



PRESS RELEASE

GABONESE NATIONAL PARKS AGENCY CHIEF ANNOUNCES SHOCKING LOSS OF OVER 11,000 ELEPHANTS IN AND AROUND THE MINKEBE NATIONAL PARK IN NORTHEAST GABON

LIBREVILLE, GABON (February 5th, 2013): Shocking figures have been released showing the drastic decline in Gabon's elephant population as a result of poaching. An estimated 11,100 elephants have been killed since 2004 in the Minkebe National Park alone. It is probable that the majority of these losses occurred over the last 5 years

Gabon holds 13% of the African continent's rain forests but is estimated to be the home to over half of Africa's forest elephants, with a population estimated at over 40,000.

Dr. Fiona Maisels of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), who has been analysing the survey data of the elephant population in Minkebe National Park, explained that: "Comparing the area already surveyed in 2012/13 with the same area surveyed in 2004, suggests that between 44-77% of the elephants have been killed: in other words, that 11,100 elephants have been lost since 2004".

Working with the World Wide Fund Nature (WWF) and WCS, *Agence nationale des parcs nationaux* (ANPN) launched a wildlife survey of Minkebe National Park and its buffer zone in October 2012. The objective is to assess wildlife abundance and human impact across the area and in particular to assess the impacts of the dramatic surge in elephant poaching over recent years. The survey was funded by ANPN, the CITES MIKE (Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants) Programme and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

It was previously thought that Gabon's elephant herd had been declining much more slowly than in the rest of the region, but in the last couple of years there have been a series of poaching incidents, including two elephant massacres detected by staff of the Gabonese National Parks Agency. In April 2011, parks staff detected 27 elephant carcasses in the Wonga Wongué Wildlife Reserve savannahs. Poachers had killed the elephants and then used chain saws to remove the ivory, while leaving the bodies to rot. Parks staff estimated that several hundred carcasses were hidden in the rainforests that cover much of Wonga Wongué area.

In June 2011, a significant increase in human activity in the Minkebe National Park and its buffer zone was detected; a small camp of 300 artisanal gold miners had expanded to over 5000 miners, poachers, and arms and drugs dealers. Park authorities estimated that 50-100 elephants were being killed daily, as a result of increases in demand for ivory from the Far East, and the resulting price hike.

In the last week, as the suspected heavy losses in Minkebe were confirmed by hard science:

- the Judicial Police, working with staff from the Ministry of Water and Forests, ANPN and the NGO Conservation Justice, seized 20 tusks weighing 176kg at Port Môle in central Libreville that were about to be loaded onto a cargo boat heading to Togo;

- ANPN staff, working with military reinforcements in Minkebe National Park, arrested 11 heavily armed Cameroonian poachers with eight tusks, who had penetrated 75km into Gabon;
- a second team of ANPN staff accompanied by gendarmes in Minkebe were ambushed and fired upon by poachers using high calibre rifles, in an attempt to recover two porters carrying 6 tusks who had been arrested;
- a Cameroonian poacher with 4 tusks was arrested in Mwagne National Park;
- a gendarme was arrested in Tchibanga carrying 50kg of ivory in a government vehicle;
- ANPN and WCS staff detected 5 fresh elephant carcasses in Wonga Wongué..
- almost two tons of ivory were seized in Singapore on 30 January, provenance as yet unknown;
- and the estimated total for elephants killed in Africa in 2012 is a staggering 31,800 individuals.

Professor Lee White CBE, head of the ANPN stated that: “over the last 3 years we have deployed 400 additional parks staff, 120 soldiers and 30 gendarmes in our fight to stop illegal killing of elephants for the black market ivory trade. Despite our efforts we continue to lose elephants every day. If we do not turn the situation around quickly the future of the elephant in Africa is doomed. These new results illustrate starkly just how dramatic the situation has become. Our actions over the coming decade will determine whether these iconic species survive.”

The Government of Gabon has responded strongly to this alarming trend of poaching. On June 26th, 2012, President Ali Bongo Ondimba torched Gabon’s entire seized stockpile, stating “Gabon’s elephants are under siege because of an illegal international market that has driven ivory prices in the region up significantly. I call upon the international community to join us in this fight. If we do not reverse the tide fast the African elephant will be exterminated... In Gabon we have zero tolerance for wildlife crime.”

Recently, Richard Ruggiero, Chief of the Branch of the Near East, South Asia and Africa, Division of International Conservation, US Fish & Wildlife Service, stated that: “We are working closely with the Gabonese authorities, who are showing true leadership, but this is a global problem and will require a global solution”.

“International collaboration of law enforcement agencies is desperately needed to dismantle these international criminal networks,” said Bas Huijbregts, Head of the Central Africa strand of WWF’s Illegal Wildlife Trade Campaign. “If we don’t want to lose Central Africa’s remaining elephants, illegal ivory trade needs to be addressed as a serious crime that corrupts governance and seriously erodes national security and economic development prospects.”

Dr. Mike Fay, the explorer who played a key role in convincing the late Gabonese President Omar Bongo Ondimba to create a network of 13 national parks in 2002 and who is currently leading a new initiative to create marine parks and to reform fisheries, stated that “conservation efforts in the Minkebe region have failed to react to the growing pressure of ivory poaching with tragic results. We need rethink how we do business and to act decisively if we are to save the elephant.”

Luc Mathot of the NGO ‘Conservation Justice’, who work in partnership with the Ministry of Water and Forests noted that: “Unfortunately the multiple arrests made in recent months by the gabonese authorities and information we have gathered on the organised traffic of ivory are confirmed by ANPN’s data from Minkebe. Between 1000-3000 elephants are being killed for ivory in Gabon every year. A concerted effort is needed if elephants are to survive. The recent arrests and prosecution of

a prefet and an officer in the gendarmerie are a clear indication of the Gabonese authorities' commitment to putting this situation right.

On learning of these results, President Ali Bongo Ondimba announced that Gabon will pass new legislation to make commercial ivory poaching a crime, increasing prison terms to a minimum of three years for ivory poachers, and 15 years for poaching and ivory trafficking involving organized crime. Speaking in a cabinet meeting the President called urgently for a strong, coordinated and decisive response to this national emergency from all of the security and wildlife management services.

A National Centre for Resource Protection will be created under the auspices of the Minister of Defence in order to bring together all administrations and agencies responsible for law and order and natural resource management, with a clear mandate to strengthen natural resource management and governance and to eradicate corruption that is invariably linked to wildlife crime.

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For further inquiries, please contact:

Joseph Mayombo, Communications Officer, ANPN.

Tél. +(241) 07840015; Email. jmayombo@parcsgabon.ga

Photos to illustrate an article are available at: www.parcsgabon.org/espace-presse/phototheque or by request.

Note to editors:

Twenty years ago, a wave of ivory poaching swept across Africa, killing half of the continent's elephants before the international community responded, banning the international trade in ivory. Today, wildlife crime is on the increase across Africa and once again elephant survival is in the balance. In some countries, a deadly war is being waged on a daily basis by wildlife and national parks staff who face armed gangs who are willing to kill to obtain ivory and rhino horn. Prices for illegally traded ivory and rhino horn have risen exponentially. Today crime syndicates involved in arms, drugs and human trafficking are also dealing in ivory and rhino horn.