

Elephant and Rhino Poaching in Kenya

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“Please note that some of the photographs below are gruesome. However they are real and they reflect truly what happens to rhino and elephant when they are poached. One has to see these to appreciate and understand what actually happens out there. It’s savage, it’s appalling and sickening, and the rich and wealthy are behind it in organized syndicates no different to the drug trade!” - Richard A. Moller

Poaching for elephants’ ivory and rhinoceros horn is no new thing; in fact it has been taking place for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It is deeply engrained in historical cultures, whereby in some more remote places it even formed a currency before money came in. It is important to remember that this situation was not that long ago (just over 100 years ago).

What is new though today is the insatiable demand for ivory and rhino horn from a now wealthy society in far eastern countries – China in particular.

There is a lot of speculation as to the illegal prices for ivory and rhino horn at the poachers’ level. Data from other organizations/individuals may differ from my findings and so I can only comment on what I have personally experienced with information gathered from arrested poachers and ivory brokers in the recent past.

In Kenya, between 2000 and 2009 the illegal price (to the poacher) for one kilogram of ivory in remote villages and towns that bordered elephant rangelands was between US \$23 and US \$38 (only a slight increase in nine years). However, between 2010 and the beginning of 2012, the illegal local price has sky rocketed from US \$38 to US \$225! An increase of nearly six-fold in just over one year! These figures have been correlated with other parts of the country and seem to tally in a uniform trend of increase (Information gathered from arrested poachers and ivory brokers as well as other field conservation bodies).

The rhino horn racket reflects similar, if not greater demands. Determining the illegal market of rhino horn is that much more difficult to ascertain, due to the fact that rhino are very rare and the underground syndicates involved in this gruesome trade are far more secretive than the many who are involved in the ivory racket. From my experiences, it is believed that one kilogram of rhino horn will fetch up to US \$18,000 to the man on the ground doing the “dirty work” (i.e. the poacher). With the average horn (both front and rear) being around three to four kilograms, one can clearly see why the poacher takes great risks for his bounty.

An ounce of rhino horn is now worth more than an ounce of gold!

