

VIEWPOINT

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE IVORY TRADE

IAIN DOUGLAS-HAMILTON

The view has been put forward recently that concern expressed about killing elephants for ivory in Africa is essentially misplaced. The principal proponent of this view, Mr. Ian Parker, in his book *Ivory Crisis*, has stated that the ivory trade is declining and concludes that it does not pose any immediate crisis for elephants. He has asserted that loss of elephant range, due entirely to human population increase, is at the root of current ivory production.

These opinions, which Mr. Parker has stated for several years, have had some influence. At the 1981 IUCN African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group meeting held in Wankie, Zimbabwe, the representatives expressed less feeling of alarm about elephants than had emanated from the reports of a few years previously.

In support of this point of view, Parker and Esmond Bradley Martin, in an article published in *Oryx* in 1982, "How Many Elephants Are Killed for the Ivory Trade?", implied that the amount of ivory entering the trade outside Africa is easy to monitor, that trade statistics published by importing countries give a realistic measure of what was



actually exported from the continent, and that the amount of smuggled ivory is small. Official import statistics, therefore, were supposed to allow accurate measurement year by year of the outflow of ivory from Africa, which they calculated at between 680 to 990 metric tonnes per year.

I would like to question these assumptions and the arguments based on them, and the conclusion that an insignificant number of elephants are being killed for ivory in relation to total elephant numbers.

Is it really true that official import statistics give an accurate picture of world ivory trade, and that the amount of concealed ivory leaving Africa is very small?

One of the undocumented flows of

ivory that is overlooked is that which leaves as personal effects. In Ivory Coast, for example, 29 tonnes of raw ivory were imported in 1977, according to import declarations which I examined. These import declarations were accumulated by the *Service de la Chasse* who monitored imports at the airport. Customs statistics showed a much lower total of 23 tonnes of raw ivory imports for that year. The export figures were even more revealing: only .6 tonnes of worked ivory and .5 tonnes of raw ivory were officially exported. Yet the imported ivory went almost entirely to supply the ivory carving industry to sell their wares to foreign tourists or expatriates working in the capital, Abidjan. Where did the ivory go? One can most reasonably assume that most of this 29 tonnes disappeared overseas in the luggage of tourists, classified as personal effects, and consequently erased from all official statistics.

A similar process has taken place in Burundi. According to a well-placed source in Sabena Airlines, an estimated 120 tonnes of ivory were fraudulently shipped out of Burundi in 1981 and 1982 as unac-

accompanied luggage. This deception occurred so that the dealers could avoid paying freight charges on ivory at \$5-6 per kilo, rather than the lower charge of \$2 per kilo for unaccompanied baggage. The amount of ivory is not trivial. It comes to nearly 10% of Africa's ivory exports estimated by TRAFFIC (IUCN Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit) for those years. What reason is there to suppose that this smuggled ivory would ever appear in import statistics? This amount was carried by only one airline from one country. How many times would the amount be multiplied if all such instances of concealed ivory exports were taken into account? One need look no further than Kenya to find a similar incident in 1983, when an individual attempted to export ivory fraudulently using the name of the United Nations Environment Programme.

A more serious underestimate of the volume of trade in ivory occurred when Parker and Bradley Martin overlooked the export of 315 tonnes of ivory in 1977 from Sudan to Saudi Arabia. Had this figure been included it would have inflated their estimate of the world ivory export for that year by 38%. They have said that this shipment was moved by one dealer. How many similar shipments may these authors have overlooked? How many more have gone entirely undetected?

The next important question is how many elephants do the ivory exports rep-

resent? The answer to this question depends on the mean tusk weight. Parker and Bradley Martin have argued that Hong Kong import licenses examined by Parker in 1978 give a reliable figure of 9.56 kg (21 lbs) mean tusk weight. Their subsequent calculations depend heavily on this assumption. Yet estimates for mean tusk weight in later years collected by TRAFFIC for Hong Kong are much lower at 5.39 to 6.02 kg (11.9 - 13.2 lbs). Either there has been a rapid drop in mean tusk weight, or there is some unaccounted bias that would explain the discrepancy. In the first case a drop in mean tusk weight implies gross over-exploitation of elephants for ivory, in the latter case bias would further throw their calculations into doubt.

Next is the question of the contribution of "found ivory" from "natural mortality" to the ivory exports. According to Parker and Bradley Martin this source accounts for 20% of ivory exports. However, according to Dr. D.H.M. Cumming, of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management in Zimbabwe, the amount of found ivory is as low as 1% in that country. In any event a high proportion of found ivory is likely to come from elephants that have died of wounds caused by man, as was pointed out by Kenya Warden David Sheldrick in the mid 1970s. According to Dr. Richard Bell, Senior Research Officer of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife in Malawi, of the elephants found dead by rangers in Mal-

awi, 85% have died of their wounds.

