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## Scores of elephants killed in Botswana amid poaching surge

Armed poachers are trafficking ivory tusks out of the country, targeting national parks and even endangered 'big tusker' elephants

Peta Thornycroft IN JOHANNESBURG

29 February 2024 • 12:41pm



Scores of elephants have been killed for their ivory in Botswana in recent months as a southern African country once considered a sanctuary for wildlife has seen a surge in poaching.

Poachers are thought to have killed at least 60 elephants in the past three months in the north of the country and in Chobe National Park, one of the world's top wildlife destinations.

Gunmen are particularly targeting the few remaining “big tusker” elephants which have already been hunted to near-extinction.

The tusks are being trafficked out of the country by well-organised, well-armed and sophisticated gangs of Zambians operating for syndicates in and around the capital, Lusaka.

Tusks are cut into small pieces in Zambia, before being packaged and transited through other parts of Africa and then sent to Asia.

Conservation sources alleged that the government's wildlife department had been slow to react and had not responded “adequately”. So far no arrests have been made.



Mary Rice, executive director of Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) which has for decades investigated the illegal trade in ivory, said: "We know that poaching gangs have been exploiting the weak governance and enforcement of Botswana's vast wilderness area for several years." | CREDIT: Lutz Jaekel/laif/Camera Press

Keith Lindsay, a veteran elephant biologist and conservation advisor for more than 40 years, told the Telegraph: "The poaching of elephants in northern Botswana is alarming for two reasons.

"There is clear selection of the largest males, which are also those being pressed hard by the trophy hunting industry.

"And there seems to be little concern on the part of the government to check the steady stream of armed gangs coming from adjacent countries."

Air surveys of Botswana's elephant herds have discovered high proportions of corpses, which would cause alarm if seen in other countries, experts said.

Mary Rice, executive director of Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) which has for decades investigated the illegal trade in ivory, said: "We know that poaching gangs have been exploiting the weak governance and enforcement of Botswana's vast wilderness area for several years.

"Recent and documented cases include significant rhino poaching ... but with Botswana's rhino population seriously depleted, gangs are turning their sights increasingly to ivory."

She said the poachers mostly from Zambia and Namibia were well-armed and equipped.



The tusks are being trafficked out of the country by well-organised, well-armed and sophisticated gangs of Zambians operating for syndicates in and around the capital, Lusaka. | CREDIT: StuPorts/Getty Images/iStockphoto

“At the end of 2023 a number of poaching groups were intercepted coming out of Botswana. These groups had a total of around 68 elephant tusks weighing in at more than half a tonne all from elephants poached recently in Botswana. These are the ones that were caught.”

Conservation sources told the Telegraph they thought the elephant death toll was higher than 60, because other corpses had not yet been discovered.