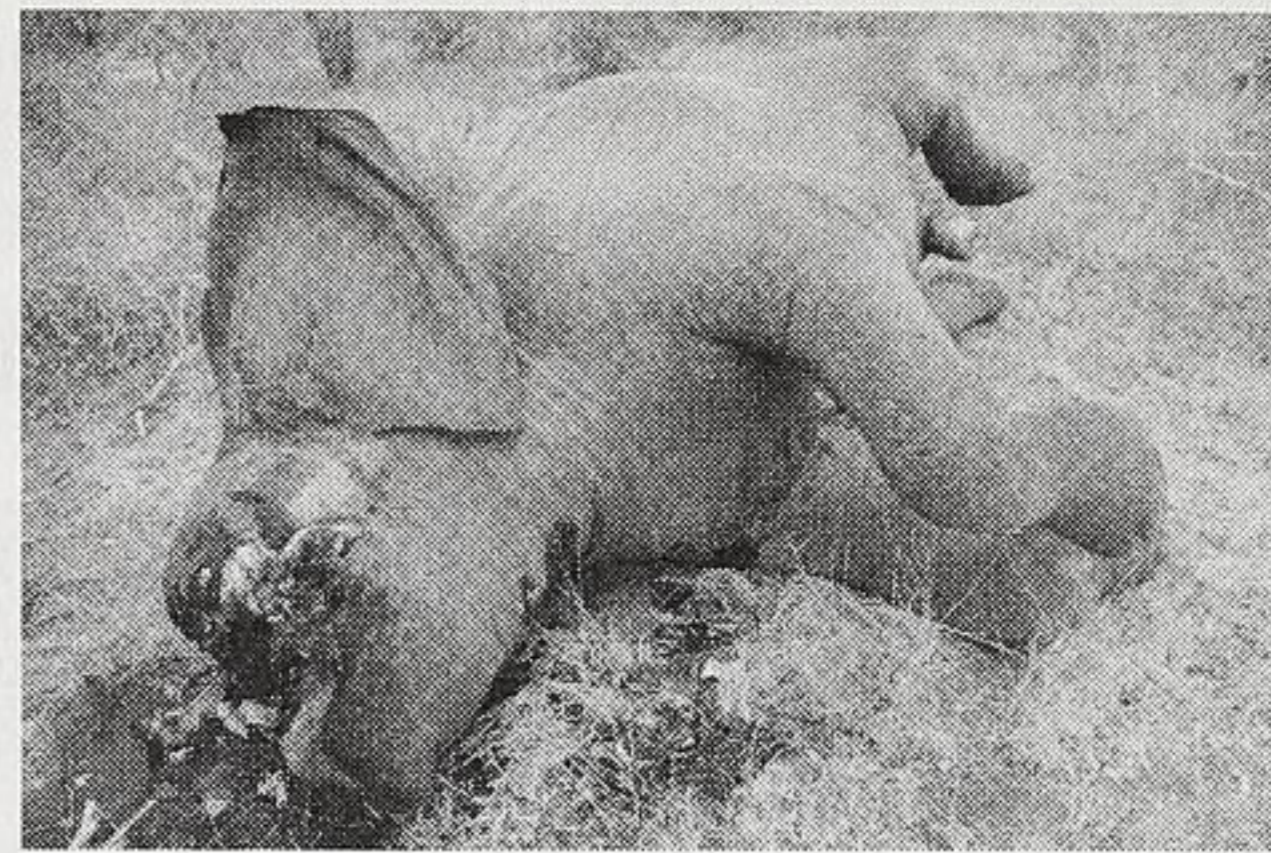
With these sorts of figures involved, the present ivory and rhino horn trade can and should be compared to the illicit drug trade where serious organized crime is leading this onslaught. For years now the conservation bodies involved at field level have been crying to try and stop this organized crime involving powerful individuals. Their pleas have all too often fallen on deaf ears; the politicians and decision makers have not yet carried out law enforcement upgrades (a vital and overdue move) for wildlife related penalties where serious poachers, brokers and dealers are handed out puny fines/sentences and are back carrying out the same crimes within days. As usual the wildlife decision-making process remains at the bottom of the pile of “things to do” (wildlife cannot vote – so it remains far less important). Yet in this oversight, the elephant and the rhino (as well as many other species that are being gobbled up in the “bush meat trade”) are edging closer and closer to the brink once again. The difference this time is that the remaining numbers (especially rhino) are so few that they may never bounce back.

Who is driving the market? It is widely believed, with good reasoning, that the Chinese are the main consumers of illegal ivory and rhino horn. They are a nation where their populous has become more and more affluent in recent years and now a nation where not only the few very rich can afford such commodities as ivory and rhino horn but also the huge growing middle class. It is a known fact that the environment is not high on China's agenda (look at Tibet as a good example where the environment has literally been raped), and with this, it is probable that the Chinese people are not actually aware of just how "close to the brink" the wild rhino and elephant actually are. They probably have no idea of the animals suffering and slow deaths at the hands of poachers (via poisoned arrows, snares, traps and festering gun shot wounds). They probably believe there are still plenty of elephant and rhino available. This naiveté, coupled with corruption across the board and the modern day colonization of Africa by the Chinese simply spells DISASTER for the remaining rhino and elephant of Africa.

In a country where unemployment is running very high, rural families are large in number and there are many mouths to feed. Human Wildlife Conflicts are a common occurrence in community lands that border protected areas. Politicians jump at this chance to gain votes and campaign against conservation bodies and once again the wildlife comes off second-best. The human growth explosion is adding to the plight of all wildlife by simply "gobbling up" what was once wildlife habitat.

Just a few ideas of how can you stop this trend?

