

Elephant poaching and illicit financial flows



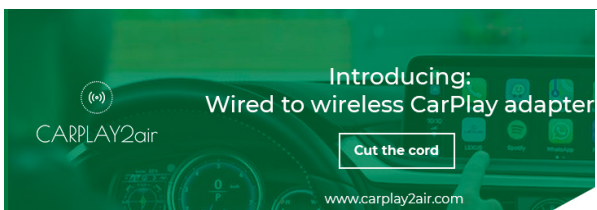
The Victoria Falls Anti-poaching Unit (VFAPU) scouts Tanyala Ncube and Goodwin Chuma on patrol in the Victoria Falls game reserve

Lincoln Towindo

According to the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks), 322 elephants were killed by poachers between 2016 and 2019, largely for their tusks.

These are then shipped out to Asia, via South Africa, but the real number may be much higher, according to wildlife groups.

Much of the poaching occurs in northern Zimbabwe in game reserves straddling the border with Zambia, according to ZimParks, a statutory body responsible for managing the country's wildlife population.



In December 2017, immigration officials intercepted over 200kg of ivory at the Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport that was destined for Asia.

In two separate incidents at the expansive Hwange National Park, 90 elephants were killed in 2013 and 40 in 2015, after poachers poisoned salt licks at watering holes, in what some conservationists described as industrial-scale poaching.

Official figures provided by ZimParks also show that 264 tusks were recovered from captured poachers between 2016 and 2019.

A kilogramme of ivory fetches up to US\$1 500 on the Asian black market, offering lucrative incentive for poachers in Zimbabwe's poorly policed and vast game reserves, says Ms Nyaradzo Zinyowera, a conservationist studying for a doctorate in ecology at the Chinhoyi University of Technology.

A single tusk can weigh up to 110kg, and can sell for as much as US\$165 000.

She says Zimbabwe has lost millions of dollars in potential tax revenue and possibly hunting licence fees to poaching syndicates that illicitly kill and smuggle elephant tusks across the Zambezi River into Zambia.

A combination of a weak law enforcement and anaemic prioritisation of the fight against elephant poaching means that Zimbabwe is at the centre of the multi-billion dollar ivory smuggling racket.

Zimbabwe has a vast elephant population, estimated at around 85 000 – a population only second to Botswana's, but ZimParks is woefully capacitated to protect these animals.

ZimParks manages about 5 million hectares of land in Zimbabwe, accounting for 13 percent of Zimbabwe's total land area, but is grossly underfunded, says its spokesperson, Mr Tinashe Farawo.

Optimally, Zimbabwe's game reserves can accommodate only 50 000 elephants but currently carry over 80 000, according to Mr Farawo.

A global ban on culling and export of ivory by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has only heightened the problem, according to Zimbabwean officials who have pressed the organisation to allow more legal culling and trade.

"Our reserves have breached their carrying capacity and can no longer accommodate all the elephants in the parks hence the escalation of human-wildlife conflicts," says Mr Farawo.

He adds: "We do not have the either the financial muscle or the manpower to protect our elephants."

This has, in turn, made Zimbabwe a lucrative playground for complex international illicit ivory trade syndicates.

Tusks from the 322 elephants that were officially reported to have been killed by poachers over the last four years could fetch over US\$100 million on the Asian black market, money that has slipped through the palms of Zimbabwean authorities.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Interpol estimate illegal wildlife trade is valued between US\$7 billion and US\$23 billion annually, and illicit ivory trade accounts for much of that.

According to the Global Finance Integrity, a US-based think tank which analyses illicit financial flows, this makes illegal wildlife trade the fifth largest criminal industry worldwide.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that African economies lose around US\$50 billion annually to illicit financial flows.

Poachers kill as many as 35 000 elephants each year across Africa for their tusks, according to the Africa Wildlife Foundation – a statistic that suggests Zimbabwe's official figure of 322 in four years may be vastly under-estimating the problem.

A 2016 study by international scholar, Robin Naidoo, on economic losses to tourism in Africa from the illegal killing of elephants, estimates that elephant poaching costs the continent US\$25 million in tourism revenue annually.

Hunting fees gazetted by the Ministry of Environment Tourism and Hospitality Industry last year show that hunters cough up as much as US\$11 000 to legally hunt an elephant weighing over 27kg in Zimbabwe.

The gazetted price for raw ivory is US\$170 per kilogramme.

This money is generally used to fund conservation efforts, including preventing pervasive human-wildlife conflict in settlements around conservancies.

Human-wildlife conflicts accounted for more than 20 lives in 2019 and massive financial losses for villagers living adjacent to conservancies, according to ZimParks.

According to a report released by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Environment and Tourism on elephant management in February, elephant poaching remains a challenge.

“ZimParks made successful arrests and secured significant convictions between 2016 and 2018. Out of 85 arrests, 80 convictions were secured in the courts,” reads the report.

“Because of its successful security and investigations activities, it managed to recover 121 firearms and 37kg of cyanide within the same period.

“As a result of human–elephant conflict, un–quantified crops were damaged as a result of the conflict.”

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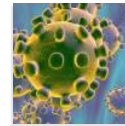
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