

Time Running out to Save Elephants from Ivory Trade



Posted by [Iain Douglas-Hamilton](#) of [Save the Elephants](#) on January 31, 2013



Elephants crossing the Ewaso Nyiro River in Samburu, Kenya. Photo: Lucy King/Save the Elephants

The new wave of killing of elephants in Africa is in many ways far graver than the crisis of the 1970s and 80s. Firstly there are fewer elephants, and secondly the demand for ivory is far higher. Record ivory prices in the Far East are fueling poachers, organized crime, and political instability right across the African elephant range. And the situation shows no sign of calming.



On January 3, 2013, a 40-year-old bull named Changila, a recent arrival in the Save the Elephants' study area, was gunned down just south of Samburu reserve. Photos courtesy STE.

In January last year, Janjaweed militia gunned down more than 300 elephants in Bouba N'Djida National Park in Cameroon. In March, 22 elephants in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), were slaughtered in a single attack, many with shots to the top of the head. A Ugandan army helicopter was seen flying low-level over the park a few days after. In December 2012, an illegal shipment of 6 tonnes of poached ivory was seized in Malaysia, one of the largest such hauls in recent history. Over the last decade Zakouma National Park in Chad has lost 90 percent of its elephants.

As if we needed more evidence of the dire situation, at the time of writing news arrived from our study area in northern Kenya that three adult elephants have been found dead in a pile near Isiolo, evidence that experienced gunmen are at work. Littered around that valley were at least 20 more fresh carcasses. This well-monitored elephant population has suffered higher levels of illegal killing in 2012 than in any other year on record.

Pictures: Death of an Elephant

Top photo: *Changila's identification picture.*

Second photo: *Changila's body as it was found the following morning. It had been covered with branches to such an extent that it was invisible from the air.*

Third photo: *Vultures on Changila's remains as seen from STE's aircraft six days after the shooting.*

Bottom photo: *The carcass after being uncovered.*

[Read the [tribute to Changila](#) by Oria Douglas-Hamilton; add your comments below the post.]

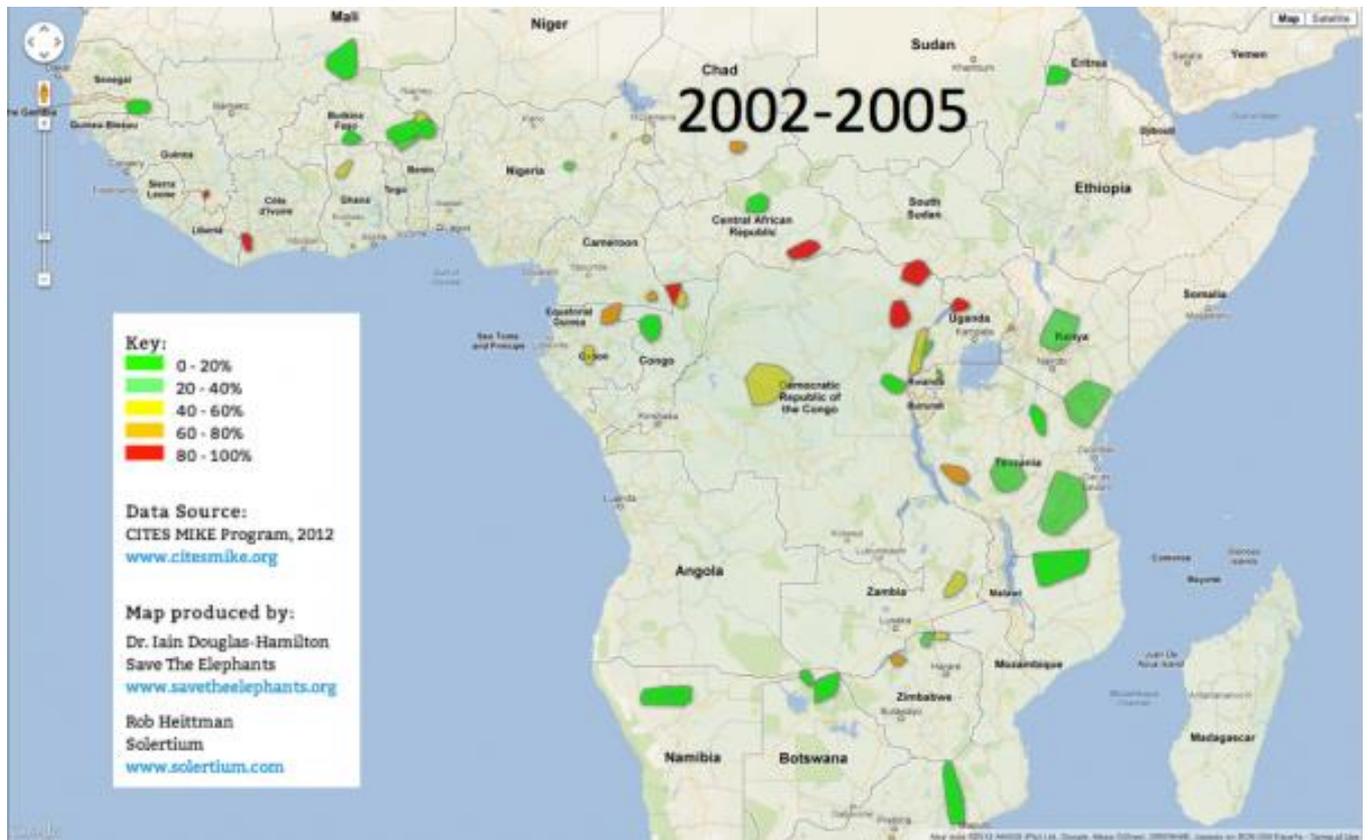
"Over the past few years wildlife trafficking has become more organized, more lucrative, more widespread, and more dangerous than ever before," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently warned a meeting of Washington's diplomatic community. The situation has become an issue of both national and economic security for nations across Africa, she added.