In summary, therefore, I question any complacent view of the effect of the ivory trade on wild elephant populations when that view is based on Parker and Bradley Martin's assumptions on the size of the world ivory trade, on the mean tusk weight, and on the proportion of ivory derived from natural mortality.

Better indications of the effect of the ivory trade can be gained by monitoring the species at a population level. Although scientific census data are few and far between there is a mass of circumstantial evidence which suggests that elephant poaching for ivory is the most important factor causing their rapid decline over a huge crescent in Central and East Africa that stretches from Cameroon, Central African Republic and Chad in the West across to Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia in the East and down to Zaire, Tanzania and parts of Kenya. In many cases these reports, emanating first from hunters or wildlife officials in the field, have been confirmed by aerial census, sometimes years later.

In several cases sources reported a healthy situation when first approached by the IUCN/WWF/NYZS Elephant Survey and Conservation Programme in 1976, and then later they reported that the situation had rapidly changed for the worse. This was true of reports from Spinage in the Central African Republic, Abel in Somalia, Bell in

Malawi, Joubert in South Africa, Caughley in Zambia, Dupuy in Senegal, La Marche in Mali, and many others. Now most recently Sudan has shown the same dramatic increase in ivory poaching witnessed elsewhere.

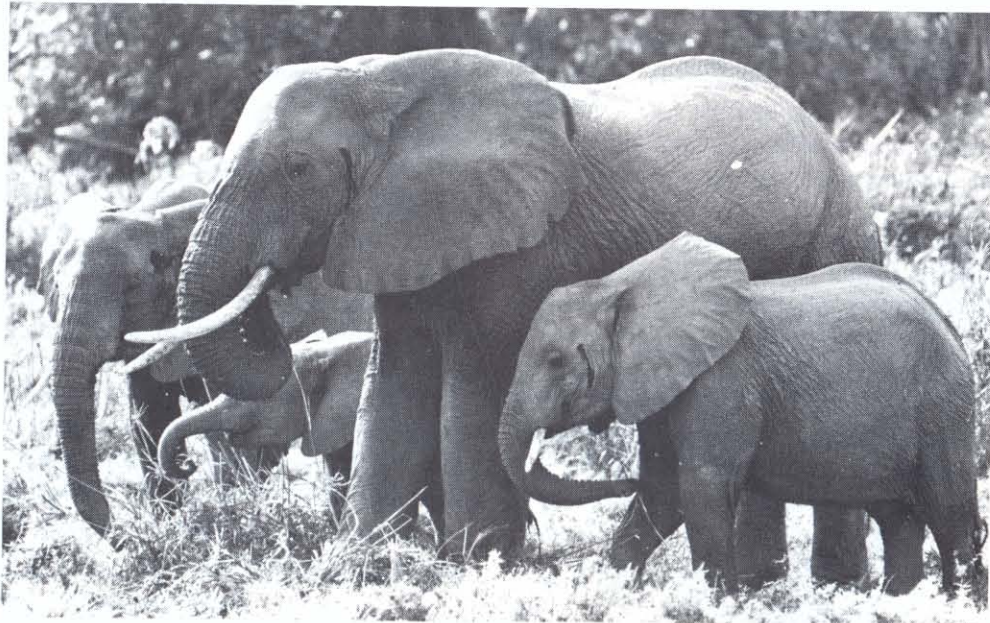
It is important to note that most of the declines were not in areas of human-elephant conflict. They were not in response to an expanding human population protecting its crops against elephants. The idea that current elephant declines and ivory production are closely tied to human population increase is a fallacy. In the decade of 1970-80 the increases in the price of ivory, the availability of automatic weapons to poach-

ers, and the breakdown in law and order in many countries, have been far more important factors than human population increase.

United international action to combat the illegal trade in ivory is still urgently needed, including action that will hinder and frustrate traders who at present knowingly buy "whitewashed" ivory of illegal origin. The total ban in private ivory trading seems to have worked reasonably well in Kenya and should be encouraged in other countries as well. The recent ratification of CITES by Belgium and the banning of raw ivory exports from Sudan at the end of 1983 are steps in the right direction, although it

will still be impossible to assess the underground traffic that will undoubtedly continue.

The ivory crisis is real, and the decimation of elephants over much of their range is happening now — one of the wasteful mammalian tragedies of this century, caused not by human population growth, but by human greed. Once this is recognized, Mr. Parker's further charge, that the ivory crisis was manufactured spuriously by the conservation movement in order to provoke self-serving fund-raising campaigns, can be judged in its proper light.



C. Moss