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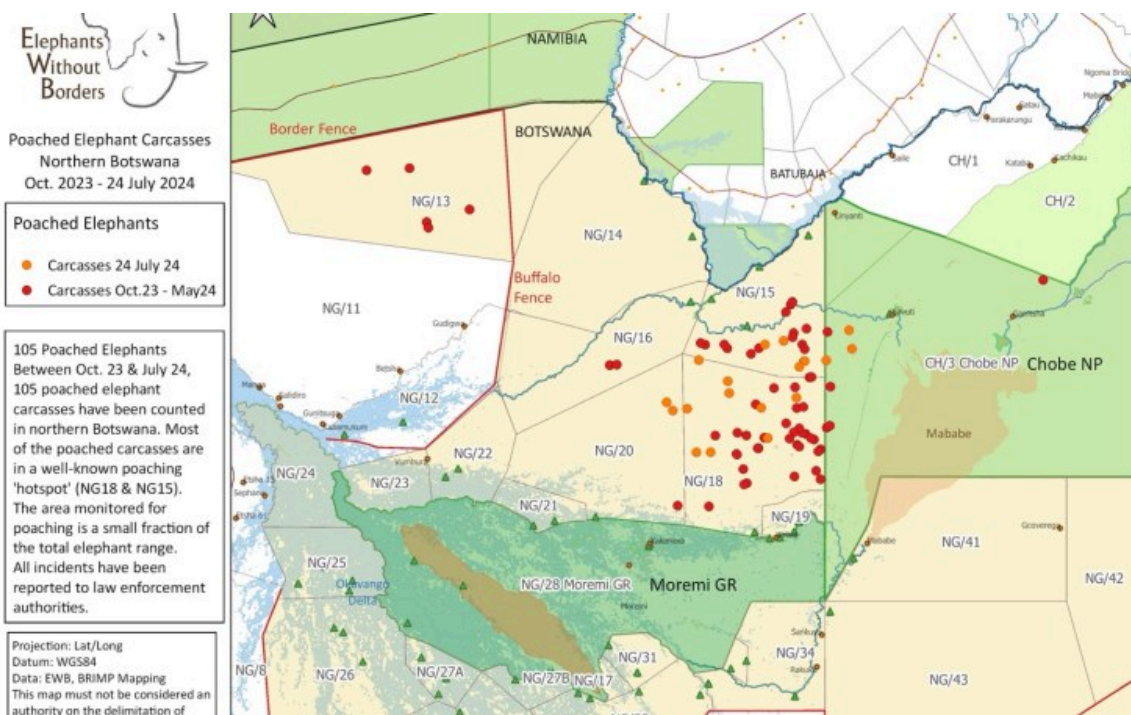
BOTSWANA: SHARP SPIKE IN ELEPHANT POACHING – ‘SOMEONE IS DROPPING THE BALL HERE’

Adam Cruise - All Africa

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There has been a dramatic increase in elephant poaching in northern Botswana, with little official concern about reports of the poaching. An aerial survey in July revealed 19 poached carcasses, bringing the total to 105 since October 2023.

Mary Rice, Executive Director of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), warns that “the increasing number of elephant poaching incidents being documented in Botswana should be of real concern to the wider conservation community”.



Adam Cruise Contrary to President Masisi's claim of reducing elephant numbers to reduce human-elephant conflict, trophy hunting generally takes place far from human settlements as was the case of the largest tusker trophy hunted in the remote NG13 concession in the far

north of the country in 2022, where, incidentally, five of the recent poaching victims have been found.

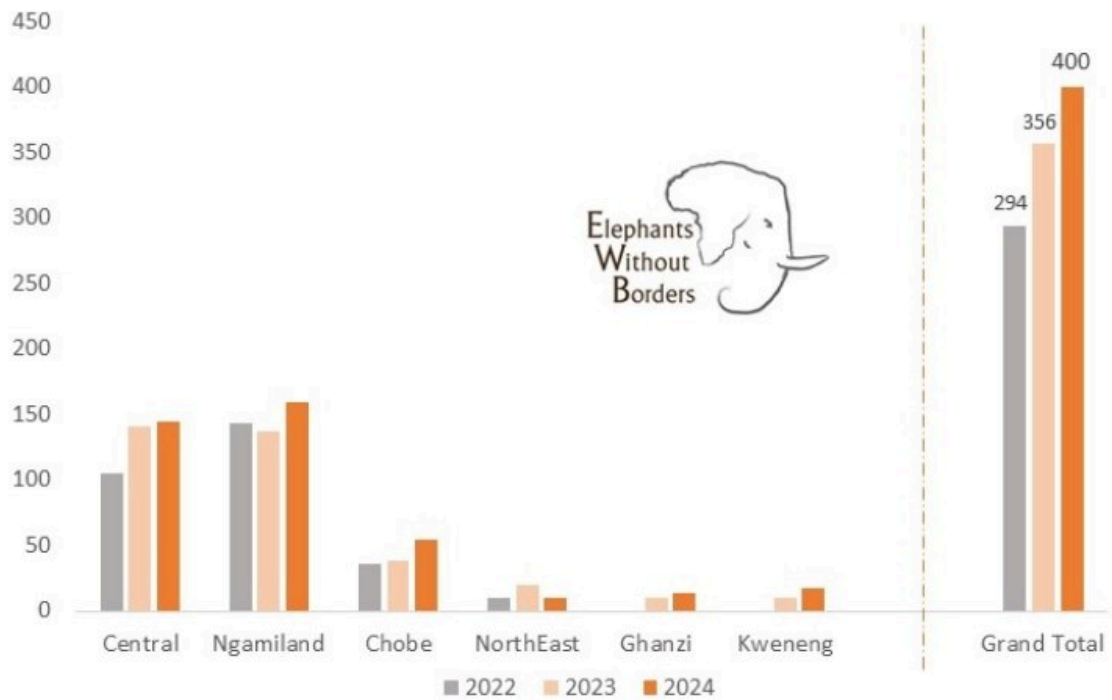
New poaching and trophy hunting epicentre

