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LAEBRA 1985/006

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13 September 1985

## Central Africa tackles elephant slaughter

The drought has attracted nomads into the Central African Republic, bringing ivory poaching and cattle disease. A recent aerial survey found nearly twice as many corpses as live elephants. However, after his personal helicopter was attacked by poachers, President Kolingba has ordered the crack presidential guard into the parks.

WITH PHOTOS

Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton is a Kenya-based conservationist, and a leading expert on African elephants.

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1410 words

elephants

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Central Africa tackles elephant slaughter

by Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton

Bangui, Central African Republic - After his personal helicopter was shot at by ivory poachers, the Central African Republic's head of state, General Andre Kolingba, ordered his elite, French-trained presidential guard into the national parks.

The aerial census <sup>J.M. Fromont,</sup> ~~by~~ and <sup>and I</sup> Gustave Doungoube have just carried out reveals the scale of the decline in elephants and rhinos which started under the late Emperor Bokassa. The Central African Republic (CAR) has probably lost three-quarters of its elephants in the last three to four years. The black rhino is now virtually extinct here.

Under Bokassa, poaching was controlled by the emperor himself, with guns handed out to villagers in return for ivory. The tusks were exported to France by La Couronne, a company in which Bokassa had a major share.

Today, horsemen from drought-stricken Chad and Sudan have moved into the parks, armed with spears and Kalashnikov automatic rifles. Wildlife, the main source of protein for the CAR's people and the main national economic asset, has been grossly overexploited.

The slaughter of the CAR's elephants is part of an endgame in one of the last great strongholds of wild Africa. This vast region of savannah and open forest covers an area the size of western Europe: over 2.5 million sq km (1 million sq miles) in Chad, western and southern Sudan, the Central African Republic and northern Zaire.

The national parks of Bamingui-Bangoran and Manovo-Gounda lie along the CAR's border with Chad, in the remote north of the country, 500 km (300 miles) from the capital Bangui.

It is an extraordinarily beautiful region: dry Sahelian grassland along the northern border grades into thorn scrub and then thick Guinean forest in the south, dissected by tumbling crystal-clear waterfalls and lazy, winding, brown rivers. Grey granite kopjes (small hills) rise out of the plains, sculpted by centuries of wind and rain.

Already visited by very wealthy tourists - French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing used to go to Central Africa on safari in Emperor Bokassa's time - the area has great tourist potential.

The parks have in the past been largely devoid of people, but the Sahel's lethal combination of drought and political turmoil, combined with the soaring price of ivory, have changed all that. Until his overthrow in a French-inspired coup in 1979, the notorious Emperor Bokassa ravaged the country for ivory, but the trade was on the whole limited to the inhabited southeast.

So in spite of Bokassa, the national parks remained relatively unscathed until the late 1970s. Then, the increasing grip of the Sahelian drought, especially in Chad and western Sudan, sent nomadic herdsman south in search of pasture. The big wild grazing animals, notably buffalo and giant eland, appear to have declined by four-fifths, largely as a result of rinderpest, introduced with the nomads' cattle from Chad in 1983.

Today, two tribes of nomads are in the parks, with tens of thousands of livestock; we saw one herd of at least 4,000 animals. The Bororo people come from Chad, the men on horseback driving herds of black, tan or white longhorned cattle in front of them, the women riding behind on pack-cows. Desperate for grazing, they now range over much of the eastern Sahel, as they probably have in past centuries in time of drought. Their presence reduces the pasture for wildlife, but the Bororo are a pacific people, with little tradition of elephant hunting.

The same cannot be said for the Falata, a horse-riding people from the Sudan. These remarkably brave Arabs have a long tradition of elephant hunting, and will ride hundreds of kilometres to find ivory. They chase the elephants through the bush on horseback, and then stick them in the rear with spears to cut their leg-tendons, or shoot them with Kalashnikovs.

The ivory is sold to Arab traders, and finds its way over the border into the Sudan, or south to Bangui. The Falata often carry Kalashnikov rifles, now widely-available from the civil wars in Chad and the Sudan; we saw several families of elephant corpses which had clearly been gunned down.

Two other groups of outsiders can be found in the CAR's parks. By the rivers, we saw encampments of diamond prospectors, who are said to trade in ivory. And in Bamingui-Bangoran we saw a camp of what we suspect were dissident soldiers from Chad.

A dramatic incident in May guaranteed the personal interest of the CAR's president, General Andre Kolingba, who was flying over the Manovo-Gounda national park. He saw elephant carcasses, and as his two helicopters descended to investigate, they came under automatic rifle fire from a group of ivory poachers.

Kolingba ordered members of his presidential guard to counterattack. The poachers with their Kalashnikovs escaped into the bush, but 200 elephant tusks and some Kalashnikov magazines were captured.

Our census, which I <sup>made</sup> ~~did~~ with Gustave Doungoube and Jean-Marc Froment, with support from FAO/UNDP and World Wildlife, spotted a few large groups of elephants, usually in clearings in the thicker forest, but the more open savannah was studded with corpses and bones.

We calculated that the two parks contained about 4,300 live elephants - and about 7,900 dead ones. Some of the corpses were

fresh, others three or four years old. In this period, certainly half and probably more than three-quarters of the park's elephants were killed: down from at least 12,000 to barely 4,000 today. Black rhinos, of which the CAR was in 1982 the stronghold in west and central Africa, are down from several hundred to a mere handful.

What should be done? And what, in reality, is likely to happen? We made three main recommendations to President Kolingba, which he has accepted. First, the CAR should immediately ban all trade in raw and worked ivory, all permits for collecting it, and all ivory exports. And the overseas markets for CAR ivory must be closed by international action.