[Read Clinton's full remarks in [U.S. Pursues Global Strategy to End Trafficking in Wildlife](#).]

The ivory trade is the greatest danger to elephants, one that threatens to wipe them from the wilds of Africa and Asia long before they disappear beneath man's ever expanding footprint. Behind the many facets of the current crisis is the swelling demand for ivory. The race is on to convince China's affluent middle class of the terrible impacts of buying ivory, before elephants succumb to the unbridled desire for their tusks.

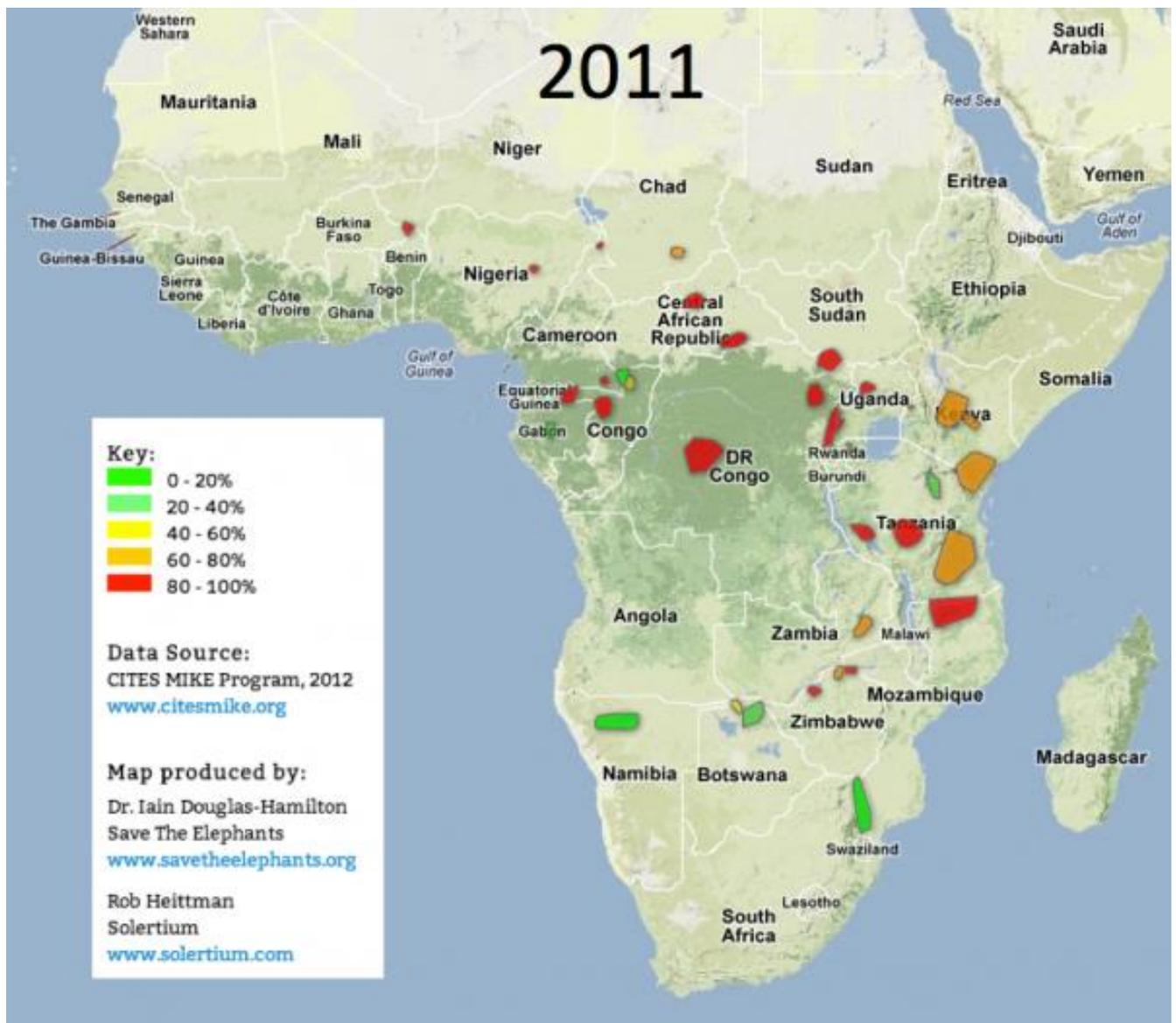
Elephant populations across Africa have been falling like dominoes. The once widespread elephants of West Africa—such as the fabled herds of the Ivory Coast—disappeared into tiny, isolated pockets long ago. Central Africa's elephants seemed more secure as recently as the 1980s when they were thought to constitute more than half of the continent's population and to be a vast repository that could withstand an ivory trade indefinitely.

