

Cameroon: Expanding Cameroon's Successful Green Militarisation Strategy to Protect Elephants



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Elephants in Waza National Park, Cameroon (file photo)

The global demand for ivory is driving heavily armed poachers from Chad and Sudan into Cameroon's Bouba Ndjida National Park.

Poaching threatens the survival of savanna elephants in Central Africa. Over the past two decades, the Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants programme has [recorded](#) 3 004 elephants illegally killed in this region. In April 2023, several elephants were killed in Chad's Beinamar [area](#), close to the Cameroon border, sparking concerns about a potential resurgence of poaching.

The Bouba Ndjida National Park in Cameroon's North Region shares a border with the Sena Oura Biosphere Reserve in Chad. It has been repeatedly targeted by heavily armed poachers from Chad and Sudan who are driven by the international demand for ivory and the need for additional income streams to fund their activities.

Inadequate surveillance capabilities, local tolerance of poaching, pervasive corruption, porous borders and regional instability all increase the park's vulnerability to illegal activity.

In 2012, around 650 elephants were [killed](#) in Bouba Ndjida National Park by a faction of the Sudanese Janjaweed militia. This was reportedly orchestrated by Sudanese clans affiliated with the [Janjaweed](#), along with members of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. At the time, the park was protected by only five rangers equipped with outdated MAS 35 rifles. They were supported by roughly 20 villagers armed with traditional weapons.

This pivotal incident prompted Cameroon to adopt a green [militarisation](#) strategy that integrates military approaches into conservation practices.

Operation Peace at Bouba Ndjida is part of this strategy. Six hundred soldiers, 60 combat vehicles, an air squadron from the Rapid Intervention Battalion and an elite unit of the Cameroon military, are deployed annually from December to May. This time period coincides with the dry season, when elephants migrate across the Chad-Cameroon border to water sources inside the park - and when poachers have historically been most active.

While active, the operation has [helped](#) safeguard the park's elephants and improved the area's overall security. Interviews with community members and administrative and military authorities, indicate that Cameroon's military presence significantly reduces poaching, cattle rustling and hostage-taking from December to early June every year.

This apparent lull may be misleading however, as criminals often shift their activities southward to the Belél area in Adamawa during the annual military operation. When the rainy season arrives and the military departs, hostage-taking and cattle rustling tends to spike again.

Deterring poachers from Cameroon has also displaced their activities to the border areas with Chad. Equipped with powerful weaponry such as AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, the poachers have been able to out-manoeuvre the state at every turn. They use Global Positioning System devices, satellite phones and satellite imagery to track, locate and poach the elephants.

Not only are elephants under threat, but the presence of armed poachers in the park and surrounding areas also creates security challenges for local communities, rangers and Cameroon's military. Tourism in Bouba Ndjida - a vital revenue source for Cameroon - has been crippled, with wealthy [hunters](#) from the United States, Mexico, Germany, France and South Africa deterred by these poachers' presence.

Even though the operation is costly, at around US\$2 million a year, disbanding Operation Peace is not an option. When the Rapid Intervention Battalion scaled back its presence during the 2018 dry season after several years of relative calm, poachers swiftly returned. In the aftermath, six Cameroonian [soldiers](#) and two local guides were killed.

Bouba Ndjida also has too few park rangers, who work in tough conditions without proper equipment or safety measures. These factors highlight the importance of continuing Operation Peace, a high-ranking officer at the Yaoundé army headquarters told the ENACT project.

But Cameroon should also extend its efforts beyond green militarisation. Actively involving local communities in anti-poaching efforts through education and awareness campaigns will foster a sense of responsibility for the park as a sanctuary, and encourage them to protect their environmental heritage for future generations.

This culture of responsibility will be strengthened when authorities consistently ensure the fair and equitable [distribution](#) of wildlife fees to locals, as outlined in the financial and fiscal provisions of the Law on Forestry and Wildlife.

Cross-border cooperation is also essential to combat poaching in Bouba Ndjida. The anti-poaching agreement between Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad, and the regional Extreme Emergency Anti-Poaching Plan in 2013, marked important progress. Ongoing informal collaboration between the three countries also enables intelligence sharing on the Sudanese ivory hunters, who travel long distances across Chad and the CAR to operate in Cameroon.

However, this cooperation needs to be strengthened through the specific actions outlined in Component 2 of the African Union's 2015 [strategy](#) on combating the illegal exploitation and trade in wild fauna and flora in Africa. Central African countries, other than Congo-Brazzaville which is already a member, should also join the Lusaka Agreement Task [Force](#), which works cooperatively on operations against poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

Finally, given the severe impact of elephant poaching on the security and economies of Central African countries, mixed anti-poaching brigades should be activated. These are provided for in the

2011 Sena Oura-Bouba Ndjida binational agreement signed between Chad and Cameroon.

This article was [first](#)

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