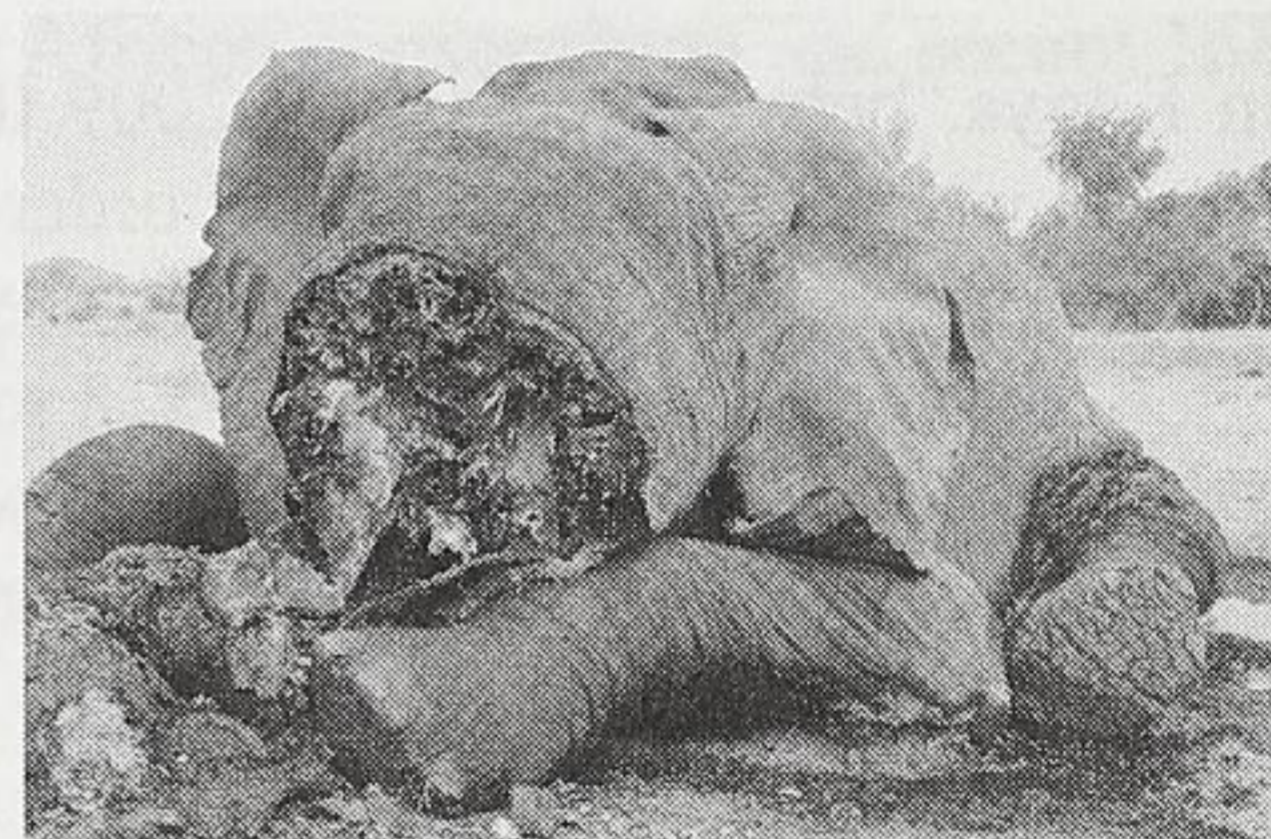
- Pressurize local governments to up-grade the presently out-of-date law and punishment systems. Review the fines and penalties in line with the illegal prices of rhino horn and ivory.
- Armed poachers within national parks should be treated as terrorists and shot on sight.
- Awareness campaigns in the Far East, especially China, possibly via celebrities that the Chinese follow, such as the well known footballer David Beckham? There must be many that would be willing to "shout loud" for the rhino and elephant. Internet campaigns and awareness drives must make an impact also.
- This is not just an African problem; it is a global one and all must stand together to fund field conservation projects. It will take big money and long-term commitment from local and international governments to ensure that elephant and rhino are to remain in their natural wild habitat.