It took years for scientists to penetrate the forests and accumulate reliable facts on the elusive forest elephants that inhabit them. Populations there had entered a steep decline, which I believe started in the 1970s. By the first decade of the 21st century vast areas of forest had been emptied of elephants. Their range has now shrunk to a tiny fraction of its previous extent, and the animals that remain are under acute threat. Notorious armed groups like Darfur's Janjaweed and the Lord's Resistance Army are financing their operations by preying on the few survivors. The central African domino has toppled.



Enlarge image by clicking on it. Map courtesy of STE.

In approximately 43 sites across Africa an ongoing body count of elephant carcasses of the CITES Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) program reveals the proportion that were illegally killed over the last decade. The results are color coded for the percentage killed. Green usually signifies a stable or increasing population, yellow one that is marginal, orange highly likely to be declining, and red severely afflicted and highly at risk. The early results in the series (2002-2005 average) indicate a concentration of heavily impacted elephant populations in central Africa. The most recent year, 2011, shows that the high levels of illegal killing in central Africa have spread to East Africa and the northern parts of southern Africa. Only three large populations—Kruger in South Africa, Chobe in Botswana, and Etosha in Namibia—have remained unscathed. Scientists have analyzed this MIKE data and shown that by the end of 2011 all four regions of Africa—west, central, east, and southern—were showing highly significant increases in illegal killing. (See the CITES report [Monitoring of the Illegal Killing of Elephants](#).) While individual populations may have better information on them, the MIKE data is the only set that gives an objective overview of the situation across the continent.



Enlarge image by clicking on it. Map courtesy of STE.

With this central reserve of elephants gone, the rising demand for ivory can only be sated by poachers turning to the remaining populations in East and southern Africa.

The deep south of southern Africa—Botswana, Namibia and South Africa itself—has long escaped the poaching problem, thanks to the region’s relative wealth and well-financed wildlife departments. Elephant populations here are still the most secure, but with ivory now an established commodity for organized crime that may yet change, and reports of substantial ivory poaching are beginning to come from Botswana.

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As evidenced by recent seizures, even sleepy Cape Town is now seen as a soft option for ivory traffickers, and the authorities of Kruger National Park, having suffered a devastating and unexpected assault on rhinos, are now bracing for a similar attack on elephants. Unless demand is lowered, all that stands between southern Africa and an ivory poaching onslaught are the elephants

of East Africa.

Here the battle is in full spate. CITES monitoring of elephants has shown that 9 out of 10 major East African protected areas showed record levels of illegal killing in 2011. Most of the illegal ivory seized in large-scale shipments in the past three years originated in Kenya and Tanzania.

One of Africa's best studied elephant populations is in the Samburu District, northern Kenya, where the fate of individually known elephants has been a particularly sensitive barometer of trouble. Elephants are safe and very tame and trusting within the national reserves of Samburu and Buffalo Springs, but they often leave this highly protected haven and move into dangerous areas outside. First the large bulls disappeared, targeted for their ivory. Sometimes the bodies were found, but mostly we have simply seen their numbers dwindle away. Currently females outnumber bulls by two to one, but they are now being killed, and one-fifth of the families have no mature females left to lead them. *[Read the related post: [Ivory Poaching Threatens "Elephant Memory"](#).]*



Photo courtesy of STE.

