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Elephant and Rhino



C.A.R. ACTS TO HALT MASSACRE OF ELEPHANTS

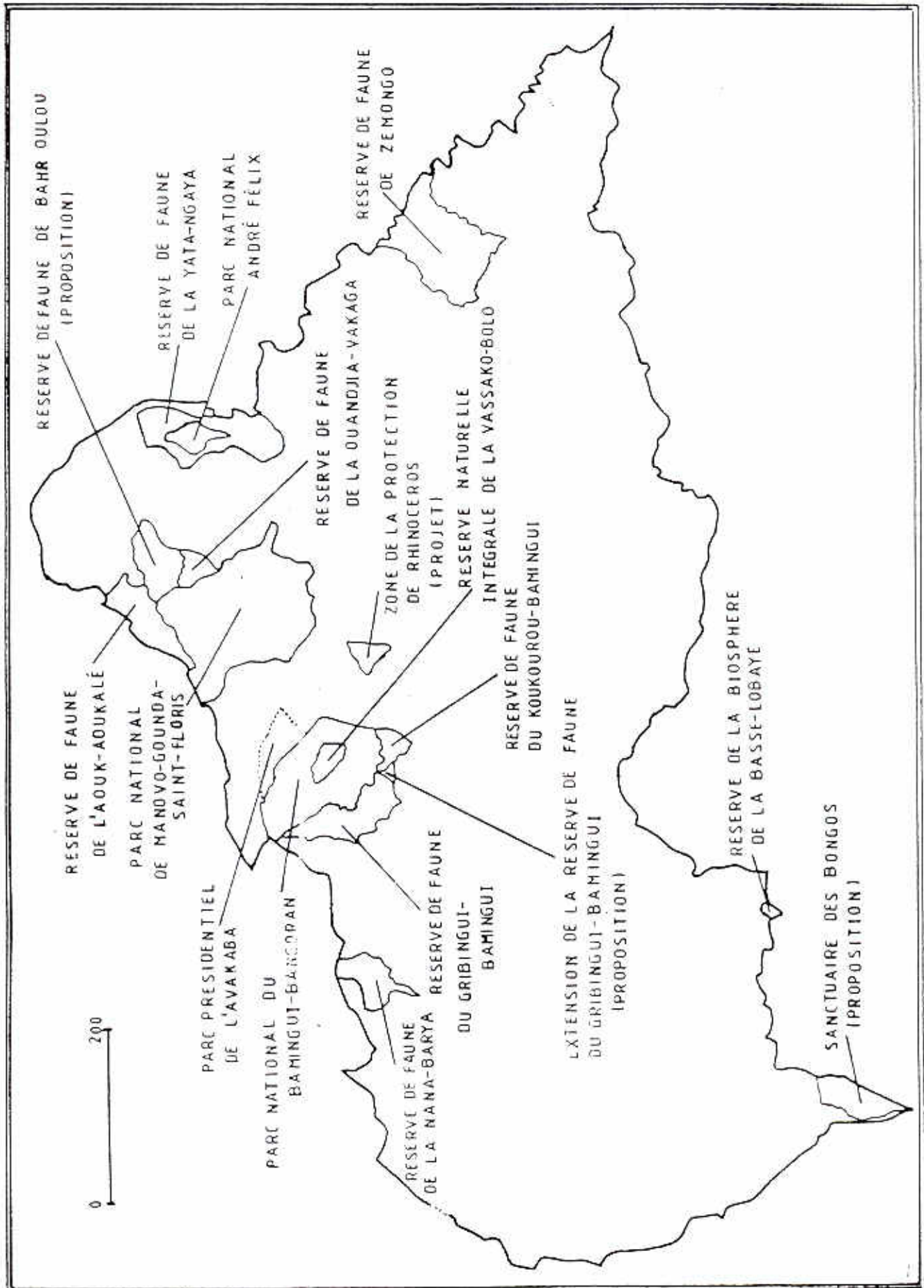


Dead Elephant in Central African Republic

Photo: WWF/I. Douglas-Hamilton

An aerial reconnaissance over the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) in 1985 showed that 75% of the elephants in the north of the country had been slaughtered by poachers for their ivory over a four-year period. Following a report on the survey by WWF and FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization), the C.A.R. government has launched army operations to combat the poachers who enter the country in organized gangs from Chad and Sudan. Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Jean-Marc Froment report on the situation.

LES PARCS NATIONAUX ET RESERVES DE FAUNE



Poaching in the northern parks of the C.A.R. by spear-wielding horsemen from Sudan and Chad gained momentum with the reopening of the ivory trade in 1981. Every year caravans of poachers cross the frontier on horseback to hunt elephants, accompanied by a string of camels and donkeys to carry away the poached ivory. They pursue the elephants on horseback and spear them to death. The tusks are either cut out immediately or left on the carcass for several days so that they may be removed more easily.

Groups of carcasses seen from the air together suggest that automatic weapons are also being used. On three occasions in the south of Manovo-Gounda-St Floris National Park, 15 to 20 skeletons were sighted within an area of less than two sq km, including whole families of elephants.

As a result of the increase in poaching of elephant and rhino, the government of the Central African Republic asked WWF/IUCN and UNDP(UN Development Programme)/FAO to make an aerial survey to reveal population trends and define urgent measures for protection of the threatened wildlife.

The aerial census was carried out in May and June 1985 by a team from the C.A.R. Centre National pour l'Aménagement de la Faune and expatriate personnel. It covered an area of about 64,000 sq km, including the Bamingui-Bangoran and Manovo-Gounda St. Floris national parks and surrounding reserves and hunting zones. Standard methods of strip sampling were used.

Elephants were estimated at 12,100, of which 4,300 were live and 7,800 dead. Most of the dead elephants seen on the survey had apparently been killed between 1982 and 1985. Thus it is probable that 75% of the elephants of this region were killed in those four years.

No rhinos were seen from the air, although hunters had reported a few tracks during 1985, indicating that some rhinos still existed at very low densities. The black rhinoceros (Diceros bicornis longipipes) was relatively abundant until the end of 1982 and this population, estimated at about 3,000, was considered the most important rhino concentration in Central and West Africa. It has now been reduced to the point of extinction. Most of the slaughter occurred between the months of January and May 1983.

Census figures suggest that buffalo and giant eland numbers declined approximately 78% and 84% between 1979 and 1985. An epidemic of rinderpest in 1983, introduced by cattle from Chad, may have been a significant factor.

The invasion of the northern parks by nomads with tens of thousands of livestock, escaping from the Sahelian drought, has exacerbated both the poaching and the spread of rinderpest.

Despite the conclusions of the survey, a magnificent resource of vast, unspoilt natural scenery still exists in the north of the C.A.R., with a widespread and varied fauna and the potential for recovery within the national parks.

Following the WWF/FAO report, the government has abolished all private trade in ivory. A coordinated operation has been launched to control poaching, using government armed forces. A five-year conservation plan has been drafted and adopted by the government, and aid is being sought from bilateral, multi-lateral and private sources to rehabilitate the national parks. The European Economic Community has committed itself to a major project within this five-year plan.

For initial report see 1985/008