Second, the government should mount an immediate anti-poaching campaign. The only well-equipped force available at present is the Central African Presidential Guard, commanded and officered by French personnel, which has the rough-terrain vehicles, helicopters and air-to-ground radio essential for anti-poaching work. Kolingba had already ordered Presidential Guard units into the parks by the time we were there, and they were rounding up some of the poaching gangs we located.

Third, outside funds should be sought to develop the CAR's national parks, which will need a new guard force. The European Community and World Wildlife are already responding, and the US and France are considering doing so.

We are not calling for protection of wildlife at the expense of people. On the contrary, wildlife represents one of the CAR's most important resources. Around 80% of the meat in local markets seems to be wild game, and the parks have great potential for tourism and controlled big game hunting - even for the careful harvesting of ivory.

But how likely is all this to happen? Under its energetic director Gustave DOUNGOUBE, who collaborated in our elephant census, the CAR's parks have an able administrator. After a personal meeting with President Kolingba in Bangui in July, I am convinced of his determination to act, probably by establishing a new national parks service directly responsible to him.

But with three-quarters of its elephants already destroyed, can the CAR's parks ever really recover? On the whole, I am optimistic. My experience of the situation in Uganda after the fall of Amin in 1979, when a similar catastrophic slaughter of elephants occurred, suggests that recovery is not impossible.

If a real partnership can be developed among the CAR authorities, international wildlife experts and foreign donors, with the personal commitment of President Kolingba, wildlife could play a key role in the CAR's future development.  
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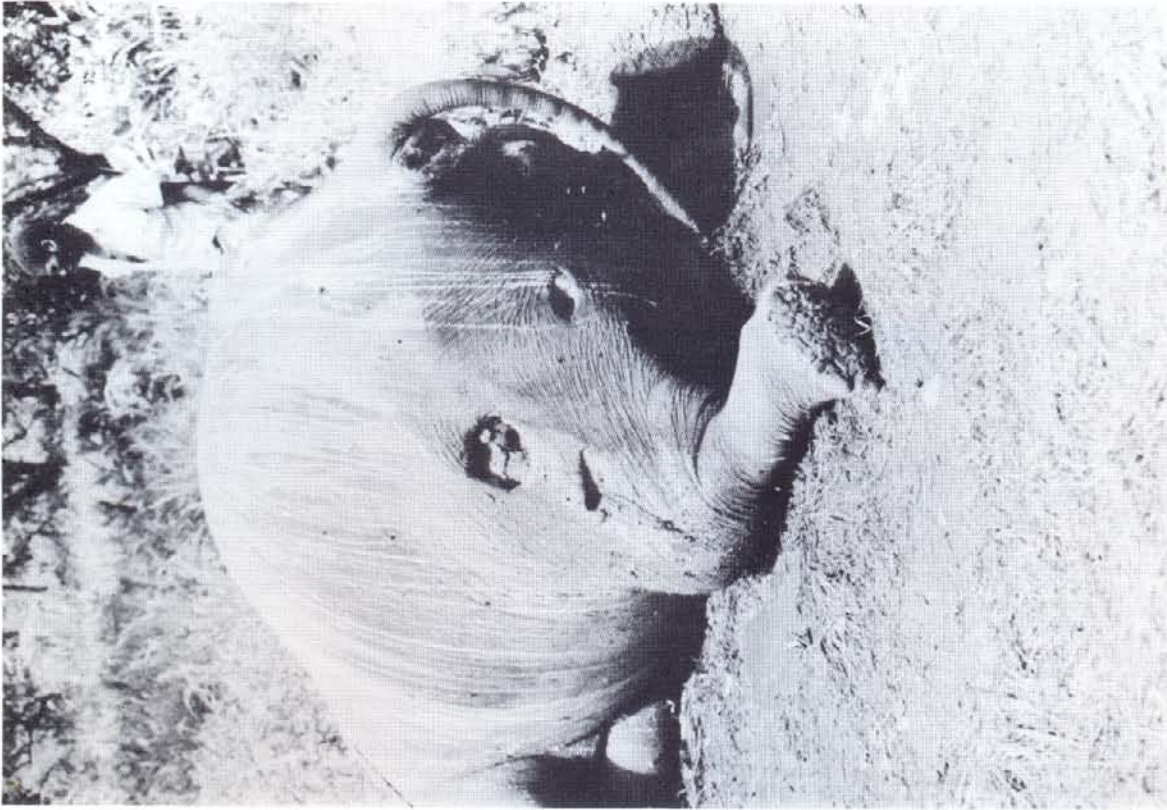


Above: Magazines from the Kalashnikov automatic rifles and personal effects used by ivory poachers from Sudan in the attack on the president's helicopter.

Photo credit: Joan Root/Earthscan

Below: A freshly killed elephant (2-3 days), surrounded by vultures. A recent survey reckoned that two Central African Republic wildlife parks contained 4,300 live elephants - and about 7,900 dead ones.





Above: An elephant carcass (2-3 days old), showing the spear wounds left by Falata tribesmen who chased the animal on horseback, hacking at its leg tendons with long spears. Vultures have enlarged the wounds, and left droppings on the elephant's back.

Photo credit: Joan Root/Earthscan

Below: Some 200 tusks and Kalashnikov magazines captured when Central African Republic President Andre Kolingba sent his presidential guard to counter-attack poachers who fired on the president's helicopter.

Photo credit: Joan Root/Earthscan

