



CAPETIMES NEWS

Illegal killing for ivory threatens the survival of African elephants



Poaching of high-value species like elephants and rhinoceros is driven primarily by sophisticated criminal syndicates.

Published 1h ago



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Cape Town - Illegal killing for ivory continues to threaten African elephants.

This is according to a study by UCT and Oxford University researchers, who sought to uncover what might drive, facilitate, or motivate continent-wide poaching.

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In the paper, published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, the researchers found that the illegal killing of elephants is associated with poor national governance, low law enforcement capacity, low household wealth and health, and global elephant ivory prices.

They further found that forest elephant populations suffered higher rates of illegal killing than savannah elephants.

The illegal wildlife trade is one of the highest value illicit trade sectors globally, with thousands of wildlife species, worth billions of dollars, being poached, trafficked and sold annually, researchers explained.

This is a major threat to biodiversity and ecosystems, which are the bedrock of human well-being as the recent multi-national UN Biodiversity Conference made clear.

Dr Tim Kuiper of the Centre for Statistics in Ecology, Environment and Conservation at the UCT Department of Statistical Sciences, said: “The strong associations we found between poaching and factors like corruption and human development do not necessarily imply that these factors directly cause poaching, correlation does not imply causation. Deeper research into these associations at particular sites will help to see what underlying processes are at play, and better understand cause and effect. Furthermore, we could not test many plausible drivers of poaching due to a lack of comparable site-level data on things like changes in local political will, influxes of conservation funding, or socio-economic shocks.”

While professor EJ Milner-Gulland from the University of Oxford added: “Although we cannot claim causality, we make some suggestions about what might lie behind the associations which we found, based on understanding from previous research studies. For example, a key finding was that having controlled for other factors, higher levels of local human well-being in the areas around a park was associated with lower poaching. One explanation could be that, in areas of economic deprivation, local residents may participate in illegal killing to meet their basic needs or earn extra income, in the absence of viable alternatives. Another interpretation might be that criminal ivory syndicates seeking to recruit local hunters target these areas because they are able to operate more effectively there for a range of possible reasons.”

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The study suggests that tackling poaching requires dealing with the wider systemic challenges of human development, corruption, and consumer demand, and not just focusing on actions which would be traditionally defined as “wildlife conservation”.

Cape Times

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