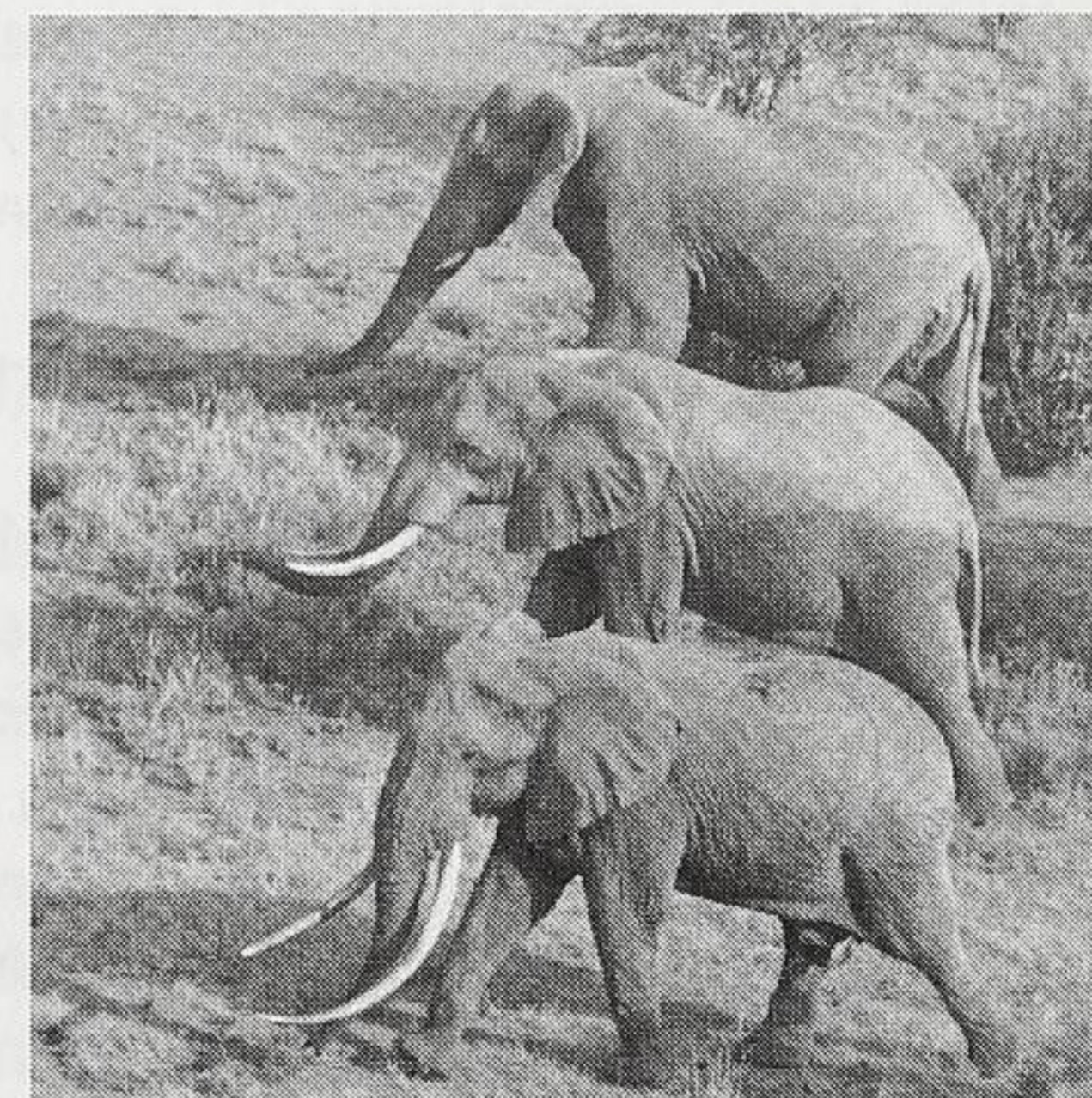
Freshly poached elephant with its face hacked off by poachers to get to the ivory. This photo was taken in Kenya in late January 2012.



Freshly poached white rhino with horns savagely hacked off by poachers



Freshly poached elephant, shot by armed poachers, face hacked off to get at ivory. Surely the Chinese People cannot accept this savage behavior!



Tree elephant bulls, small, medium and large, this is how it should be – allowed to survive and not poached or killed just for their teeth!