A worrying new trend has been observed by Save The Elephants since September 2004. Several carcasses of both male and female elephants have been found with their genitals and nipples hacked off. The act appears to have been carried out soon after death, for splatters of blood are usually seen on the surrounding area of skin and the ground. The motivation of the poachers is still unclear, but witchcraft, strange culinary tastes or an unusual property of this type of skin are all possibilities.

It looks as if 2012 will turn out to have been the worst year we've recorded for elephant poaching in the northern Kenya area.

The actual number of elephants killed per day across the continent is difficult to estimate. On the assumption that their populations are still much as estimated in 2007, and that natural mortality is within normal limits, then as many as 100 elephants killed per day is an easily believable figure, despite more boots and guns being deployed in their defense than ever before.

In the coming months elephants and their ivory will be increasingly in the news. The [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#) is holding its [16th Conference of Parties](#) in Bangkok in March. Those with an interest in the future of elephants will potentially be riven by a fundamental argument between those who believe in a sustained ivory trade and [those who opt for a complete trade ban](#). (*Interesting documents prepared for COP16 include the Secretariat report [Monitoring of the Illegal Killing of Elephants](#), and both the [Monitoring of Illegal Trade in Ivory and Other Elephant Specimens report of the Secretariat](#) and the [report submitted by TRAFFIC](#).)*

We must break the deadlock and find consensus, rather than division. There is cause for common ground in a new conservation paradigm that recognizes that the current demand for ivory exceeds the possible supply of elephants, and that demand needs to be reduced if elephants are to survive. If concerned individuals, NGOs, institutions, and governments can hold to this understanding, it could lead to united international action to lower the demand for ivory. Whatever our point of view, this is crucial for the long-term survival of elephants.

We don't yet have all the facts we need to understand the relationship between ivory supply and demand to make all the judgments, but we have been through intensive elephant killing before, and history can teach us some lessons. It is true that in the 20th century, in the colonial and immediately post-colonial era, some East African game departments were substantially funded by legal ivory sales, but that world has gone forever. At present any call for reopening a well-regulated legal trade is utopian and unrealistic. Corruption, mismanagement, weak penalties for wildlife crime, and a lack of political will to change things mean that too often poachers have the upper hand.



Elephant herd in Samburu National Reserve, Kenya. NGS photo by Michael Nichols.

The 20 years after the 1989 ivory trade ban were accompanied by recovery of elephant populations, particularly in East Africa. We should spare a thought for those rangers and wardens who have so often risked their lives and carried out their duty tirelessly protecting the elephants in far-flung, forgotten places, receiving very little reward or recognition.

Thanks to the ban and widespread outrage in the media, ivory became unfashionable, and almost all the key populations in the region recovered from the excessive illegal killing of the former epoch. Increasing numbers were seen in aerial counts, and the ratio of carcasses to live elephants diminished. In most protected areas law enforcement was adequate enough to allow elephant populations to grow through the 90s and early 2000s, even in areas where poaching was at a moderate level.

The [Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants \(MIKE\)](#) program, put in place by CITES with input from independent scientists and the African Elephant Specialist group, picked up on the central African declines early. In 2011 the alarm bells finally began ringing loud and clear that illegal killing

was not sustainable in all four regions of Africa. For Samburu the tipping point appears to have come in 2008, when the price of ivory surged yet again. The current level of killing is unsustainable. If it continues unchecked, we will lose most of Africa's wild elephants.

Under these circumstances it is a moment of wisdom that Tanzania's proposal to sell its ivory, the only one that was on the table, was gently withdrawn before it engendered polarization on the familiar lines usually seen at CITES conferences. The desperate situation of the elephants in that country, and the inability of the government to monitor or control illegal killing, made the proposal for one-off sales of an ivory stockpiles seem doubly untenable.

However, the claim of such countries that they desperately need money for elephant conservation and protection is true, and there is a need for new strategic thinking. In particular there is a need to explore how to deal with large stockpiles of ivory. They cannot be traded, and ideally should be destroyed, but new money must come to help those countries.

"It is the booming economy of the world's most populous nation that makes China a black hole with the power to suck in all elephants in only a few short years."

Forty years ago, in the first pan-African onslaught on elephants, the surge in poaching was driven by newly wealthy Japanese buying ivory totems. Demand for ivory still exists across the Far East, but today it is the booming economy of the world's most populous nation that makes China a black hole with the power to suck in all elephants in only a few short years.

