

THE ANGOLA CONNECTION

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We cannot know the extent of South Africa's complicity in the smuggling of ivory and rhino horn in the 1970s and 1980s. But thanks to the provocation by conservation groups and the serious assessment by the Kumleben Commission, we now know a lot more about it than we once did.



difficult task in an environment where elephants are rarely seen.

Counting elephants from the air in savanna environments poses less practical problems but is costly. The two main techniques, aerial sample and aerial total counts, also have their own inherent difficulties. In addition, very few countries have the financial means or expertise to conduct systematic surveys on a regular basis, and political strife plagues many elephant range states.

Despite the limitations of the data, the AED remains pivotal to the conservation and management of Africa's remaining elephants and collecting and publishing the most comprehensive and up to date information available on African elephant population and range is invaluable in many ways. Primarily, the AED provides a continental overview of numbers, range, survey methods used and quality of information. It is a baseline against which to compare future information and to assess trends and conservation status of many populations. Without such an overview it would not be possible to prioritise conservation strategies for the species as a whole. In addition, the overview helps individual management authorities to place local management issues and actions in a wider perspective both globally and with respect to neighbouring states sharing cross-border elephant populations.

During the next phase of the AED project, the data will be updated, refined and used for analysis of specific questions. Because the AED is a geographically referenced database, it will enable a variety of modelling exercises and analyses relevant to the planning of elephant conservation actions, to be carried out such as population trends of specific populations where historical data are available, and predictive modelling of potential areas of human-elephant conflict.

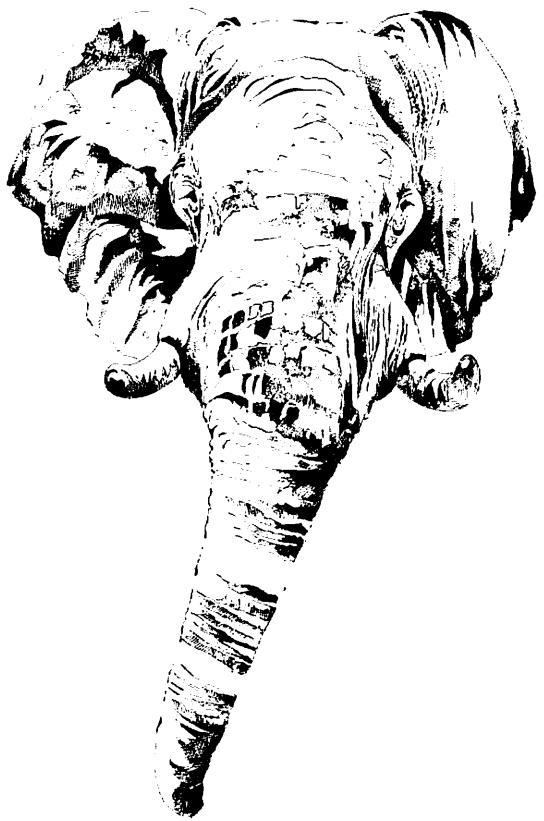
By summarising and providing a basis for comparison of data quality, and by having specific data requirements, the AED provides a stimulus to the wider adoption of improved and consistent standards of population estimation. It also helps identify areas where more information

is a priority, where greater effort is needed to ensure accurate data are collected, and where co-ordination of cross-border surveys is important. The AED can serve as an effective tool for the conservation and management of the African elephant at national, regional and continental levels.

Summary of continental elephant estimates (Said *et al.*, 1995)

Definite	Probable	Possible	Speculative
286 234	101 297	155 944	36 057

Reference: Said, M.Y., Chunge, R.M., Craig, G.C., Thouless, C.R., Barnes, R.F.W. & Dublin, H.T. 1995. *African Elephant Database 1995*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, 225p.









In 1978, I was invited by Professor Fritz Eloff, then head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Pretoria, to accompany him on a three-week expedition to what was then known as the Kaokoveld in northern Namibia, comprising Damaraland and Kaokoland – a vast wilderness which was off limits to the general public. One required a special permit to gain entry. We travelled south from the Kunene River on the border of Angola, as far as central Damaraland. It became increasingly obvious in discussion with various members of the expedition and from my own observations that there had been large-scale destruction of wildlife and, in particular, of elephants and rhinoceros,

throughout the region. We could only wonder what went on in Angola, engulfed in civil war and opaque to the media except for military propaganda.

