

Malawi police arrest elephant poachers in Kasungu National Park

by Charles Mpaka on 18 April 2024

- *Police and wildlife authorities in Malawi have arrested two men suspected of having killed an elephant in Kasungu National Park.*
- *Residents of villages just outside the park's boundaries informed police about two men selling elephant meat, who were subsequently found in possession of 16.6 kg (36.6 lbs) of ivory.*
- *Kasungu forms part of a transfrontier conservation area that extends into Zambia, a previous poaching hotspot where authorities have spent the past five years strengthening enforcement in collaboration with the International Fund for Animal Welfare.*

Liwonde National Park in southern Malawi; communities have reported increased raids by elephants on farms and granaries since then, with four people killed by elephants between July and October.

BLANTYRE — Police and wildlife department officials in Malawi have arrested two men suspected of having killed an elephant in Kasungu National Park in the country's west. In July 2022, 263 elephants were translocated to the park (<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/08/jumbo-task-as-malawi-moves-263-elephants-to-restock-a-degraded-national-park/>), which forms part of a transfrontier conservation area covering 32,000 square kilometers (12,400 square miles) across Malawi and Zambia. Parks authorities in the two countries, working alongside the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), have invested \$8.5 million since 2017 to secure what was previously a hotspot for poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking.

Police say Grave Nkhoma, 48, and Nickson Nthukwa, 50, were arrested in Kasungu district on April 11 and found in possession of 16.6 kilograms (36.6 pounds) of ivory. Residents of villages just outside the park's boundaries informed police about two men selling elephant meat.

"The community knew where they were operating from in those two weeks so they tipped the police and park officials," said Anthony Chatama, vice chair of the Kasungu Wildlife Conservation for Community Development Association, a local community organization. "This is one role we are playing in our partnership with the government in conservation in Kasungu National Park and surrounding areas."

Joseph Kachikho, police spokesperson for Kasungu district, told Mongabay that investigators confiscated locally made

two used for their poaching operations in the park. They've been detained pending a date to appear in court to be formally charged. Following their arrest, the two men led the officials to the carcass of a bull elephant in the park, where they admitted to killing the elephant on March 28. Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) officials told Mongabay that one of them had previously been convicted of poaching offenses in the same park: Nthukwa was jailed for five years in 2019 for killing an elephant in Kasungu. His sentence was commuted in 2021 and he was released.

Nkhoma has been on a wanted list for several years in connection with multiple incidents of poaching of elephants and buffalos in the park. Officials say he previously avoided arrest by crossing the border to a second home he maintains in Zambia. He's also wanted in Zambia for poaching-related offenses there.



In July 2022, 263 elephants were translocated from Liwonde National Park, where authorities believe the elephant carrying capacity has been reached, to Kasungu NP, where five years of strengthening enforcement had reduced poaching activity. Image by Marcus Westberg.

Kasungu National Park, Malawi's second largest at 2,100 km² (810 mi²), was home to more than 1,200 elephants in the 1970s. However, decades of poaching for ivory

the animals left in the park in 2015.

The park lies on the border with Zambia and forms part of the Malawi-Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area.

In 2017, IFAW, in partnership with the wildlife and parks departments in both Zambia and Malawi, initiated a five-year project to combat wildlife crime in the Malawi-Zambia landscape, which covers Malawi's Kasungu, as well as Lukusuzi and Luambe national parks in Zambia, both also hotspots for elephant poaching.

In Kasungu, the project strengthened security through joint law enforcement operations and training of game rangers and police and judiciary in investigation and prosecution of wildlife crimes, leading to a reduction in elephant poaching cases.

In July 2022, 263 elephants and more than 300 other animals were translocated to Kasungu from Liwonde National Park in southern Malawi, in a month-long exercise.

Since the translocation, villagers around Kasungu National Park's boundaries have reported increased elephant raids on their farms and granaries. In a series of incidents between July and October 2022, four people were killed by elephants.

Malawi DNPW director Brighton Kumchedwa said the human-elephant conflict was due to the newly translocated elephants trying to establish their territory.

"With a new herd, there are always these movements from one corner of the park to the other until such time when they settle down," Kumchedwa told Mongabay in October 2022.

Banner image: Savannah elephants at Majete NP, Malawi.

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