Our own NGO, **Save The Elephants**, is one of many that are reaching out to the people of China. Last year, with our talented and visionary partners WildAid, we brought to Kenya one of their most influential celebrities, basketball player Yao Ming, where he was well received by Kenya Wildlife Service. In 2013 we will broadcast hard-hitting campaign advertisements in China to highlight the impacts of buying illegal ivory. Yao's emotional response to living, breathing, playing elephants—and to horrific faceless carcasses—revealed the powerful commonality of human responses and awareness needed to save elephants.



Image courtesy STE.

In August 2012 Yao Ming, one of China's most celebrated stars, visited Kenya with Save The Elephants and WildAid to meet wild elephants and see the grim results of poaching. "After witnessing how illegal ivory was obtained, I really was speechless," he said. "It was a harrowing experience I never want to repeat, but something that everyone thinking of buying ivory should see—the wastefulness of these animals cruelly slaughtered just so a small part of them could be used. Would anyone buy ivory if they had witnessed this?"

The few remaining elephants in China are revered and highly protected, as we learned when we visited Xishuangbanna two years ago. When a Chinese delegation from the China Wildlife Conservation Association paid us a return visit, they too were shocked at the sight of poached elephants and were delighted by the living herds. Helping China to realize that Africa's elephants are just as worthy as their own is not only possible, it is happening.

The [speech by Hillary Clinton](#) signaled an unprecedented new political awareness in Washington about elephants and other wildlife. She promised U.S. intelligence assets to help fight the chaos and organized crime. New technologies must be used to their full, but so too should existing ones, such as the DNA tracking of tusks, whose potential has been proved but which has been very slow to be properly implemented. Low-tech solutions can be just as useful, as shown by the success of the community conservation movement in the north of Kenya and in Namibia.

The root of the problem lies in excessive demand; attempts to save the elephants will fail unless it is tackled. Appetite for ivory can be changed, as it was both in the West and in Japan. But such shifts take time, and awareness of what is happening to elephants must rapidly be shared in ivory consumer countries in the East. If it is not, elephants will not survive even at their current reduced levels.

The clock is ticking. A coalition of the willing is needed to help change come faster. To paraphrase Clinton, elephants cannot be manufactured. Once they're gone, they cannot be replaced. We must tackle the demand for ivory. If we do not, elephant massacres like those in the two Congos, Cameroon, Chad, and Kenya will be repeated over the coming months and years, intensifying and spreading deeper into areas previously seen as safe. No amount of seizures and arrests on their own will be able to stem the tide of death that threatens Africa's elephants.

Key quotes by Hilary Clinton, the U.S. Secretary of State, in a speech to the Diplomatic community in Washington:

We are increasingly seeing wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world... Local populations that depend on wildlife, either for tourism or sustenance, are finding it harder and harder to maintain their livelihoods. Diseases are spreading to new corners of the globe through wildlife that is not properly inspected at border crossings. Park rangers are being killed. And we have good reason to believe that rebel militias are players in a worldwide ivory market worth millions and millions of dollars a year.

This is a global challenge that spans continents and crosses oceans, and we need to address it with partnerships that are as robust and far-reaching as the criminal networks we seek to dismantle...

We need governments, civil society, businesses, scientists, and activists to come together to educate people about the harms of wildlife trafficking. We need law enforcement personnel to prevent poachers from preying on wildlife. We need trade experts to track the movement of goods and help enforce existing trade laws. We need finance experts to study and help undermine the black markets that deal in wildlife. And most importantly, perhaps, we need to reach individuals, to convince them to make the right choices about the goods they purchase.

I think it's working to create a scientific consensus and very preeminent scientists from across the world speaking out that is one of the important steps that we are urging partners to join with us in doing...

The world's wildlife, both on land and in our waters, is such a precious resource, but it is also a limited one. It cannot be manufactured. And once it's gone, it cannot be replenished. And those who profit from it illegally are not just undermining our borders and our economies. They are truly stealing from the next generation.



Photo by Michael Nichols, NGS.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton is one of the world's foremost authorities on the African elephant. He pioneered the first in-depth scientific study of elephant social behavior in Tanzania's Lake Manyara National Park at age 23. He received a Ph.D. in zoology from Oxford University for the work. During the 1970s he investigated the status of elephants throughout Africa and was the first to alert the world to the ivory poaching holocaust. For his work on elephants he was awarded one of conservation's highest awards, the Order of the Golden Ark, in 1988. He founded **Save the Elephants** in 1993 in order to create an effective and flexible NGO dedicated specifically to elephants.

Iain has assisted numerous media coverages of African elephants by *National Geographic*, BBC and others. His work was featured in the *National Geographic* article [Samburu Elephants](#) by David Quammen (September 2008 issue).

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