



Journal of African Elephants

SPOTLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF AFRICA'S ELEPHANTS



NEWS

From poacher to the end user – the intricate web of wildlife criminals

🕒 12TH JUL 2021



By Peter Muiruri, The Standard

Geoffrey Gikonyo lives in a small village on the slopes of Mount Kenya. He is 66 but looks much older. He speaks with a slight stammer, especially after taking a beer or two.

Our meeting has been several months in the making but Gikonyo had used every trick in the book to try and cancel the appointment. He holds some secrets that he would rather keep to himself.

“That was my office,” he tells this writer in confidence, pointing to the forest below the mountain. “That’s where we used to kill them. We may have killed a dozen. Perhaps more.”

He goes on to demonstrate how they laid the traps. “We would dig a hole and cover it with twigs along the elephant route. Do you know elephants don’t forget their paths?” he asks rhetorically. Theirs was a rudimentary method, unlike some poachers today who use sophisticated weapons, including night vision goggles to track their quarry.

Gikonyo and his cohorts would then descend on the carcass with hacksaws while brokers who knew of their missions would collect the tusks for a few hundred shillings a piece. That was in the early 1980s. Gikonyo was never caught in the act and has since reformed while some of his accomplices have since died.

Poaching and eventual sale of ivory and other wildlife trophies has a tight hierarchy, much like a pyramid scheme.

Gikonyo and his ilk, those who do the dirty job of mowing down a wild animal, are at the bottom. They are unknown to the rest of the cartel and receive the least of the proceeds from these crimes.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), most of the poachers come from poor communities and are just looking for food. Such ones use snares, wire traps, poisoned watermelons or nails to catch elephants, and spears as weapons to kill the trapped animals.

Independent poachers, on the other hand, procure their own guns and ammunition and receive higher compensation for the trophies.



“In this group are some wildlife rangers and other security personnel who even quit their jobs to go into poaching. The remuneration they receive out of poaching is very high in comparison to the meagre salaries they receive in formal employment. In any case, they are already adept at using firearms,” says wildlife law expert Didi Wamukoya.

A level above the poachers are the carriers or mules, the fellows who are usually arrested with several pieces of ivory, a rhino horn or some bush meat. In Kenya, though, poachers are sometimes responsible for transporting the trophies.

Wamukoya says this stage requires some level of ingenuity.

“Some have been arrested carrying ivory in a hearse, complete with hired ‘mourners’ in a ‘funeral’ procession. Others have used water bowsers, with water dripping from the tank, a perfect cover to ferry illicit ivory,” she says.

Then there are the middlemen, the dealers who amalgamate the loads for shipping to foreign markets. UNODC says this is the stage where some good money changes hands.

It is through this segment that corrupt security and port officials line their pockets. For example, UNODC says in the single ivory shipment from Africa that led to the arrest of the Shuidong gang, bribes to custom officials ranged between Sh9 million and Sh20 million.

From the middlemen, the goods move to the exporters who use shadowy companies, some dealing in legitimate business, to ship their illicit cargo. As experts in global trade, the exporters will change the Bill of Lading to conceal the port of origin, create a transit point and hide the details of both the sender and recipient.

In the final destination, wholesalers take over the consignment and sell it to the end users, those who process and sell finished ivory, rhino horn or pangolin scales. Here, the products fetch the highest possible price – Sh110,000 for a kilo of ivory and Sh2.5 million for a kilo of rhino horn.

However, Edwin Wanyonyi, Director of Strategy and Change at Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) says despite the use of modern technology by



perpetrators of illegal wildlife crimes, the unit is up to the task of protecting the country’s wildlife with a corresponding drop in poaching activities.

He says rhino poaching has reduced from a high of 59 cases in 2013 to none in 2020.

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001417872/from-poacher-to-the-end-user-the-intricate-web-of-wildlife-criminals>

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