

Initial survey results reveal a worrying decline in Guinea's forest elephant population

September 14 2017, by Lulu Sloane



Credit: Fauna & Flora International

A new survey by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has highlighted the increasing risk in the density and distribution of forest elephants in Guinea's Ziama Massif forest. This is the first time that such a survey has been attempted since 2004.

Due to the poor visibility in dense [forest](#) it is virtually impossible to rely on elephant sightings alone. Therefore, to be as accurate as possible, FFI replicated the methods used in the 2004 [survey](#) to enable easily comparable results. However, there were so few sightings of forest

elephants during the study that an estimate of the population size could not even be attempted – suggesting a severe decline in numbers.

This is extremely concerning, as Ziama forest – a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve – contains the last remaining population of forest elephants in Guinea and is therefore considered a priority site for [forest elephants](#) in West Africa.

Where have all the elephants gone?

The most recent surveys conducted in the area saw the population increase from 108 elephants in 1991 to 215 in 2004. So where have all the elephants gone? Poaching is a major and increasing threat; however, poaching alone does not explain this drastic decline as it would be unlikely for such a significant number of carcasses to go unnoticed.

Another theory is that degradation and fragmentation of their forest habitat, in particular the bas-fonds (forest wetlands) which are believed to be favoured by the elephants and have decreased over the last ten years due to conversion of land for farming purposes, may have pushed Ziama's elephants into smaller areas of forest outside the reserve.

In reality, the researchers say that the fall in numbers within Ziama is probably due to a combination of both poaching, increased forest disturbance and changes in elephant behaviour which have affected the suitability of the survey methodology used. The results highlight the perilous state the population is in, and the urgency needed to conserve them.



Forest elephant caught on camera trap. Credit: FFI/FDA

Other species at risk

Ziama Massif forest is rich in wildlife; chimpanzees, pygmy hippos, bongo and the Diana monkey are all found in this incredible area. Therefore, destruction of this habitat puts many more species at risk alongside its elephants.

However, while the initial results of the survey are discouraging, there is real hope that the situation can be turned around if the threats are identified and reversed. The framework for developing a sustainable management plan is already in place, with Ziama's designation as a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve designed to achieve just this.

What is more, Ziama forms an important trans-boundary forest complex with Wonegizi Proposed Protected Area across the border in Liberia. This is a crucial corridor for [elephants](#) moving between the two forests, so by improving management, anti-poaching efforts and cooperation between authorities in both countries, both areas and the wildlife that inhabit them, will be better protected.

Next steps

FFI is currently working with farmers from the four villages around Ziama that have the greatest farming presence in the bas-fonds within the forest. The aim is to teach these farmers new agriculture techniques that will enable them to effectively farm closer to their villages and away from the forest, without having any detrimental effects to their livelihood.

The second step will be to conduct another elephant census this winter. This time FFI is planning to replicate the census methodology from 2016 but supplemented with additional surveys carried out at the same time, such as the use of recce transects and camera trapping in order to gain as accurate an understanding of the current elephant population as possible.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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