

How Killing Elephants Finances Terror in Africa

(excerpts from article)

Armed groups help fund operations by smuggling elephant ivory. Can fake tusks with hidden GPS trackers thwart them?



Veteran ranger Jean Claude Mambo Marindo sits beside almost a hundred tusks seized from elephant poachers at Garamba National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The park has lost all its rhinos to poaching for their horns. Now it's under siege for its ivory, mainly by rogue soldiers from national armies and by the terrorist group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

By **Bryan Christy**

PUBLISHED AUGUST 12, 2015 IN NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

When the American Museum of Natural History wanted to update the hall of North American mammals, taxidermist George Dante got the call. When the tortoise Lonesome George, emblem of the Galápagos Islands, died, it was Dante who was tasked with restoring him. But Dante, who is one of the world's most respected taxidermists, has never done what I'm asking him to do. No one has.

I want Dante to design an artificial elephant tusk that has the look and feel of confiscated tusks loaned to me by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Inside the fake tusk, I want him to embed a custom-made GPS and satellite-based tracking system. If he can do this, I'll ask him to make several more tusks. In the criminal world, ivory operates as currency, so in a way I'm asking Dante to print counterfeit money I can follow.

I will use his tusks to hunt the people who kill elephants and to learn what roads their ivory plunder follows, which ports it leaves, what ships it travels on, what cities and countries it transits, and where it ends up. Will artificial tusks planted in a central African country head east—or west—toward a coast with reliable transportation to Asian markets? Will they go north, the most violent ivory path on the African continent? Or will they go nowhere, discovered before they're moved and turned in by an honest person?

As we talk over my design needs, Dante's brown eyes sparkle like a boy's on Christmas morning. To test ivory, dealers will scratch a tusk with a knife or hold a lighter under it; ivory is a tooth and won't melt. My tusks will have to act like ivory. "And I gotta find a way to get that shine," Dante says, referring to the gloss a clean elephant tusk has.

"I need Schreger lines too, George," I say, referring to the cross-hatching on the butt of a sawn tusk that looks like growth rings of a tree trunk.

Like much of the world, George Dante knows that the African elephant is under siege. A booming Chinese middle class with an insatiable taste for ivory, crippling poverty in Africa, weak and corrupt law enforcement,

and more ways than ever to kill an elephant have created a perfect storm. The result: Some 30,000 African elephants are slaughtered every year, more than 100,000 between 2010 and 2012, and the pace of killing is not slowing. Most illegal ivory goes to China, where a pair of ivory chopsticks can bring more than a thousand dollars and carved tusks sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

East Africa is now ground zero for much of the poaching. In June the Tanzanian government announced that the country has lost 60 percent of its elephants in the past five years, down from 110,000 to fewer than 44,000. During the same period, neighboring Mozambique is reported to have lost 48 percent of its elephants. Locals, including poor villagers and unpaid park rangers, are killing elephants for cash—a risk they're willing to take because even if they're caught, the penalties are often negligible. But in central Africa, as I learned firsthand, something more sinister is driving the killing: Militias and terrorist groups funded in part by ivory are poaching elephants, often outside their home countries, and even hiding inside national parks. They're looting communities, enslaving people, and killing park rangers who get in their way.

South Sudan. The Central African Republic (CAR). The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Sudan. Chad. Five of the world's least stable nations, as ranked by the Washington, D.C.-based organization the Fund for Peace, are home to people who travel to other countries to kill elephants. Year after year, the path to many of the biggest, most horrific elephant killings traces back to Sudan, which has no elephants left but gives comfort to foreign-born poacher-terrorists and is home to the janjaweed and other Sudanese cross-continental marauders.

Park rangers are often the only forces going up against the killers. Outnumbered and ill equipped, they're manning the front line in a violent battle that affects us all.

Father Ernest Sugule...tells me that many children in his diocese have seen family members killed by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, the Ugandan rebel group led by Joseph Kony, one of Africa's most wanted terrorists...

In 1994 Kony left Uganda and took his murderous gang on the road. He went first to Sudan, initiating a pattern of border-hopping that continues to make him difficult to track. At the time Sudan's north and south were in a civil war, and Kony offered Sudan's government, in Khartoum, a way to destabilize the south. For ten years Khartoum supplied him with food, medicine, and arms, including automatic rifles, antiaircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. It was thanks largely to efforts by the group Invisible Children and its video *Kony 2012* that Kony became a household name in the West. In the United States, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama supported efforts either to arrest or kill him. The U.S. State Department named Kony a "specially designated global terrorist" in 2008, and the African Union has designated the LRA a terrorist organization.

When north and south Sudan signed a peace agreement in 2005, Kony lost his Sudanese host. In March 2006 he fled for the DRC and set up camp in Garamba National Park, then home to some 4,000 elephants. From Garamba, Kony signaled his desire for peace with Uganda, sending emissaries to neutral Juba, in southern Sudan, to negotiate with Ugandan officials while he and his men lived unmolested in and around the park, protected by a cease-fire agreement.

(Geli Oh) saw many elephants in Garamba National Park, she says, which is where the LRA took her. Tongo Tongo shot two elephants one day, she says. "They say the more elephants they kill, the more ivory they get." ...In village after village along the road between Father Sugule's church and what is now South Sudan, I meet Kony victims who describe being fed elephant meat and how, after elephants were killed, militants took the ivory away. But where?

