

## After virus, poachers can strike again Elephant poaching at record low

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Elvira Hattingh - Once the world gets Covid-19 under control, poaching - especially the poaching of elephants - could skyrocket again. It will then have to catch up with the accumulated demand for ivory in the world's black markets.

Mr. Daniel Stiles, an independent investigator who has been specializing in illegal markets and trade in game and game products for decades, warns that a recent rise in black market prices for ivory in Vietnam and China are disturbing signs.

He made the remarks in a report that forms part of a series by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). In this, market dynamics as well as the trade prices of illegal game and game products are examined.

Stiles believes that although elephant poaching rates have reached their lowest point since 2003, this could all change within the next two years as there is still a strong demand for ivory.

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"Sporadic restrictions on cities and countries have overturned transport in unpredictable ways. It affected the movement, shipping and flying of illegal products.

"On the other hand, the pandemic also had a devastating impact on game conservation due to the collapse of foreign tourism and hunting activities, which were important sources of money for national protected areas as well as in game parks and private or community conservation areas.

"The financing of anti-poaching activities as well as basic costs have been cut, including staff salaries. It creates opportunities for poachers as it reduces security measures," he wrote.

He believes it may happen that America and Europe can gain control of Covid-19 by next year, while the rest of the world could have a grip on the virus by 2023 - either through vaccinations or other measures.

"The price for unprocessed ivory is well below the peak of 2014, but it is rising again.

"The seizure of more than 500 kg of ivory worldwide in 2019 is also the highest since 2013. However, these figures collapsed in 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions."

The Chinese have to some extent lost interest in buying ivory as an investment. The sale of national ivory stocks has further drastically reduced the black market price. At the same time, the break-up of transnational criminal networks in East and Southern Africa has led to the relocation of ivory poaching and illegal trade activities to West and Central Africa.

"However, numerous seizures of ivory as well as consumer surveys show that there is still a strong demand for ivory in East Asia. The sale of national ivory supplies in both Africa and China has apparently suppressed the ivory price and, with it, elephant poaching since 2015."

Namibia in particular has seen a sharp decline in elephant poaching over the past eight years.

According to figures maintained by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, elephant poaching appears to be declining annually. While in 2016 up to almost 101 elephants were poached, in 2019 and 2020 there were only 13 and 12 respectively.

In 2014, 78 elephants were poached, up from 50 in 2017.

The spokesperson for the ministry, Mr. Romeo Muyunda, previously told Republican, the decline is due to the fact that law enforcers are taking stricter action when it comes to wildlife crime - in collaboration with several law enforcement agencies.

Stiles says elephants are most common in southern Africa and least in West Africa. Since 1995, Southern Africa has the largest elephant population, followed by East and Central Africa. ? - elvira@republikein.com.na