

## African elephants: A dying way of life

Some 130,000 elephants lived in Kenya in 1973; fewer than 20,000 remain today. Tanzania's Lake Manyara National Park has lost half its elephant population in the last two years.

With ivory prices soaring, poachers are killing elephants over much of Africa at a record rate. In the latest compilation of African elephant censuses, researchers counted fewer than 750,000 elephants — down from the 1.3 million estimated in 1979 when the last African elephant survey was compiled.

"Although scientists and field workers had long been aware of increased poaching in their immediate areas, it wasn't until the figures for the entire continent were pulled together that anyone realized the magnitude of the devastation," Diana E. McMeekin of the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) in Washington, D.C., told reporters at a press conference last week.

This year, based on a worldwide demand of 800 tons a year for ivory, the AWF expects that another 70,000 elephants will be killed for their tusks and an additional 10,000 young elephants will perish because their mothers died.

But as alarming as conservationists find these numbers, they are even more concerned about which elephants are

being killed. Having exhausted the supply of mature males, which have the largest tusks, poachers are now killing younger males, breeding-age females and especially the matriarchs that lead the elephant families. Recent surveys in some parts of Africa found no elephants older than 30 (elephants can live to be 60 years old), and some researchers have reported seeing small, frightened herds composed almost entirely of calves.

Conservationists expect this switch to females to have a devastating effect on elephants' rich social fabric. Like humans, elephants have largely undeveloped brains at birth. They have relatively little innate knowledge and essentially must be taught, during their 12-year childhood, how to behave and survive as elephants, according to Cynthia Moss, director of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project in Kenya and a senior associate at AWF. "I'm not as worried about the numbers," she says. "I don't think elephants will go extinct in the next 20 years. But their whole way of life is being destroyed. . . . We're losing the whole culture and the whole tradition of elephants."

While ivory has always been a precious commodity, notes McMeekin, poaching




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Poachers are not only taking elephant lives, but also destroying a familial way of life.

of Africa's elephants has escalated in the last several years because of fluctuations in world economic conditions. These have made ivory a solid currency like silver and gold and have helped elevate its price from \$2.45 per pound in the 1960s to as much as \$68 per pound today. Moreover, with the older males gone, poachers need to kill increasing numbers of smaller adults to satisfy the ivory demand. To decrease this demand, the AWF last week asked the U.S. public, which consumes 30 percent of the world's ivory, to voluntarily stop buying it. Current U.S. law controls the amount and condition of ivory imports. Congressional hearings to consider stronger measures, including a possible ban on all ivory imports, are scheduled for next month.

— S. Weisburd



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