

# A Nigerian forest and its animals are under threat. Poachers have become rangers to protect both

August 17 2023, by Taiwo Adebayo

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Sunday Abiodun, 40, second from left, a former poacher turned forest ranger, sets out on patrol with other rangers inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria, on Monday, July. 31, 2023. The reserve faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming, and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

Sunday Abiodun, carrying a sword in one hand and balancing a musket over his other shoulder, cleared weeds on a footpath leading to a cluster of new trees.

Until recently, it had been a spot to grow cocoa, one of several plots that Abiodun and his fellow forest rangers destroyed after farmers cut down trees to make way for the crop used to make chocolate—driving away birds in the process.

"When we see such a farm during patrol, we destroy it and plant trees instead," Abiodun said.

It could take more than 10 years for the trees to mature, he said, with the hope they ease biodiversity loss and restore habitat for birds.

He was not always enthusiastic about conservation. Before becoming a ranger, Abiodun, 40, killed animals for a living, including endangered species like pangolin. He is now part of a team working to protect Nigeria's Omo Forest Reserve, which is facing expanding deforestation from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming and poaching.

The tropical rainforest, 135 kilometers (84 miles) northeast of Lagos in Nigeria's southwest, is home to threatened species including African elephants, pangolins, white-throated monkeys, yellow-casqued hornbills, long-crested eagles and chimpanzees, according to [UNESCO](#).





Sunday Abiodun, 40, a former poacher turned forest ranger, patrols on a motorcycle inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July 31, 2023. Before becoming a ranger, Abiodun killed animals for a living, including endangered species. He is now part of a team working to protect Nigeria's Omo Forest Reserve, which is facing expanding deforestation from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

To protect animals and their habitat, 550 square kilometers—more than 40% of the forest—is designated as a conservation zone, said Emmanuel Olabode, project manager for the nonprofit Nigerian Conservation Foundation, which hires the rangers and acts as the government's conservation partner.

The rangers are focused on nearly 6.5 square kilometers of strictly

protected land where elephants are thought to live and is a UNESCO-designated Biosphere Reserve, where communities work toward sustainable development.

"The rangers' work is crucial to conservation because this is one of the last viable habitats where we have forest elephants in Nigeria, and if the entire area is degraded, we will not have elephants again," Olabode said.

For decades, the conservation foundation has assisted in [forest management](#), but hiring former hunters has proven to be a game changer, particularly in the fight against poaching.



Forest rangers line up as they look for poachers inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Omo Forest Reserve, a tropical rainforest, faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming, and



poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

"The strategy is to win the ring leaders from the anti-conservation side over for conservation purposes, with a better understanding and life that discourages them from their destructive acts against the forest resources and have them bring others to the conservation side," said Memudu Adebayo, the foundation's technical director.

For poacher-turned-ranger Abiodun, it offered a new life. He started helping the foundation protect the forest in 2017 as a volunteer but realized he needed to fully commit to the solution.

"Back then, I used to see students on excursions, researchers and tourists visit the forest to learn about the trees and animals I was killing as a hunter," he said. "So, I said to myself, 'If I continue to kill these animals for money to eat now, my own children will not see them if they also want to learn about them in the future.'"



Sunday Abiodun, 40, right, a former poacher turned forest ranger, patrols the Omos Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Omo Forest Reserve, a rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming, and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

He said he now sees "animals that I would have killed to sell in the past, but I cannot because I know better and would rather protect them."

Abiodun's team consists of 10 rangers, which they say is too few for the size of the forest. They established Elephants' Camp, named for rangers' top priority, deep within the protected part of the forest, where they take turns staying each week and organize patrols.

The camp has a small solar power system and a round room where the

rangers can rest amid the sounds of birds and insects chirping and wind blowing through the trees. Outside, the rangers plan their work at a large wooden table beneath a perforated zinc roof.

The roughly hourlong journey from their administrative office to the camp is difficult, with a road that is impassable for vehicles and even motorcycles when it rains. But once there, ecologist Babajide Agboola, who mentors the rangers and helps document new species, declared, "This is peace."



Sunday Abiodun, 40, a former poacher turned forest ranger, armed with a cutlass, looks for poachers inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Before becoming a ranger, Abiodun killed animals for a living, including endangered species. He is now part of a team working to protect the Omo Forest Reserve, which is facing expanding deforestation from excessive

logging, uncontrolled farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

Despite the physically taxing work, Adebayo of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation said the rangers have a better life than as poachers, where they could spend 10 days hunting with no guarantee of success.

"Now, they have a salary and other benefits, in addition to doing something good for the environment and humanity, and they can put food on the table more comfortably," Adebayo said.

The rangers have installed motion-detecting cameras on trees in the most protected part of the forest to capture footage of animals and poachers. In a 24-second video recorded in May, one elephant picks up food with its trunk near a tree at night. Other images from 2021 and 2023 also show elephants.

Poaching has not been eradicated in the forest, but rangers said they have made significant progress. They say the main challenges are now illegal settlements of cocoa farmers and loggers that are growing in the conservation areas, where it is not permitted.





Sunday Abiodun, right, a former poacher turned forest ranger, shows trees recently planted at a site once used for cocoa cultivation, in the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Omo Forest Reserve, a tropical rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming, and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba





Sunday Abiodun, left, a former poacher turned forest ranger, argues with an illegal logger during a patrol inside the Omo Forest Reserve Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Before becoming a ranger, Abiodun killed animals for a living, including endangered species. He is now part of a team working to protect Nigeria's Omo Forest Reserve, which is facing expanding deforestation from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba



Forest rangers, some of them former poachers, salute during a parade in the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Omo Forest Reserve, a tropical rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba





A ranger shows trees recently planted at a site that was once a cocoa cultivation plot in the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July. 31, 2023. Omo Forest Reserve, a tropical rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, faces threats from excessive logging, uncontrolled farming, and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

"We want the government to support our [conservation](#) effort to preserve what remains of the forest," said another poacher-turned-ranger, Johnson Adejain. "We see people we arrested and handed over to the government return to the forest to continue illegal logging and farming. They'd just move to another part."

One official from the government's forestry department said they were not authorized to comment and another did not reply to calls and

messages seeking comment.

Rangers implore communities in the forest, particularly farmers, to avoid clearing land and plant new trees. However, they called the government's enforcement of environmental regulations critical to success.

"We are losing Omo Forest at a very alarming rate," said Agboola, the ecologist, who has been visiting for eight years. "When the [forest](#) is destroyed, biodiversity and ecosystem services are lost. When you cut down trees, you cut down a climate change mitigation solution, which fuels carbon accumulation in the atmosphere."

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