At the time I was director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT). The rhinos in question were black rhino, but black rhinos were not then in the dire straits now characterising their status. Our greater concern early on was for the elephants which became known as “the desert elephants,” tall, rangy animals that routinely travelled enormous distances for water in that sparse environment.

The first person to sound warnings about Kaokoveld wildlife was Garth Owen-Smith, at





the time employed there as an agricultural officer. In a paper arising from my own visit, I presented findings at the IUCN Elephant Specialist Group meeting held in Nairobi in 1980, two years later. That report emphasised the destruction of elephant and rhino in the area and, while acknowledging that we had no evidence regarding the position in Angola at the time, noted that there had been considerable rumours and allegations.

My report also drew to the group's attention the vagueness of statistics emanating from South Africa as regards the export of ivory to the Far East, and discrepancies between our documented exports and the amount of ivory legally entering trade from within the country. South Africa certainly did not produce the volume of ivory flowing to the Far East. The country was admittedly part of a customs union with neighbouring territories, and ivory passing through South African customs was ascribed to South Africa in official overseas statistics. But even so – where was all this ivory coming from? There was an enormous difference between the amount of ivory legally leaving South Africa on permits issued by the nature conservation authorities in Pretoria, and the official statistics on our harvest, chiefly ivory becoming available from culling in the Kruger National Park. Much of the exported ivory was not of South African origin and was clearly coming from surrounding countries.

During this period, I made vain efforts to raise the alarm about the disappearance of Namibia's wildlife, particularly elephants and rhinos, but to no avail. In most instances, doors were slammed firmly in my face. In an article for the journal *African Wildlife* entitled "Who's Doing the Killing Now?" I suggested that already there were possibly fewer than 50 elephants and 15 rhinos still surviving in the western regions of the Kaokoveld. Sadly, no special steps were taken to protect the wildlife of this region of restricted access, nor were the promises of soon to be proclaimed game reserves carried out.

Failing to get action from the conservation authorities, a few of us resolved to engage the assistance of friends in the media. A prominent

wildlife advocate for the Kaokoveld was Blythe Loutit, who was later to be a founder member of the Namibian Wildlife Trust – which EWT supported for many years – and who went on to establish the Save the Rhino Trust, recognised as being at the forefront of rhino and elephant conservation today. Blythe flew to Cape Town for a hearing with the Minister of Environmental Affairs and gave a press report; I went on live television. By now, I had little difficulty in convincing the EWT Board of Trustees to commence, in conjunction with the University of Pretoria, an urgent, detailed aerial survey of these elephants and rhinos. The survey ultimately revealed the position to be as we had estimated it: fewer than 50 elephants and 15 rhinos still remained.

As indicated, at the time the area in question was off limits to ordinary citizens, requiring an entry permit issued by the then South African Department of Bantu Affairs. Consequently, much of what had taken place there had gone unnoticed. Who would see it? During the course of one of our survey flights, upon coming in to land, we found the mummified carcasses of five elephants with the ivory removed – not, as we had found in past incidents, by chain saw but removed some time after the animals had died. All the elephants had been killed by automatic weapons: we found the dispensed shells near where the carcasses lay. Clearly the killers had had time on their hands and had been in no hurry.

Our presence in Namibia's Kaokoveld had come at a time when most of the wildlife, especially rhino and elephant, had already disappeared. Since that time the efforts of EWT and later of the Namibian Wildlife Trust, and Save the Rhino Trust, and eventually direct control by the official nature conservation agencies over the region, have effectively put the brakes on further destruction. There is no doubt that elephant and rhino have been poached in the interim, but such episodes have by and large been local incidents and have been effectively controlled by the conservation authorities. Through their work, EWT's community game guard scheme, and the efforts of Blythe's organisation, there has been a



notable improvement in both elephant and rhino populations over the years.

This whole sorry business had a sequel in Washington, D.C. on 14 July 1988, when Craig van Note of Monitor (a conservation, environmental and animal welfare consortium) presented a statement to a U.S. congressional sub-committee on oversight and investigations of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee. Van Note said it was astonishing that CITES and other agencies supposedly monitoring the ivory trade had apparently consciously avoided any mention of the great volume of ivory flowing through South Africa from Angola, Zaïre, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Moçambique and Botswana. According to reliable sources in Africa, he said, a massive smuggling ring to channel ivory and other contraband out of Africa had been operating for years with the complicity of South African officials at the highest levels of the government and the military. None of this ivory showed up in any customs book in Africa, and very few destinations in the Middle East, India or the Far East reflected it either.