The concessions where the poaching is concentrated are to the west of the Chobe National Park and just south of the border with the narrow Namibian Zambezi Region where poachers from Zambia are crossing over to poach elephants. The tusks are being trafficked out of the country by organised, well-armed gangs operating for syndicates in Lusaka.

The country's Department of Wildlife and National Parks is aware of all recent cases of elephant poaching, yet to date, there has been no response from the authorities.

“Whilst it may be the view that the figures are relatively low given the size of the population,” says Rice, “we have seen this trajectory of engagement before: failure to address the problem internally, denial of the problem and evidence of seizures and arrests mainly taking place in neighbouring countries, for which those enforcement agencies are to be applauded. It is clear that there is significant intelligence available for targeted enforcement action to take place, but is there the will?”

The lack of political will could be a reflection of President Masisi's desire to reduce Botswana's elephant population. Masisi has vociferously defended the high elephant hunting quotas by claiming that killing elephants keeps the population in check and reduces human-elephant conflict. Trophy hunting in Botswana is at an all-time high – 400 elephants were permitted to be trophy-hunted for the 2024 season.



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This effectively means that the elephant population in Botswana is getting assaulted on two fronts – legal trophy hunting and illegal poaching.

Earlier this year, Masisi threatened to send 20,000 elephants to Germany in response to a suggestion by the German Environment Minister to place stricter measures on the import or hunting trophies.

However, contrary to Masisi's claim of reducing elephant numbers to reduce human-elephant conflict, trophy hunting generally takes place far from human settlements as was the case of the largest tusker trophy hunted in the remote NG13 concession in the far north of the country in 2022, where, incidentally, five of the recent poaching victims have been found.

Poaching also tends to take place far from permanent settlements, where poachers enjoy less chance of detection. All the recently discovered elephant carcasses are in remote concessions, most of them in NG15 and NG18, along with a temporary poacher's camp containing tusks.

Male tuskers targeted

Of the greatest concern, though, is that both poachers and trophy hunters are exclusively targeting bull elephants. All the elephants recently poached were bulls. Poachers favour the bulls, especially mature ones, since they have the biggest tusks and therefore the greatest market value. Trophy hunters are after the bulls for the same reason. According to elephant biologist, Dr Keith Lindsay, this will create a serious imbalance to the social fabric of the elephant population in Botswana.

Trophy hunters tend to argue that “harvesting” mature male bulls are past their prime breeding age. They claim that they are “redundant” and are therefore legitimate targets.

This is problematic in a number of ways:

Firstly, “harvest” implies that elephants are inanimate crops in a field to be collected, mere commodities for financial gain. The term, which is increasingly being used by proponents of trophy hunting attempts to sanitise what essentially is a mass slaughter of sentient animals who live in complex societies. Elephants are highly intelligent and morally agentive. An elephant may physically encounter hundreds of other individuals during their daily range. The other individuals an elephant meets will be related to them by different degrees, and known to that individual based on the frequency and the quality of his or her previous meetings. These factors will shape the nature and define the form of the relationship. Elephants have intensely strong family bonds and are known to mourn the deaths of other elephants.



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Killing just one elephant will have deep psychological effects on the entire clan in the area.

Secondly, removing older males has detrimental effects on the broader elephant society through the loss of leaders crucial to younger male navigation in unknown, risky environments. A study in Botswana in 2020 raised concerns over the biased removal of mature bulls in both legal trophy hunting and illegal poaching. The research finds that “young adolescent males may gain considerable fitness benefits by associating with older males, with potentially decades more experience of utilising their environment safely and effectively, and older male elephants may act as repositories of ecological knowledge to younger males”. Lindsay warns that elephants “can ill afford the loss of their genetic contribution and role as social keystones to the long-term health of the population”.

Rhino population decimated, elephants next

“We have seen these criminal gangs all but wipe out Botswana’s rhino population,” says Rice, “and they now have their sights set on Botswana’s elephants, once the ‘safe-haven’ and ‘darling’ of conservation, and failure to act in these early stages of a growing problem, will only lead to the demise of a once-proud legacy.”

The Botswana government seems to be doing little to deal with the poaching situation while at the same time promoting trophy hunting. Dr Lindsay, who has spent 40 years studying elephants, says that “someone is dropping the ball here. They are failing in the duty to protect the biggest and best elephants, and damaging Botswana’s reputation as a conservation success story”.

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