

Text N°6: Poaching in Gabonese National Parks

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.

5 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 and 77%  
10 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 (World Conservation Strategy), 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  
15 and human impact across the area and in particular to assess the impacts of the dramatic surge in elephant poaching over recent years. 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  
20 carcasses in the Wonga Wongué Wildlife Reserve savannahs. 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  
25 were being killed daily, as a result of increases in demand for ivory from the Far East, and the resulting price hike.

The Government of Gabon has responded strongly to this alarming trend of poaching. On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012, President Ali Bongo Ondimba torched Gabon's entire seized stockpile, stating  
30 "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."

Abridged from <http://www.en.legabon.org/news>, January 02<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.