

Defending Nigeria's last elephants against poachers

March 25 2016, by Stephanie Findlay



Ranger Hashimu Abdullahi (C), known as 'The Armorer' and his assistant, unpacking some of the over 200 confiscated locally made 'Dane guns' at Yankari Game Reserve in northeastern Nigeria

For years, blacksmith Hashimu Abdullahi was making guns for ivory poachers and hunters invading the Yankari Game Reserve, one of the last wildlife areas home to elephants in Nigeria.

The five-kilogram (11-pound), 1.5-metre-long (five-foot) flintlock muskets are a relic of West Africa's colonial past, when slave traders used and swapped almost identically designed guns for people.

But today the 'Dane guns'—the colloquial name for the homemade firearms—are the weapon of choice for people fighting Yankari's rangers for control of the park and the lucrative animals within.

"I feel shameful. I don't want to see poachers again," Abdullahi, a 44-year-old man with impeccable posture and a neat moustache, told AFP.

Abdullahi, known as 'The Armourer', is an unlikely conservation convert, hired by Yankari as a ranger in 2012 for his talent in crafting the firearms.

Now he is part of a 80-strong team that protects Yankari in a bush battle where ivory poachers, hunters, herdsman and even Acacia tree sap harvesters are pitted against rangers protecting the park and its 300 elephants—the last viable elephant population in the country.

Abdullahi says he and the other rangers are often shot at "by a gun like this", pointing to one of more than 200 confiscated Dane guns, held together with rusted wire and one with a shoulder strap fashioned from faded blue shoelaces.



Wildlife in Yankari Game Reserve is under pressure from subsistence hunters and ivory poachers armed with "Dane guns."

When asked if he was scared to go out on patrol in the evening, Abdullahi replied solemnly: "This is how we took it. This is our job. This is how it is."

Boko Haram threat?

Unlike South Africa, where a rhino poaching crisis is driven by sophisticated international crime syndicates who sell horns to overseas clients, in Nigeria the threat to wildlife is more amorphous.

Hunters emboldened by voodoo charms pick off animals from the reserve and destroy key infrastructure such as bridges to thwart rangers on patrol.

Herdsmen shepherd cows, sheep and donkeys into the park, who chow the food of the elephants, waterbuck and roan antelope.

Now there are growing fears that Boko Haram fighters, on the back foot after a Nigerian military counter-offensive, may set up camp in Yankari and use the bush as a base to launch deadly attacks.



Good luck charms used by illegal hunters and ivory poachers to avoid detection or harm at Yankari Game Reserve in northeastern Nigeria

Haladu Idi, one of Yankari's senior rangers, said his policeman friend working in the strategic northeastern city of Maiduguri warned him Boko Haram could be heading Yankari's way.

The militants have for years been based in the Sambisa Forest, a colonial-

era game reserve in Borno state.

"He called me and said we should be careful of them," said Idi. "I told him, 'Yes, I agree'. He said, 'If you see them you must delete them'."

The worst-case scenario could see Boko Haram start poaching Nigeria's last elephants for ivory to fund their operations, mirroring the business model of other African armed groups including Ugandan-led rebel group The Lord's Resistance Army and Janjaweed horsemen from Sudan.

"Large domestic ivory markets in Lagos and Abuja threaten Yankari's elephants," said Andrew Dunn, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) country director in Nigeria.

"It is essential that we protect Yankari's elephants to prevent their ivory from becoming a source of revenue for Boko Haram."



A screengrab taken on July 13, 2014 from a video released by the Nigerian Islamist extremist group Boko Haram and obtained by AFP

Regaining territory

For now, Boko Haram remains an uncomfortable but still distant menace compared to the more pressing concerns posed by the communities around the park.

The majority of the 141 arrests made in 2015 were "grazers"—nomadic herders coming from as far away as Niger, who pay village chiefs near Yankari to access the reserve.

Subsistence hunters were also detained, revealing the need for environmental education in a harsh, arid region where conservation comes second to daily survival.

"Many Nigerians are hungry and when you're hungry the first thing you need is food," said Nachamada Geoffrey, WCS manager in Yankari.

Still, despite the human onslaught, the rangers are slowly gaining back territory in the reserve.

Last year, Geoffrey and his team recorded just two elephant carcasses, compared with more than 10 in years before.

It's a small victory that makes up for the daily grind.

"It's very fulfilling and very exciting to me to see that we still have these elephants and most times we see them calm and comfortable," said Geoffrey.

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