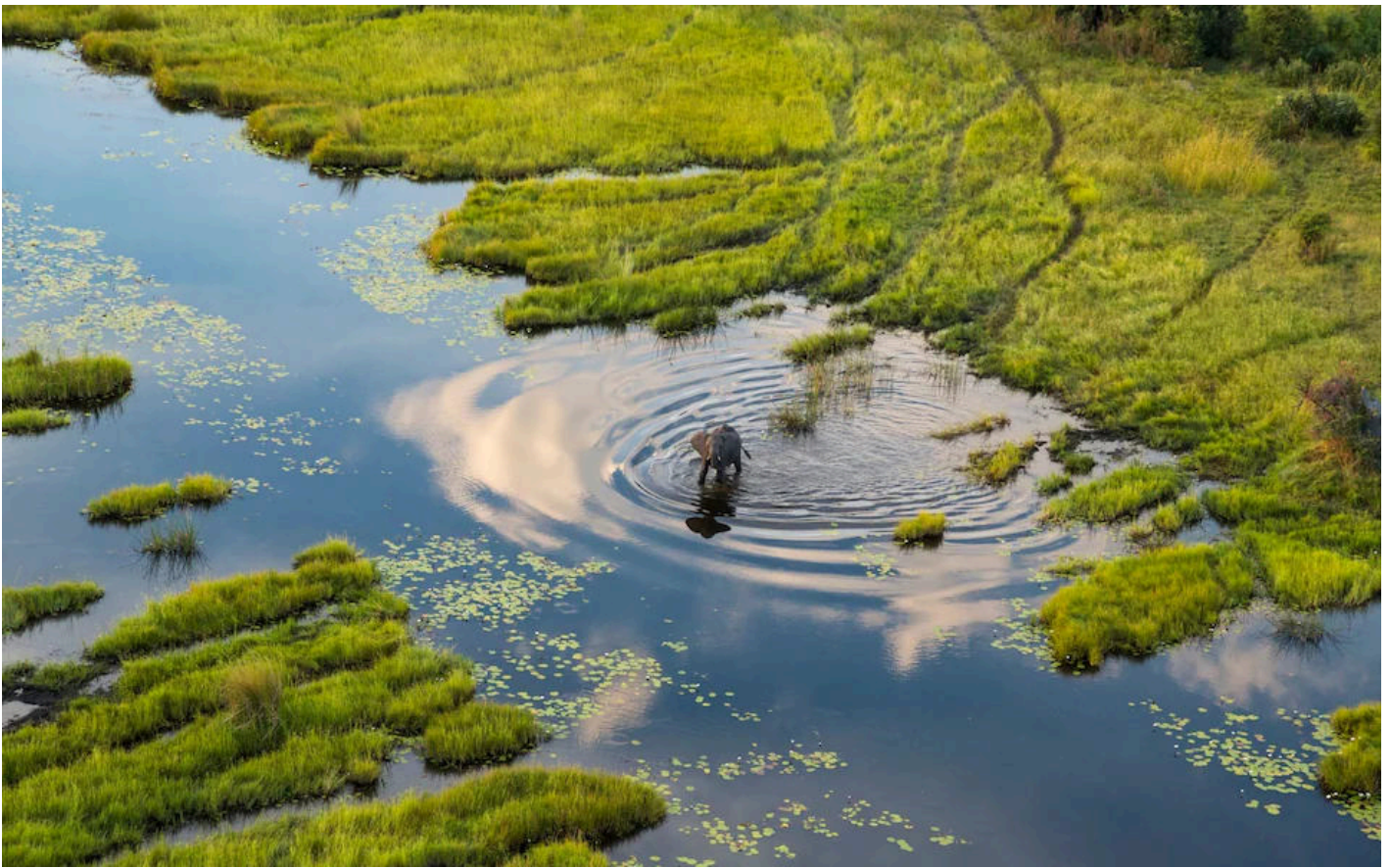
Ms Rice said Botswana’s government had deployed limited wildlife patrols in response and warned that most of Tanzania’s elephant population was wiped out a decade ago when authorities failed to act against poachers.

She said: “We seem to be witnessing the start of another cycle, this time, in Botswana.”

Botswana’s wildlife department declined requests for comment.

Mr Lindsay said neighbouring countries with well-protected elephants, such as Namibia and Zimbabwe, showed no sign of the high carcass ratios spotted in Botswana.

He said: “This suggests strongly that the illegal killing of elephants is beyond the control of Botswana’s government.”



With Botswana's rhino population seriously depleted, well armed and equipped poaching gangs are turning their sights increasingly to ivory. | CREDIT: Peter Adams/GETTY

But Chris Thouless, research director at the Elephant Crisis Fund, cautioned that the high proportion of carcasses could be a natural phenomenon.

He said: “This data is not inconsistent with a higher mortality rate from poaching, but is not strong evidence for it.”

Botswana has the largest elephant population in Africa and experts say statistics indicate that its population of about 130,000, is still, at this moment, stable.

Hunting was banned in Botswana for the last five years of former President Ian Khama’s second term of office which ended in 2018, but returned following the election of his former ally and deputy, President Mokgweetsi Masisi in 2018.

The relationship between the two men deteriorated and Mr Khama now lives in exile in South Africa, and there are concerns about the present government’s apparent “lack of commitment” to Botswana’s wildlife.

“Shortly after the transition, tensions mounted as it became clear that Masisi was not to be Khama’s puppet, and he also denied the former president his demands for special privileges such as a larger staff and the appointment of his brother Tshekedi Khama as vice president,” said Christopher Vandome, Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House’s Africa Programme.

“Masisi has backtracked on a lot of Khama’s conservation policy and efforts in a further attempt to distance himself from the former president.”

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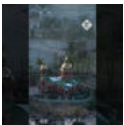
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