rangers patrol the 14,650-square kilometre (5,660-square mile) park, and [wildlife authorities](#) say ten times that number are needed.

There are more than 120,000 elephants roaming Zimbabwe's national parks.

Elephant tusks and other body parts are prized in Asia and the Middle East for ornaments, as talismans, and for use in traditional medicine.

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

Wildlife experts estimate that the illegal international ivory trade is worth up to \$10 billion a year.

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