

Elephants in Cameroon Fall Victim to Killings



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The remains of elephants killed by poachers in Boubou Ndjida National Park, Cameroon

BARBARA KLEIN: This is SCIENCE IN THE NEWS, in VOA Special English. I'm Barbara Klein.

MARIO RITTER: And I'm Mario Ritter. Wildlife experts are concerned about the growing number of elephants and rhinoceros being killed in Africa. Today we tell about the issue, and about some efforts to help the animals.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: The nation of Cameroon recently suffered one of the worst mass killings of elephants in years. Up to four hundred fifty of the animals have been found dead in the country's Boubou Ndjida National Park since January.

A United Nations agency expressed deep concern over the killings. John Scanlon is head of CITES -- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

A CITES study showed an increase in the number of elephant kills in two thousand eleven. Secretary-General Scanlon said people are killing the animals for ivory – the substance that makes up their tusks. He said the deaths are a major concern not only for Cameroon but for all areas where African elephants live.

MARIO RITTER: The CITES chief said the incident shows that a new poaching problem is taking place. He said poachers are using high-powered weapons to destroy elephant populations. Reports say groups from Chad and Sudan have attacked elephants during recent weeks. The hunters are thought to sell the ivory to get money, weapons and ammunition for armed conflicts.

CITES is offering African governments support for catching the hunters, and seizing the poached ivory. Countries where poachers pass through or trade are being asked to cooperate. And CITES has appointed its chief enforcement officer to organize an effort to respond to major elephant poaching.

BARBARA KLEIN: The government in Cameroon also has attempted to help elephants. On March first, it sent as many as one hundred fifty soldiers to the Bouba Ndjida National Park. They were deployed in an effort to save the remaining elephants. But a World Wildlife Fund official said another twenty elephants were killed after the soldiers arrived. Another Fund official described the effort as too little, too late.

The CITES study was the second recent one on elephant-poaching from Africa. The first came last month from the animal warden at a U.N. World Heritage Site in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He said poaching is so severe that dogs are trained and used to follow poachers.

(MUSIC)

MARIO RITTER: Like elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns have great value when sold. Some observers say people from Asia are paying high prices for jewelry and other objects made from elephant ivory. They also say more Asians are demanding rhino horns for use as medicine. The horns contain keratin, a protein substance found in material including hair.

In South Africa, thirteen rhinoceros were killed for their horns in two thousand seven. Four years later, almost four hundred fifty rhinoceros were killed in just twelve months. The losses include both white rhinoceros and the smaller, black rhinoceros. Strangely, both animals are a gray-brown color instead of white or black, as their names suggest.

BARBARA KLEIN: Twenty ten was also a record year for rhinoceros kills in South Africa, the world's largest homeland for rhinos. Three hundred thirty three rhinos were lost to poachers during that time. The hunters cut off the rhino's horn while a drug makes the animal unable to move. Many times the rhino is left to bleed to death. Or it never recovers from its drugged condition.

It is easy to understand why poachers want the horns. The International Rhino Foundation says the price of one is close to fifty seven thousand dollars a kilogram. Others place it much higher.

Lucy Boddam-Whetham works for the group Save the Rhino International. She is very concerned.

LUCY BODDAM-WHETHAM: "We are incredibly worried at the moment. We are actually facing the worst rhino poaching crisis for decades."



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A Hong Kong customs officer stands guard near seized rhino horns shipped from South Africa

Rhino poaching is not new. Rhino horns have been used for centuries in traditional human medicines. The horn has been thought to effectively treat high body temperatures and head pain. But recently, false reports have spread that rhino horn material can cure cancer. The reports are perhaps responsible for the huge increase in poaching.

MARIO RITTER: Tom Milliken studies international trade in wildlife products for the organization Traffic International. He says rhino horn cannot cure anything, let alone cancer.

Mr. Milliken directs Traffic International's operations in southern and eastern Africa from Zimbabwe. He says the horn is usually ground into small pieces. These are mixed with medicines to form a pill that is swallowed. Or, he said it can be ground and mixed with water and drunk as a liquid.

Mr. Milliken says rhino horn is especially popular in Vietnam, where it is being sold for home use. An industry there manufactures small containers for grinding the powder at home.

Ms. Boddam-Whetham says many Asians have enough money to buy costly rhino horn products. She also notes the growth of trade links between Africa and Asia.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: What can be done to save the rhino population from falling in South Africa?

One idea being tried is removing a rhino's horn to prevent the animal from being killed illegally. Many ranchers who raise rhinoceros for profit support this idea. That includes some whose animals were killed for their horns. The landowners say horns removed humanely then would be available for the market, reducing the price. And poachers would not attack rhinos without horns. Another idea that has been proposed is making the sale of rhino horn legal. Activists for that plan say it would reduce criminal activity.

MARIO RITTER: Dr. Jacques Flamand is a wildlife specialist in South Africa. He has been working to help rhinos in other ways. These methods also involve ranchers.

Earlier in Dr. Flamand's career, he became known for helping to rescue the white rhino population from disappearing forever. Now he is leading the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project. Its goal is to increase the home territories of rare black rhinos, which can raise their numbers. The activist organizations WWF and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife are working to provide wider, safer spaces where the animals can move freely.

BARBARA KLEIN: Over the years, Dr. Flamand supervised the transport of many black rhinos by helicopter. The process begins when the animals are given a drug that makes them sleepy. Then they are suspended upside down from the helicopter. They hang by their legs on strong ropes for a fast trip to another territory -- much faster than traveling by truck.

Veterinarians say the trip does not hurt the animals. Health experts watch them during the flight, after landing and during their release. And they say the creatures simply wake up in their new surroundings with much more space than before.

But Dr. Flamand said it was not always easy to get landowners to provide that space. Black rhinos interest many people, especially foreign tourists. But, as we know, they also get the attention of poachers. Not all landowners are interested in earning money from the tourist trade. Others are just not pleased to have two-ton visitors.

MARIO RITTER: Dr. Flamand told a VOA reporter that some landowners have combined their properties to create large areas. He said a lot of hard work was needed to persuade them. But now, many landowners have removed barriers that would have stopped rhinos from moving freely.

Recently, nineteen black rhinos were among a group of animals "translocated" to new territory. That brought the total population of the transported creatures to one hundred twenty.

Jacques Flamand says their rangeland territory has been expanded by thirty-four percent. Their safety has been improved. And landowners have increased security to protect the animals – and themselves – from poachers.

BARBARA KLEIN: Dr. Flamand says other wildlife also have gained more security and breeding space from the project.

JACQUES FLAMAND: "It is not only good for black rhino. It is good for elephants, vultures and especially another critically endangered species, the wild dog."

Many activists praise Dr. Flamand's work for rhinos. Still, as one South African said, "Any animal with the possibility of that kind of value will always be in some danger."

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MARIO RITTER: This SCIENCE IN THE NEWS was written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Mario Ritter.

BARBARA KLEIN: And I'm Barbara Klein. Join us again next week for more news about science in Special English on the Voice of America.