

Trouble in Botswana's elephant paradise as poaching said to rise

f t in @ ✉ by Johan Augustin on 5 March 2019



- Botswana is home to 130,000 elephants, a third of Africa's total elephant population, and has gained a reputation as a sanctuary for the threatened species.
- This is thanks in large part to a hunting ban and strict anti-poaching measures, including the provision of automatic rifles to rangers, championed by the previous government.
- But a report based on an aerial survey carried out last year shows an alarming increase in poaching, notably of male elephants for their typically larger tusks — a finding disputed by the new government.
- The government, which moved to disarm anti-poaching rangers when it took office last year, is also considering ending the hunting ban to allow the trophy shooting and culling of elephants to get their population under control.

This is the first article in a two-part series on the threats to African elephants in Botswana.

CHOBE NATIONAL PARK, Botswana — The strong aroma of sage fills the air as we travel along the Linyanti River in northern Botswana, near the border with Namibia. We cross the tracks of a honey badger, and in the distance hear the yelping of a pack of African wild dogs in pursuit of an impala. The Linyanti River and adjacent swamps eventually feed into the Chobe River and Chobe National Park. Here, the area is renowned for another, more iconic species: the African savanna elephant, also known as the African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). Enormous herds constitute one of the last continuous populations on the continent. They migrate 200 kilometers (120 miles) up and down the river system, congregating en masse during the dry season on the Linyanti and Chobe rivers.

Savanna elephant numbers are stable in Linyanti and Chobe, currently around 80,000, where most of the region is protected by national parks and private concessions. In all, Botswana is home to 130,000 elephants, Africa's biggest population of the pachyderms, which in some areas is even growing.

About 40 percent of the land in Botswana, a country the size of France, is set aside for conservation through national parks and private reserves. That, together with the fact that former president and conservationist Ian Khama imposed a hunting ban on big game in 2014 and, more controversially, armed rangers with automatic rifles, has made the country a safe haven for elephants and other wildlife.



A herd of elephants drinks at the Linyanti River in northern Botswana. Image by Roger Borgelid for Mongabay.

But this picture of Botswana as an elephant idyll may soon change. When the new president, Mokgweetsi Masisi, took office in April 2018, he ordered the disarming of the anti-poaching units. The new government has also been pushing to overturn Khama's hunting ban. It has proposed legislation that would permit the hunting and culling of elephants on the basis that herd populations have become too large in some parts of the country and thereby raise the risks of human-animal conflict.

Poaching spree

Then came news from what was supposed to be a routine aerial survey, carried out every four years: the carcasses of 87 elephants, shot with high-caliber arms and with their tusks hacked off, were spotted during the survey in July and August 2018 near the Okavango Delta. It was believed to be one of Africa's worst mass poaching sprees, according to the conservation organization Elephants Without Borders (EWB), which conducted the survey of northern Botswana together with representatives from the country's Department of

Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP). Photo evidence was taken to verify that each dead elephant had indeed been poached.

EWB submitted its report of the survey to the DWNP in January this year, and on Feb. 24 the government responded, on Twitter, by casting doubt on the methodologies used and the conclusions drawn.

PRESS RELEASE REVIEW OF ELEPHANTS WITHOUT BORDERS 2018 DRY SEASON AERIAL SURVEY OF ELEPHANTS AND WILDLIFE IN NORTHERN BOTSWANA REPORT

— Botswana Government (@BWGovernment) February 24, 2019

The report hasn't been made public, but a copy seen by Mongabay reveals a significant increase in the poaching rate since the previous aerial survey in 2014. Between 2014 and 2018, the report states, the surveyors observed "a 593 percent increase in estimated numbers of fresh and recent carcasses," while the number of carcasses observed increased in 40 of 49 surveyed areas. The report also notes that most of the dead elephants were clustered in a few "hotspots" — "exactly the pattern one would expect if poachers are targeting elephants in relatively small areas where the poachers operate." Nearly all carcasses suspected of being poached were bulls, generally targeted because of their larger tusks.

"They showed obvious signs of being poached. I defend what I stated last year," Mike Chase, the founder of EWB and part of the team that conducted the aerial survey, told Mongabay.

But the Botswana government has steadfastly disputed the claim, saying back in 2018 that a "verification mission ... established that the majority were not poached but rather died from natural causes and retaliatory killings as a result of human and wildlife conflicts."

Otisitse Tiroyamodimo, the director of the DWNP, was more blunt in an interview with Mongabay last December.

"I wish to make it clear that we have never had 90 carcasses found earlier this year," he said. "This was pure fabrication of news."

"The poaching situation of elephants is that we lose elephants in the northern part of Botswana along our international boundary with Namibia," he added. "The poaching is sporadic, but due to the density of elephants in the area the opportunity of a kill is always available."



A hacked elephant skull found in northern Botswana. Image by Roger Borgelid for Mongabay.

'Flagship species'

In its Twitter statement earlier this month, the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources Conservation and Tourism said the elephant population from the 2018 survey was "not statistically different from the 2014 survey." It added that the "only reasonable conclusion" was that the population had remained stable within that period.

Yet even beyond the report, evidence of a poaching problem persists. Local newspapers have recently reported a rise in poaching of both elephants and rhinos. The relocation of 130 South African white and black rhinos into remote areas and closely guarded areas of the 3,900-square-kilometer (10,000-square-mile) delta was seen as a success story, until last year when a number of rhinos were poached by what appeared to be a criminal syndicate made up of locals working with Namibian and Zambian citizens. Between January 2018 and January 2019, 13 rhinos were killed. The Botswana government has deployed anti-poaching teams to protect the rhinos, and private companies are also assisting.

Tiroyamodimo said the Botswana government under President Masisi continued to deploy troops to areas prone to poaching. "From suspects arrested or incapacitated during contact with Security Forces, there are Namibian and Zambian citizens, the latter appearing in more numbers," he said.

Asked about the withdrawal of the Khama-era "shoot-to-kill" policy, Tiroyamodimo denied there was ever one.

"Automatic weapons were withdrawn from the DWNP [rangers] because of a legislative omission in the act governing the department. Other anti-poaching units being the police, military and intelligence institutions remain fully armed," he said.

Any solution to tackling poaching in Botswana and Africa as a whole needs to be "multifaceted," he said. "It includes ... properly resourcing frontline protection units, involving communities in conservation decision making, allowing communities to benefit from conservation, regional law enforcement collaboration and proper community inclusive elephant conservation strategies. Increasing penalties will also offer deterrence," he said.

But on the essential question of whether poaching is on the rise, Tiroyamodimo remained adamant: "Facts must be put before me to prove that."

Chase of the EWB called for an end to the quibbling over the fate of what he described as the "flagship species" of the African continent.

"Stop [arguing] and let's focus on the elephants. They are being killed," he said, adding it was important to "secure Botswana's international reputation" as home to one-third of the continent's remaining elephants.

"If we can't save the elephants," he said, "then we cannot save other wildlife either."



Elephants bathe in the Linyanti River at sunset. Image by Roger Borgelid for Mongabay.

Banner image of elephants in Botswana's Linyanti River by Roger Borgelid for Mongabay.

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