The report was very disturbing. In particular, it threw a dark shadow over the activities of the then South African Defence Force, which had long been operating in both Namibia and Angola. As a result of the report, the military carried out their own investigation into the allegations. It was unfortunate that an

independent commission had not been set up much earlier to investigate the situation and that it took pressure from an international environmental organisation to bring the scenario back onto centre stage. In due course, and with a new government, this resulted in the Minister of Environmental Affairs ordering a commission of inquiry. Mr. Justice M.E. Kumleben was appointed chairman and sole member of the commission on 7 October 1994.

The Kumleben Commission's charge was to investigate and report on the alleged smuggling of ivory and rhino horn, particularly of Angolan and Moçambiquan origin, to and through South Africa; the alleged involvement of South African citizens in such smuggling activities; and the alleged illegal trade in ivory and rhino horn of South African origin. The commission was also enjoined to recommend steps to be taken to eliminate such irregularities.

The terms of reference initially limited the inquiry to a period of ten years prior to the appointment of the commission. However, it was found that past conduct could not be placed in proper perspective with such a time limitation. After the minister officially announced the appointment of the commission, written submissions were invited by or before 10 December 1994. In addition, a letter of request went to particular individuals and organisations believed likely to be able to assist with information or evidence.





The letter noted that allegations of South African involvement in the smuggling and illegal sale of ivory and rhino horn had persisted for a considerable period and that one of the commission's tasks was to determine whether these allegations could be substantiated. The Rhino & Elephant Foundation, although it had not been in existence at the time of my visit to Namibia in 1978, nevertheless provided the commission with as much information as it possessed.

Within the commission's terms of reference the following allegations and topics were listed:

- South Africa, with the involvement of conservation officials, had for a considerable length of time been the clearing house for covert, illicit and large-scale handling and disposal of ivory and rhino horn, originating from other African countries and sent abroad, particularly to the Far East. Syndicates of foreigners, some with South African involvement, had mainly been responsible for such activities. Certain of these syndicates were general dealers. Their operations were not confined to ivory and rhino horn, but included dealing in drugs, other species of wildlife, and firearms.
- The commission further noted that the South African Defence Force was covertly involved in the receipt, transportation, sale, and export of (inter alia) ivory and rhino horn. The SADF had thus aided and abetted the slaughter and destruction of elephant herds and rhino in neighbouring countries, particularly Angola and Moçambique. Such operations were conducted with the knowledge of sanction by highly placed personnel of the SADF, state officials, and ministries. Among other allegations, these points emerged from publications and other material of journalists and non-governmental conservation bodies.
- The commission indicated that none of the documents submitted contained first-hand evidence in support of these allegations. They were hearsay based on information from disclosed and undisclosed sources.

The collation of evidence was a long and arduous process and the report was finally published in January 1996. Justice Kumleben, assisted by his legal officers, thoroughly and

meticulously examined every bit of evidence, producing thousands of pages which were finally cranked down to a 226-page report. The report made for serious reading and confirmed beyond doubt that the alarm bells sounded so many years before bore more than a measure of truth.

The report concluded that during the period from 1975 to 1987, there had been large-scale destruction of wildlife in Angola and north-eastern Namibia, as a result of civil strife and border wars in those countries. It further stated that there were clear indications that most of the rhino horn and tusks thus obtained were exported via South Africa, either as undisclosed contraband or with false or dishonestly obtained documentation.

During the period from mid-1978 to about 1986, the SADF Military Intelligence Division officially, though covertly, participated in the illicit possession and transportation of ivory and rhino horn from Angola and Namibia to fund wars in neighbouring countries. It was further found that after 1986, there were no grounds for believing that the SADF or its successor, the South African National Defence Force, had been engaged in smuggling either rhino horn or ivory. These were the principal areas that concerned EWT at the time and later the Rhino & Elephant Foundation, although there were numerous other conclusions and recommendations emerging in the commission's findings. The allegation that South Africa was party to the liquidation of perhaps 100 000 elephants in Angola is groundless. No sound evidence has ever been produced to support this.

The commission did criticise several organisations for their activities or incompetence and the South African Department of Customs for its seriously flawed trade controls. On a positive note, the commission found that the Endangered Species Protection Unit of the South African Police Services was operating effectively and conscientiously, given their limited resources.

The Kumleben Commission Inquiry Report is available for R18-15 from Government Printers Publications, Private Bag X85, PRETORIA, 0001, South Africa.

