



High-level Gabonese official arrested for ivory traffic

LIBREVILLE (4 Mars 2013) – A high-level Gabonese official previously suspected of being involved in illegal ivory trade admitted to the criminal police on Saturday to heading one of the country's largest ivory trafficking networks, the conclusion of a coordinated sting which led to the arrest of thirteen individuals within three weeks.

According to sources familiar with the operation, the head of the Bollossoville subdistrict in north Gabon, Athanase Edou Mebiane, told police on Saturday 2 March that he provided weapons, munitions and food to poachers and transported ivory across international borders using official vehicles.

"The suspect admitted to the police he was involved in elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade, and that he used public goods for personal gains," it said.

"The suspect also asked to be forgiven for the harm he had caused," the source added,

The operation, which began on February 12, led to the seizure of 24 elephant tusks, punishable by up to six months in jail and a fine up to 10,000,000 Central African Francs (US\$20,000), and two .458 caliber big game rifles and a 12-gauge shotgun, punishable by up to three years in prison and a maximum fine of 500,000 Central African Francs (US\$1,000).

Luc Mathot, head of the local NGO Conservation Justice which investigates wildlife crime, said Mebiane, who had previously been interrogated by law-enforcement officials, should also be charged for corruption, which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

"The fact that a high-level government official is involved in ivory trade shows the corrupting nature of wildlife trafficking, which robs the people of Gabon of their natural heritage," he said.

"This is an opportunity for Gabon to show the whole world and all those involved in elephant poaching and illegal wildlife trade that it is serious about stamping out this activity," Mathot added.

Rising demand and prices for ivory – especially in East Asia – is leading to an elephant poaching epidemic across the continent, and especially in Central Africa.

Gabon, the last bastion of Africa's forest elephants, has also been hard hit, losing an estimated 11,000 elephants in just one part of the Minkébé National Park in the north of the country between 2004 and 2012.

"Although global demand reduction for ivory is key to save Africa's forest elephants, governments in the region must do more to save this species," said Bas Huijbregts, head of the Central African strand of WWF's campaign against poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

“After the public burn of its total ivory stock last year and its recent decision to ban sales of big game rifles and ammunitions, Gabon has demonstrated its leadership in the fight against ivory poaching in Central Africa.”

“It can continue doing so by prosecuting all those involved in this criminal activity – starting with Athanase Edou Mebiame – to the full extent of the law,” Huijbregts added.

Conservation Justice and WWF are campaigning for greater protection of threatened species such as rhinos, tigers and elephants. In order to save endangered animals, source, transit and demand countries must all improve law enforcement, customs controls and judicial systems. Conservation Justice and WWF are also urging governments in consumer countries to undertake demand reduction efforts to curb the use of endangered species products.

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About CONSERVATION JUSTICE

Conservation Justice is an NGO fighting against wildlife and ivory trafficking. It is active in Gabon and collaborates with the government. Its activities go from investigations, following court cases and providing support the law enforcement organizations. Its unique model is also used in six Central and West African countries. NGO LAGA, based in Cameroon, was the initiator.

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.

To learn more about WWF and TRAFFIC's campaign visit panda.org/killthetrade and follow us on Twitter [@WWF_media](https://twitter.com/WWF_media).

