



Forest Elephants in Dzanga Bai

Andrea Turkalo/WCS

- Botswana
- Cameroon
- Central African Republic
- Congo Republic
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Equatorial Guinea
- Ethiopia
- Gabon
- Ivory Coast
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- Madagascar
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- Regional Africa

WCS AND FOREST ELEPHANTS

African savannah elephants are one of the best known and most majestic symbols of Africa. Yet savannah elephants are only half of the story of the “African elephant”, for hidden among the trees in the vast forests of the Congo Basin and small forest fragments of West Africa live the other elephants - the “Hidden Giants”. African forest elephants, which made up about 1/3 of all Africa’s elephants in 1989, are much less well known. They are smaller than savannah elephants, have smaller, straighter tusks, and due to their forest environment, are ecologically very different from savannah elephants. Their taxonomic status is debated amongst geneticists, and today all African elephants are lumped into the same species (*Loxodonta africana*) though the popular consensus is towards classing forest elephants as a separate species.

The challenge facing the conservation movement in the Congo Basin is transforming the legally protected areas into fully functional, well-managed parks in which all natural resources, including forest elephants, are fully protected in practice as well as on paper. This is a challenge for the coming decade as forest elephants continue to be routinely poached inside, as well as outside, some of the best protected parks in the forest. The world view is that “African elephants” are doing well, even too well in southern African nations where space is at a premium and elephants risk over-populating small protected areas. This is only half of the truth; in fact Central Africa remains a killing ground for elephants under the relentless pressure from the illegal ivory trade.

The Human Aspect

Central Africa is among the poorest regions of Africa. Humans are eking out a living based on small-scale subsistence agriculture, fishing, and hunting, illegal poaching for the bushmeat trade and for ivory, or else work in industries based on commercial and usually unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, particularly timber. In addition, forest elephants, like their savannah counterparts, sometimes raid farmer’s fields and even possibly ruin an entire year’s food supply in a night of activity. However, for local people in central Africa elephants provide huge “ecosystem services” to maintain forests, such as seed dispersal, cycling nutrients, and maintaining clearings and other habitats used by myriad other species. Lose forest elephants and lose much of the intricate fabric of the Congo basin rainforest which sustains the great majority of local people of the basin, protects watersheds, and buffers the globe from climate change and other problems. Lose forest elephants and lose one of the major attractions for tourists in central Africa, with its potential to diversify national economies and provide jobs and security for local people. Lose forest elephants and lose the soul of the largest land dwelling animal on the planet and with it perhaps part of the human soul itself.

Elephant Highlights

- **Dzanga bai study:** 18 year study of forest elephants. Over 3000 individuals identified and the study provides complete security for them at the most critical single location in their range (collaboration with WWF).

- **Surveys of populations across central Africa** provide timely status reports and vital current information on illegal human activities for managers (in collaboration with CITES MIKE, WWF)

- **Region-wide study of the ranging and migrations** in some of the most important conservation areas of the Congo Basin (Collaboration with Save the Elephants, WWF, Smithsonian Institute, RAPAC)

- Publication of widely cited article “**Forest Elephant Crisis in the Congo Basin**” (PloS biology).

- Publication of the first book on forest elephant biology and conservation – “**Hidden Giants: Forest Elephants of the Congo Basin**” (In collaboration with RAPAC and Espèces Phare)





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Threats

The greatest threat facing forest elephants comes from the human thirst for ivory. International trade in elephant ivory was banned in 1989, yet the illegal trade is alive and well and probably growing stronger. Europeans and Americans continue to buy ivory, while the market in Asia, particularly in China, is booming. Access to forest elephant habitat and the last large populations is increasingly easy for poachers due to the explosion in logging roads and other infrastructure that the Congo Basin has experienced, and the price of illegal ivory is rising dramatically.

Direct habitat loss is a lesser threat than might be imagined for a tropical forest region since deforestation rates in the Congo Basin remain lower than any other tropical forest region, primarily due to a continuing exodus from rural areas to urban centers, and due to the selective nature of logging in the Congo Basin. However scientists do not understand the long term effects of logging on rainforest ecology and forest elephant habitat quality. Furthermore, as infrastructure improves the cost of extracting timber will decrease eventually to the point where almost all the trees in the forest become profitable.

Less direct threats include poor law enforcement capacity, poor land use planning systems, a poor understanding of elephant biology, weak national and international efforts to address the problems, human conflict and civil unrest, human-elephant conflict over crops, and poor dissemination of information means that managers and government often have limited information on which to base management decisions.

WCS Activities

- WCS has set the standards for monitoring the conservation status of forest elephants, and this work continues today.
- WCS was instrumental in developing, coordinating and implementing the central Africa Monitoring of the Illegal Killing of Elephants (**MIKE**) program which, in 2005, produced the most authoritative assessment of forest elephant status since 1989.
- Applied research by the forest elephant program includes the first landscape wide study of elephant ecology which was conducted in the Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park, Congo, and a comprehensive **GPS telemetry Program** which has tracked the movements of 35 forest elephants in six sites across Gabon, Congo, and Central African Republic.
- WCS has 5 projects focusing on the joint goals of conservation and research on the social organization of forest elephants based in large forest clearings called bais which are both centers of elephant society and also illegal killing grounds when not protected.
- WCS is committed to working with governments in central Africa to improve law enforcement in elephant ranges, address growing problems associated with crop raiding and human elephant conflict around protected areas and plan national strategies following a successful regional elephant conservation strategy.
- At all levels of operation the program is committed to capacity building for African nationals, in areas including anti-poaching and law enforcement, monitoring and scientific research.
- The program has recently produced a book on forest elephants and their conservation entitled "**Hidden Giants: forest elephants of the Congo Basin**"

The goal of the forest elephant project is to conserve Central African forest elephants and their habitat by integrating scientific research, monitoring, and capacity building to influence management, policy and practice at landscape, national and regional levels.

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Mission

The Wildlife Conservation Society's International Conservation Program saves wildlife and wild lands by understanding and resolving critical problems that threaten key species and large, wild ecosystems around the world.

WCS Strategies

- Site-based conservation
- Research
- Training and capacity-building
- New model development
- Informing policy
- Linking zoo-based and field-based conservation

Support this Project!

Contributions to the African Elephant projects can be sent to the WCS Africa Program in NY (address above)

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