

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Rising ivory prices threaten elephants

Kenya's premier Samburu elephant population is the focus of a distressing surge in ivory poaching, coincident with an increase in illegal trading of ivory. This ivory is mainly destined for China (see [go.nature.com/czac3x](http://go.nature.com/czac3x)). Effective protection of elephants depends partly on more conservation investment, but mainly on stemming the demand for ivory and eliminating black-market trade — actions that mandate leadership from and cooperation with China.

The Samburu elephants are one of the world's best-studied populations. Intensive monitoring has revealed that more have been poached in the past 2.5 years than in the previous 11 years. The highest poaching rates ever were recorded in the first 5 months of this year.

Poaching of males has resulted in a population with more than double the number of females to males. Poachers are now also targeting adult females, resulting in the loss of one or more in most families and leaving roughly one in five groups with no mature females. The number of orphans in the population is increasing rapidly.

These changes correlate with a near tripling of the total number of seizures of illegal ivory in or coming from Kenya (see [go.nature.com/k9bkwy](http://go.nature.com/k9bkwy)) and with rising ivory prices. Local black-market ivory prices around Samburu have more than doubled since 2007, and are an order of magnitude greater than in 1990. At current local prices, the ivory of the largest male elephant poached in the Samburu population is equivalent to 1.5 years' salary for a wildlife ranger or 15 years' salary for an unskilled worker.

Ivory demand and prices have reached a point at which poachers are willing to target well-protected, closely monitored populations. With many poorly protected, soft-target elephant populations now over-harvested (P. Bouche *et al.* *PLoS ONE* 6, e20619; 2011), the pressure on the Samburu elephant population may be a harbinger of what is to come for Africa's protected areas.

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