

DRASTIC DECLINE IN ELEPHANTS AND RHINOS IN C.A.R.



Elephants in C.A.R.

Photo: WWF/Ruggiero

An aerial census of wildlife in the Bamingui-Bangoran and Manovo-Gounda-St Floris complexes in the Central African Republic was completed between 28 May and 23 June 1985. A team of Central African personnel and expatriates surveyed a total of 64,000 km² and found a devastating reduction of elephant and rhino populations. The census was supported by WWF/IUCN, FAO, UNDP (UN Development Programme) and CNPAF (Centre National pour l'Aménagement de la Faune).

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Black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*), which were relatively plentiful until the end of 1982, have been reduced to the point of extinction. This was one of the most important rhino populations remaining in Central and West Africa. In the previous survey, 10 had been seen within a transect, from which an estimate of 190 had been extrapolated. No rhinos were seen during this survey, but hunters' reports of a few tracks on the ground indicate that some rhinos still exist.

A population of approximately 1,600 elephants exists in the Bamingui-Bangoran zone, and of about 2,700 elephants in Manovo-Gounda zone. Despite wide confidence limits, the surveys in both major and sub-areas showed low densities of the same order, between 0.02 and 0.09 per km².

It was estimated that the two zones respectively contained 2,000 and 5,840 dead elephants. The majority of those that were seen were estimated to have died in the years 1982 to 1985.

In addition, trends of large mammal populations were assessed by recalculating estimates for three sub-zones where previous surveys had been made between 1977 and 1980. The apparent trends were tested statistically and in two cases showed highly significant declines of elephants of 77% and 98%, despite the wide confidence limits. The third zone was not amenable to statistical treatment as the standard error had not been calculated for the previous count.

From the estimates of dead and live elephants a carcass ratio was calculated. The carcass ratio is defined as the percentage of dead elephants within the population of all elephants dead and live, and the following results were obtained: Bamingui-Bangoran Complex - 56%, Manovo-Gounda - 68%, Vassako-Bolo - 82%, in Secteur Rhino - 83%, Manovo-Gounda - 65%.

From these two independent lines of evidence, it appears that there has been a catastrophic reduction of elephants in both national parks, with

well over half, and probably more than 75% of the elephants killed in the last three to four years.

The increase in killing of elephants in these areas appears to be related to the reopening of the ivory trade in December 1981, which was immediately followed by the appearance of ivory collectors in the region. Ivory poaching is not a recent activity, although it has undoubtedly become increasingly serious in the parks, as elephants in the south-east of the country have been wiped out.

Both the poaching and the ivory trade are dominated by foreigners. In the northern national parks, the poaching is mainly carried out by horsemen from Sudan and Chad who spear elephants and take the ivory. We saw several freshly-killed groups of elephants with deep spear wounds and gashes in their hind legs. We also saw two calves on their own, probably orphans, and two wounded elephants with leg injuries. In recent anti-poaching operations some spears had been captured with long shafts and broad blades. A U.S. Peace Corps team described a sample of 32 recent carcasses out of which 25 had been speared in the first six months of 1983.

We also saw camps of local people who had killed elephants both for ivory and meat. Several groups of dead elephants suggested that automatic weapons had also been used.

In the same period as the survey, a party of the Head of State was fired upon by poachers in the Manovo-Gounda National Park. A prompt counter-attack led to the capture of 100 tusks. Most of the poachers fled into the bush.

The apparent decline in buffalo and giant eland, 78% and 84% respectively, between 1979 and 1985 seems likely to be due to the epidemic of rinderpest in 1983, introduced by cattle from Chad. Buffalo numbers in the Manovo-St-Floris region were too few in both periods for any meaningful statistical analysis.

The north of both national parks and

reserves has been invaded by pastoral nomads from Sudan and Chad, with livestock running to tens of thousands. The situation has been exacerbated by drought.

Despite these conclusions a magnificent natural resource still exists of vast, unspoilt natural scenery, and a widespread and varied fauna of great potential value as an aesthetic heritage, a base for tourism and hunting, and as a source of protein, if properly exploited.

The situation is not irreversible and recent precedents exist where even worse situations have been contained and finally reversed, with the help of international agencies.

The government has recently shown rapid responses to the poaching, as well as acting on information provided by the survey. It appears that political will exists to rectify the situation, but there are no funds for necessary equipment or salaries.

Preliminary Recommendations

1. All trade in ivory, raw and worked, should be stopped immediately, especially the issuing of permits for the collection of ivory. This action was effective in Kenya and was the only remedy for stopping elephant poaching.
2. United international action should be coordinated to prevent the illegal ivory leaving CAR. A unilateral ban on ivory from CAR would help management authorities in importing countries to arrest Central African ivory traffic.
3. A coordinated government effort to stop poaching should be put into effect immediately with all possible resources at their disposal.
4. A new anti-poaching force should

be recruited solely for national parks.

5. Intervention should be sought from bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental and private sources.

6. A number of surviving rhino should be captured and removed to centres overseas in order to ensure the long-term survival of the gene pool.

Political Reaction to the Elephant and Rhino Situation

At the request of the Haut Commissaire TEFOP the survey mission, with the UNDP resident representative, and the FAO representative were granted an audience with the Head of State, President General André Kolingba. President Kolingba was well-informed of the situation in the north of the country, having personal experience of the problem. The survey team gave a summary report, with figures, maps and photographs. The President expressed satisfaction with the report, but was deeply disturbed and concerned by the quantitative evidence of the massacre of elephants in the parks, and the near disappearance of the rhino.

The President expressed his agreement with all the recommendations above, including the ban on collecting ivory, but stressed the absolute necessity for donors to help with all possible means in carrying out an emergency conservation programme.

The Minister of Planning confirmed the high priority attached by the Government to stopping the destruction of the country's wildlife resource, and recognized the immediate urgency of anti-poaching operations for saving the remaining elephants.

The U.S. and French embassies both expressed an interest in helping to reduce the decline of elephants in any way they could.

I. Douglas Hamilton
J.M. Froment
G. Doungoubé

Actual report 1985/008

WWF MONTHLY REPORT, SEPTEMBER 1985

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