



**TRAFFIC**  
the wildlife trade monitoring network

## Despite successes, Congo Basin forests being 'emptied' of their elephants

**Libreville, Gabon** (28 January 2013) – Authorities protecting the Gabonese segment of Central Africa's biggest forest elephant stronghold captured a record number of poachers last week. However, "terrifying" intelligence gathered from those arrested show wildlife criminals still have the upper hand in the battle to save Central Africa's elephants.

A total of 17 poachers were arrested between January 16 and January 23 in the Gabonese side of the Dja-Odzala-Minkébé (TRIDOM) Landscape, an area encompassing Gabon, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo, recognized as a priority place for biodiversity conservation, according to Joseph Okouyi, a senior warden at the Gabonese National Parks Agency.

"We never arrested so many poachers in such a short period of time – a clear sign that our strategy of fighting wildlife criminals through increased manpower is an effective one," he said, adding that a further twelve poachers had managed to avoid capture during the same operations.

But, Okouyi warned that "terrifying" intelligence collected from those arrested hinted that TRIDOM was being emptied of its elephants, and that the only effective way to win the war against poachers is through effective regional and international cooperation.

### **More Resources to preserve Central Africa's elephants**

"Last year we had 20 operational ecoguards at our disposal to patrol an area which at more than 12,000 square kilometers is equivalent to a country the size of Jamaica," Okouyi said.

"Now we have 43 ecoguards. We have two times more capacity."

"With more men you have more patrols and cover more ground. Not only does this result in more arrests, but it sends a strong signal to poachers that we are here."

With up to 40,000 elephants, the TRIDOM Landscape is home to Africa's largest forest elephant population. Unfortunately it is also one of the most dangerous places in the world for elephants, with dozens being killed every day for their ivory.

"WWF congratulates the Gabonese National Parks Agency and military for these arrests," said Bas Huijbregts, head of the WWF's campaign against illegal wildlife trade in Central Africa.

"These operations are even more impressive when we consider they were undertaken in one of the most heavily forested and inaccessible areas on earth," he said.

## **Central African forests are being “emptied” of their elephants**

“Although we are happy with these arrests, terrifying information we have obtained indicates that we have only chipped the tip of the iceberg of elephant killings in this part of Central Africa,” Okouyi said.

Okouyi explained that one of the individuals in custody said that a hunting party was usually composed of at least three hunters, seven to ten porters and a representative of the buyer. A hunting party, he added, ended when each porter carried 40 kilograms of ivory – worth up to \$70,000 per hunting party.

“This can represent up to 40 dead elephants per hunting party,” Huijbregts said.

“Although we are only just beginning to understand the dynamics of this criminal activity, we know that several of these groups are out there every day.”

“The forests of Central Africa are being emptied of their elephants,” Huijbregts said.

### **The need for more collaboration**

But Gabonese wildlife authorities are not just facing an enemy with incredible numbers. There is the added difficulty that many of the actors originate from- and partly operate in other countries, reflecting the transnational aspect of illegal wildlife crime.

“It is unfortunate but true that many of the poachers and many of their bosses in north Gabon are Cameroonian nationals and operate from villages and towns north of the border, as well as its port Douala and its capital Yaoundé,” Okouyi said.

“We also know that some of these hunting parties are commissioned by Chinese nationals.”

“This is why it is so important that we increase our collaboration with neighboring countries, especially Cameroon, but also with specialized international law enforcement agencies such as INTERPOL,” Okouyi added.

According to WWF it is rising demand for ivory in countries like Thailand and China that is pushing poachers to hunt elephants at unprecedented levels.

“Collaborating with demand countries like China and Thailand is therefore essential to stop demand which is the root cause of these massive elephant killings,” he concluded.

###

**Massive quantities of illegal African ivory are being laundered through Thai shops. To save Africa’s elephants it is essential that Thailand closes this legal loophole. Join us in asking Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to ban all ivory trade in Thailand.**

**TAKE ACTION NOW AND SIGN OUR PETITION: <http://bit.ly/13xf6hg>**

**Join us at [www.facebook.com/WWFCentralAfrica](http://www.facebook.com/WWFCentralAfrica)**



*Map of the TRIDOM Landscape which encompasses Cameroon, Gabon and the Republic of Congo. Areas in darker green within the landscape are national parks. Source: WWF*

###

**For any media enquiries, please contact JULES K CARON, WWF Head of Communications for the Illegal Wildlife Trade Campaign, Central Africa Region Programme Offices:**

Tel: +237 79 51 90 97

E-mail: [jcaron@wwfcarpo.org](mailto:jcaron@wwfcarpo.org)

Skype: [jcaron.wwfcarpo](https://www.skype.com/jcaron.wwfcarpo)

#### **About WWF**

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with over 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the Earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

#### **About TRAFFIC**

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature. TRAFFIC is a joint programme of IUCN and WWF.