

Africa: The Next Ivory Battle in the Making

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From 13th to 25th March 2010 representatives from 175 member countries of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) as well as numerous non-governmental organizations will be debating in Doha, the capital of Qatar the up- or downlisting of endangered species. Although any decisions are relating to trade only, they will also have significant impact on nature conservation. For some countries, the decisions will be of major economic significance.



Ivory will be – as always – one of the most controversial topics. Two countries have made this time a request for sale of ivory stocks. Tanzania and Zambia are planning to sell 90 respectively 22 tons to Japan and China. The proceeds will be used exclusively for conservation and wildlife management. At the same time, both countries want to downlist their elephant populations from Appendix I to II. This would reduce the red tape involved in elephant hunting, and considerably facilitate the import of hunting trophies for hunters, in particular to the United States. In addition, the valuable hides of elephant, which for example need to be shot as problem animals, could be sold instead of rotting in the bush.

As usual in such cases, the animal rights activists have lodged their protests in advance, arguing that such sales would fuel poaching. In the run-up to the last CITES conferences they regularly published in the past horror figures on elephant poaching with the media all too readily accepting them. Often the figures and cases were purely fictitious.

Today, however, one reads and hears hardly anything about it, although for the first time there is cause for concern. "We've seen this year a disastrous increase in poaching, smuggling and the seizure of illegal ivory," says Dr. Dietrich Jelden from the German Federal Office for Nature Conservation and head of the German CITES Authority. Others already speak of a return to the conditions of the eighties, when a wave of poaching swept the African continent. In the course of 2009 a lot of ivory was confiscated. The cause of this surge and the people behind it remain unknown. Currently nobody knows the reasons of the increase in smuggling. There is also no evidence that the poaching surge was fuelled by the CITES approved sale of 100 tons of ivory to China and Japan a year ago from ivory stocks held by Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Most of the confiscated ivory has been poached before that sale.

No doubt there is a huge market for both legal and illegal ivory in China, where the demand for the luxury items soars. Today traders and entrepreneurs from China appear in many places in Africa buy to buy raw material. "It is certainly no accident that in these places suddenly valuable timber is harvested illegally and poaching increases," says a professional hunter who knows the ropes in Mozambique and Tanzania.

Not many African countries provide assistance in combating illegal trade. For the last 20 years TRAFFIC, the organization which observes the illegal trade in ivory and other protected species on behalf of CITES, computes an index for the effectiveness of anti-poaching in elephant range countries. It is computed as a function between seizures in the country itself and abroad. For example in Angola the index value is simply zero. 160 times ivory from Angola was confiscated abroad; there were no seizures in Angola. Senegal, Equatorial Guinea and Togo have also zero success track record. Scarcely better is the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with an index of 0.01. Here the ratio is 6 to 396. Mali, Guinea, Ghana and Benin are at a similar level. The list goes on and on.

Tanzania is the home of the second largest elephant population on the continent. This East African country wants to sell part of its ivory stockpile, but the situation there is not good either. The country, once praised for the effectiveness of its anti-poaching, expressed by an index of nearly 100 has suffered a dramatic downturn in the past few years. Simultaneously, ivory seizures from Tanzania increased abroad. The biggest cases in 2009 were: 11 tons in Hong Kong, 8 tons in Vietnam, 3.5 tons in the Philippines and 608 tusks in Japan. TRAFFIC puts this down to corruption in Tanzania; because of the large quantities organized crime is suspected to draw the strings. Tanzania also plays a special role as a transit country for ivory from other states.

The most dramatic poaching development in 2009 occurred in the five million acres Selous Game Reserve. The situation is worst in the northern part, where the tourist lodges are located. Guests can hear the rifle shots of the poachers.



Although the lodges summon scouts from the nearby park headquarters over the radio; but they arrive, if at all, the next day and pull out without accomplishing anything. There are increasingly indications that the rangers themselves are involved, as it had happened in the eighties. How else would you explain four elephants were shot down at the runway next to the main ranger station? Even within sight of tourists game rangers are hunting zebra and other game; the meat is then smoked and sold. One can hardly blame them, because for months their salaries are paid only infrequently, if ever. Towards the end of the 20th Century elephant poaching in the Selous had been reduced with German assistance from about 5,000 animals per year to almost zero. One of the key tools was the better financing of the park at that time. The finance minister had approved a scheme under which half of the hunting revenue of about five million US dollars was allowed to remain in the reserve. Of these funds rangers were well paid, vehicles and infrastructure were maintained and poaching was effectively curbed. This system has been overturned the Tanzanian government, and the allocation of little more than 600,000 US \$ in 2009 is not enough for to live or die. Astonishingly, even donor organizations who wanted to assist the wildlife management authority have been rejected.

The tourist lodges in the north have already registered more than 80 poaching cases in 2009; and their area covers only 2% of the total reserve area. "The entrance fees for tourists have been raised two and a half fold in the last two years, while the

fund allocation to the reserve decreased and poaching increased by four fold," complained the managers of the hotel to the minister in charge. And they continued: "We categorically state that the elephants are on the run". Finally, after the leading newspapers of the country carried similar reports a helicopter supported police action was conducted in November 2009. In the first two weeks 70 people had been arrested already, weapons of all kinds were found and 100 kg of ivory as well as meat of giraffe, hippo and other wildlife was seized. However, practical experience has proven that such short-lived emergency operations are not suited to reverse a poaching trend. They are actually mostly window-dressing. One week after Operation Kipepeo, as it was called, was finished, everything went back to normal and tourist operators found a poaching camp which housed about 60 people near one tourist camp. 28 canoes and a big calibre rifle were found.

As detrimental as elephant poaching may be to some individual local elephant populations, the African elephant as a species will not be brought to the brink of extinction by poaching. In unmanaged populations, it is often the poachers who assume the job of the game ranger, namely, to reduce excessive populations. South Africa's elephant expert Ron Thomson, certainly the most radical pro-culling voice said "we must reduce the elephant population in Botswana from 150,000 to 5,000, in the Kruger National Park from 16,000 to 4,000 and in Zimbabwe's Hwange National park from 60,000 to 2,500, if we want to avoid irreparable harm to biodiversity.

Tanzania will soon publish the results of this year's elephant census. But it is likely that in the upper elephant carrying capacity of 110,000 elephant set in Tanzania's "Elephant Management Plan" has been exceeded in the meantime. Only 100 elephants are shot by visiting hunting tourists. This computes as just 0.1% of the population. The present poaching is probably also a reaction to the lack of a meaningful elephant management, which is prevented by a public opinion influenced heavily by the animal rights view. Proper organized elephant management, which would include more elephant hunting and possibly some culling could greatly contribute to the livelihoods of rural populations and to the income of the Wildlife Division. The poaching instead is destructive, destroys elephants' social structures, is cruel to the animals and spoils a valuable national resource.

Actually, Tanzania might have to resort to organized elephant culling now, if there were no poaching. But where to go with the ivory? The main Dar es Salaam store already contains 112 tons, in Arusha and Ngorongoro a further 13 tons are stored. The storage costs amount to approx. US\$ 120,000 a year, without Tanzania drawing any benefit from the ivory. "We have to build another ivory store, if we cannot sell," says the proposed Tanzanian CITES resolution. A construction company could easily be found for this project. The new six-storey office building housing the Tanzanian wildlife management authority next to the existing ivory storeroom was built by the Chinese!