

Zimbabwe: Poachers poison 91 elephants (Update)

October 1 2013, by Tendai Musiya



In this Sunday, Sept. 29, 2013 photo, workers look at a rotting elephant carcass, in Hwange National Park , Zimbabwe. The stench of rotting elephant carcasses hangs in the air in northwestern Zimbabwe where wildlife officials say at least 91 animals have been poisoned with cyanide by poachers who hack off the tusks for the lucrative illegal ivory market. Wildlife officials now say at least 91 animals have been poisoned with cyanide by poachers who hack off the tusks for the lucrative illegal ivory market. Officials say cyanide used in gold mining was spread by poachers over the flat salt pans around water holes. (AP Photo)

The stench of rotting elephant carcasses hangs in the air in western Zimbabwe, where wildlife officials say at least 91 elephants were poisoned with cyanide by poachers who hack off the tusks for the lucrative illegal ivory market.

Massive bones, some already bleached by the blistering sun in the Hwange National Park, litter the landscape around one remote watering hole where 18 carcasses were found. Officials say cyanide used in gold mining was spread by poachers over flat "salt pans," also known as natural, mineral-rich salt licks. They say lions, hyenas and vultures have died from feeding on contaminated carcasses or drinking nearby.

"The magnitude of what we are witnessing today is much higher than what has occurred previously," environment minister Saviour Kasukuwere told reporters on a trip to the park Monday.

Cyanide attacks the bloodstream, kills almost instantly and causes rapid decomposition. Most of the poisoned elephants died in the past month. The chemical is commonly used by illegal gold panners to separate the metal from surrounding ore and is easily available.

Nine suspected poachers have been arrested this month after the biggest, most brutal poaching spree on record. Three men were sentenced to up to 16 years in jail. The Hwange park, stretching over 14,000 square kilometers (5,400 square miles), has one of the highest concentrations of elephants in Africa.

Kasukuwere, newly appointed to the environment ministry after disputed elections won by longtime President Robert Mugabe in July, said Zimbabwe will intensify efforts to campaign among world nations—including Asia, where there is the highest demand for ivory—to curb a trade declared illegal by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.



In this Sunday, Sept. 29, 2013 photo, a game ranger walks by a rotting elephant carcass, in Hwange National Park , Zimbabwe. The stench of rotting elephant carcasses hangs in the air in northwestern Zimbabwe where wildlife officials say at least 91 animals have been poisoned with cyanide by poachers who hack off the tusks for the lucrative illegal ivory market. Wildlife officials now say at least 91 animals have been poisoned with cyanide by poachers who hack off the tusks for the lucrative illegal ivory market. Officials say cyanide used in gold mining was spread by poachers over the flat salt pans around water holes. (AP Photo)

Tusks of the poisoned elephants are thought to have been smuggled into neighboring South Africa through illicit syndicates that pay desperately poor poachers a fraction of the \$1,500 a kilogram (2.2 pounds) that ivory can fetch on the black market.

"We will cooperate with international organizations such as Interpol to crack down on the pay masters. So the war is on, it's a war which we will

win, we are not going to surrender," Kasukuwere said.

The state Environmental Management Authority is planning to burn the elephant carcasses and call in experts to detoxify the affected areas, beginning with digging out the salt licks and removing the top layers of soil contaminated by the cyanide granules.

Officials believe at least two deeply drilled wells supplying the water holes may have also been contaminated and will likely have to be sealed. New wells will probably be drilled away from the tainted ones.

"We will drill more boreholes in the park because these criminals target areas where there is a shortage of water," said Kasukuwere.

But Zimbabwe's cash-strapped wildlife and environment authorities say they are underfunded, understaffed and poorly equipped because of the nation's troubled economy.



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Kasukuwere said Hwange park, Africa's third largest wildlife sanctuary after the Serengeti in Tanzania and South Africa's Kruger National Park, has only about 150 rangers and few fully operational off-road vehicles for an expanse that ideally should have a staff of at least 700.

Nor can authorities afford to maintain helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft spotter patrols. The environment minister said officials have begun to work with local village communities on the fringe of the park to report the presence of cyanide and that four kilograms (eight pounds) of the deadly poison have so far been recovered.

Grown elephants, the world largest living land mammal, eat about 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of vegetative fodder a day. In the current dry season they drink water at the pans, where the salt and other minerals left by evaporation make them thirstier.



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Soaring vultures, wildlife rangers say, are often the first sign visible from considerable distances of an illegal kill by poachers in a nature preserve.

This time in Zimbabwe, scores of vultures, the first predators at a kill, have died from the cyanide. Rangers say their absence makes the ecological impact of the poisonings much harder to fight and control.

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Citation: Zimbabwe: Poachers poison 91 elephants (Update) (2013, October 1) retrieved 20 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-10-zimbabwe-poachers-poison-elephants.html>

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