



Elephant poaching could skyrocket after Covid

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PROTECTED: The poaching of elephants may increase again once the Covid-19 pandemic is under control. Photo: FILE

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Once the world gets the Covid-19 pandemic under control, poaching of elephants could skyrocket again because of the accumulated demand for ivory in the world's black markets.

Daniel Stiles, an independent investigator who specialises in illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products, warns that a recent rise in black-market prices for ivory in Vietnam and China are disturbing signs.

He says this in a report that forms part of a series by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC).

In this report, market dynamics as well as the trade prices of illegal wildlife and wildlife products are examined.

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

Logistics

He says Covid travel restrictions have reduced the movement, shipping and flying of illegal products.

"On the other hand, the pandemic also had a devastating impact on wildlife 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."

Additionally, funding of anti-poaching activities has been cut, creating opportunities for poachers as it reduced security measures.

He believes America and Europe may 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 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."

In 2019, the largest quantities were seized in China, including Hong Kong (10.7 tonnes), Vietnam (10 tonnes), Singapore (9 tonnes), Uganda (4.7 tonnes), Kenya (1.6 tonnes), Zimbabwe (1.5 tonnes) and Namibia (1.4 tonnes).

Stiles said the Chinese have to some extent lost interest in buying ivory as an investment.

According to him the sale of national ivory stocks has further drastically reduced the black-market price.

Supply and demand

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."

Statistics provided by the environment ministry in Namibia indicate that by August this year, only four elephants had been poached in comparison to the 12 elephants killed by poachers last year.

In 2014, when poaching started increasing in Namibia, 78 elephants were killed, peaking at 101 poached elephants in 2016.

Since then, there has been a decline in the number of poached elephants with 50 poaching cases reported in 2017, 27 in 2018, and 13 in 2019.

The ministry has attributed the decline in poaching to increased law enforcement activities against wildlife crimes.

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