On September 11, 2014, Michael Onen, a sergeant in Kony's army, walked out of Garamba National Park carrying an AK-47, five magazines of ammunition, and a story. Onen is short and looks even smaller wearing a camouflage-patterned Ugandan army uniform that's too long for him in the sleeves. He sits on a plastic chair opposite me in a clearing at the African Union forces base in Obo, in the southeastern corner of CAR, where he is in custody. Onen had been part of an LRA poaching operation in Garamba consisting of 41 fighters,

including Kony's son Salim. The operation was designed by Kony himself, Onen says. During the summer Kony's soldiers had killed 25 elephants in Garamba, and they were on their way back to Kony carrying the ivory.

During the failed peace talks with Uganda, while Kony hid in Garamba from 2006 to 2008, Onen had been assigned to Kony's lead peace negotiator, Vincent Otti. Otti liked elephants, Onen recalled, and forbade their killing. But after Otti left Garamba to participate in the peace talks, Kony began killing elephants for ivory.

Otti was furious, Onen says. "Why are you collecting ivory?" Otti demanded of Kony. "Aren't you interested in peace talks?"

No, I want ivory for ammunition to keep fighting, was Kony's reply, according to Onen, who was listening to transmissions. "Ivory operates as a savings account for Kony," says Marty Regan, of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. Kony's army had arrived in Garamba in 2006 with little ammunition left to continue its war, Onen tells me. "It's only the ivory that will make the LRA strong," he recalls Kony saying.

From Garamba, Kony sent an exploratory team to Darfur to look into forging a new relationship with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), who had supported him against Uganda, hoping to exchange ivory for rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons.

The recent death toll of elephants in Garamba has been staggering, even by central African standards. Poachers killed at least 132 last year, and as of this June, rangers had discovered another 42 carcasses with bullet holes, more than 30 attributed to a single Sudanese poaching expedition—a combined loss amounting to more than 10 percent of the park's entire population of elephants, estimated now to be no more than about 1,500.

From March 2014 to March 2015, Garamba's rangers recorded 31 contacts with armed poachers, more than half of whom were with groups traveling south from the direction of South Sudan and Sudan. They included South Sudanese armed forces (SPLA) and Sudanese military, as well as defectors from those militaries and an assortment of Sudan-based rebels. Congo's own soldiers threaten the park's southern border, and villagers around the park sometimes poach elephants too. And someone—it's unclear who—is believed to be killing elephants from helicopters, as evidenced by bullet holes in the tops of skulls and the removal of tusks by what can only be chain saws.

As Somalia is to piracy, Sudan has become to elephant poaching. In 2012 as many as a hundred Sudanese and Chadian poachers on horseback rode across central Africa into Cameroon's Bouba Ndjidah National Park. They set up camp and in a four-month rampage killed up to 650 elephants. According to Céline Sissler-Bienvenu, Francophone Africa director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, who led a group into the park after the slaughter, the poachers were most likely from Darfur's Rizeigat tribal group, with ties to the janjaweed—the violent, Sudanese-government-backed militias that have committed atrocities in Darfur. Sudanese and Chadian poachers were likewise implicated in the 2013 butchering of nearly 90 elephants—including 33 pregnant females as well as newborn calves—near Tikem, Chad, not far from Bouba Ndjidah.

That members of the Sudanese military trade arms for ivory with the LRA raises questions about the highest levels of Sudan's government. In 2009 Bashir became the world's first sitting head of state indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In presenting that case, ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo underscored Bashir's control of the groups said to be behind Sudan's ivory trafficking: "He used the army, he enrolled the Militia/Janjaweed. They all report to him, they all obey him. His control is absolute."

Michael Onen, the defector from Kony's army, told me that the LRA and the janjaweed had battled over ivory, with one group robbing the other, and that it was the janjaweed's success in trading ivory that originally gave Kony the idea to start killing elephants. The LRA sells to the Sudan Armed Forces, Onen said.

Earlier this year Kony suffered the defection of his commander of operations, Dominic Ongwen, who told African Union forces that Kony's desire for ivory was reinforced by Seleka. "Seleka rebels had a stock of about

300 ivory tusks that they sold, which enabled them to get the supplies that helped them overthrow President François Bozizé in CAR,” Ongwen told African Union forces, according to his debriefing. Ongwen said Kony’s plan is to obtain as much ivory as possible “for his future survival should he not be able to overthrow the government of Uganda.”

Ongwen also said that Kony intends to form a squad to establish contact with Boko Haram, the Nigerian terrorist group responsible for widespread killings and the kidnappings of hundreds of Nigerian women and schoolgirls. Boko Haram also uses the bush as a base—Nigeria’s Sambisa Forest, a game reserve south of Lake Chad. In March 2015 Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to ISIS, and his group was renamed Islamic State’s West Africa Province, giving that Middle East terrorist group a foothold in West Africa.



In May 2013 poachers with the insurgent group Seleka massacred 26 elephants at Dzanga Bai, a mineral-rich watering hole in CAR

In January 2014, while x-raying a Vietnam-bound container declared to hold cashews, Togolese port authorities saw something strange: ivory. Eventually, more than four tons was found, Africa’s largest seizure since the global ivory trade ban took effect in 1990. DNA suggests that some of the ivory is from elephants killed in May 2013 at Dzanga Bai in CAR.



Members of the Ugandan army’s dog-tracking team lift weights at the African Union base in Obo, CAR. The dogs are Belgian Malinois shepherds, famed for their use in military operations, especially in tough conditions like the dense central African bush