



# Saving Elephants

A Wildlife Conservation Society Impact Report

FALL 2020



Thanks to your generous support, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is saving elephants throughout Africa and Asia. We are pleased to share the following impact report with you and hope you feel proud of the successes you helped make possible. Thank you.

## Overview

Elephants inspire awe with their enormous size, long trunks, intelligence, and close-knit family groups. But their survival is in jeopardy, as they face intensifying threats from poaching, habitat loss, and conflict with humans.

We know that both African forest elephants and Asian elephants have lost about 90 percent of their historical range, and WCS's groundbreaking study in 2013 found that 96 African elephants were being killed each day. Now, we are seeing alarming spikes in poaching and killing of endangered species for food—all driven by desperation and opportunism as COVID-19 impacts national economies. It is more critical than ever that we are able to continue our work protecting elephants and their habitats.

WCS has led efforts to save elephants and their habitats in Africa and Asia since the early 1960s, with a strong track record of innovative science and conservation success. Elephant populations have stabilized or increased in areas throughout Africa where WCS has ensured long-term, effective site management and the necessary resources, anti-poaching systems, and training. In parts of Asia where human-elephant conflict is the key threat, our strategies have reduced potential conflict by as much as 90 percent. We work in more elephant landscapes than any other conservation organization, and our goal is to restore elephant populations to sustainable levels and to ensure that people and wild elephants can co-exist and thrive in healthy ecosystems across the elephants' range.

In the last year, WCS has:

- ✓ Helped stop the decline of key elephant populations in East Africa and Central Africa by working closely with communities, ramping up ranger patrols, and strengthening law enforcement operations to stop elephant poaching and ivory trafficking.
- ✓ Completed a successful elephant rescue operation in Cambodia, working closely with local partners to save an Asian elephant in a critical Asian elephant stronghold.
- ✓ Stepped up our advocacy to urge the European Union and other nations to close their domestic ivory markets for good.

These wins prove that with the right resources and science, we can safeguard these animals and help them bounce back. Elephant stabilization and recovery takes time, so we must remain vigilant across our all sites and work closely with local and international partners to hold on to our hard-won successes—especially as we address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

WCS field experts have the tools and know-how to help the most vulnerable communities adapt. And your partnership empowers us to rapidly get support to local community and government partners on the ground. Together, we can avert the worst economic and conservation outcomes—and even create positive impacts through conservation activities that empower local stewardship, rights, and ownership.

WCS's important work to save one of the world's most emblematic species would not be possible without you. Thank you for standing with us.

## Where We Work

The landscapes WCS protects contain more than 50 percent of African forest elephants and an estimated 50 percent of Asian elephants.





## Saving Elephants in the Field

### Recovering Elephants in Ruaha, East Africa's Most Critical Elephant Landscape

Tanzania's Ruaha-Katavi landscape, stretching across an area nearly three times the size of Switzerland, is East Africa's most important habitat for elephants. But decades of unchecked poaching, including a spike in illegal activity in the late 2000s driven by the illegal ivory trade, caused elephant numbers in this region to dwindle. Across all of Tanzania, elephant populations declined by 60 percent between 2009 and 2014.

But there is hope once again for elephants in Ruaha-Katavi: A massive wildlife survey by WCS in late 2019 has shown that, thanks to our longstanding conservation efforts, elephants in this region are stable. Our 20-day survey aerial survey covering more than 77,000 square kilometers recorded an estimated 20,145 elephants—the first evidence of elephant recovery in this region. Far fewer elephant carcasses were recorded compared to the last survey of Ruaha-Katavi in 2015, indicating that our activities are bringing poaching under control.

Since 2014, WCS has worked to stop elephant poaching in Ruaha-Katavi by partnering with the government to co-manage the region's protected areas, and providing strong support to communities and law enforcement. To date, we have trained more than 500 rangers and community scouts, established three elite rapid reaction teams in key elephant areas, and fully rolled out the SMART patrol system, which integrates real-time data on illegal activity within protected areas—enabling us to dismantle the illegal trade networks that drive elephant poaching. We also lead daily aerial monitoring of this region to prevent illegal activity before it occurs, and ensure elephants in this landscape can continue to recover.



## Stopping Emerging Threats to Elephants in Central Africa's Okapi

Along the eastern border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) lies the Okapi-Kahuzi-Biega stronghold, a vast 50,000-squarekilometer mosaic of intact forests that are home to rare animals, including one of DRC's largest populations of forest elephants, more than half the world's remaining okapi—also known as forest giraffes—and Grauer's gorillas, which are found nowhere else on the planet. These forests are also an important buffer against the effects of climate change.

Yet rapidly escalating threats from illegal gold mining, poaching, and wildlife trafficking have caused drastic declines in this landscape's elephants and other wildlife populations over the last two decades. The economic impact of Covid-19 has intensified these threats, as people are increasingly hunting wildlife in the struggle for food and income, and criminal actors are taking advantage of the crisis to poach and traffic endangered wildlife. This includes poachers killing elephants in order to illegally sell their ivory.

WCS is:

- ✓ Ramping up security measures in the most at-risk sections of forests by strengthening and professionalizing the work of park rangers, in order to keep elephants and other species safe.
- ✓ Establishing new, stronger legal measures to formally protect forests across this stronghold through public-private partnerships and more robust land tenure rights for community-managed lands.
- ✓ Advancing the development of sustainable livelihoods, and helping improve access to social services, common goods, and conservation-friendly jobs for the more than 500,000 local and Indigenous Peoples living in and around protected areas, thereby reducing dependencies on wildlife and habitats.

In 2019, WCS signed a 10-year public-private partnership agreement with the DRC government to co-manage the Okapi Wildlife Reserve so the region's elephants and other unique wildlife can recover. In the first half of 2020, WCS-trained expert ranger teams conducted nearly 230 patrols, resulting in 30 arrests including of 12 illegal gold miners—double the arrest rate from last year. Through these trainings and patrols, and by working directly with—and helping to improve security for—members of the local communities, we are helping to stamp out corruption, disrupt illegal gold mining operations, and tackle poaching.





## Rescuing Elephants in Cambodia

With thousands of field staff stationed on the ground in 60 countries, WCS operates in tough but critical areas where others don't go, stays as long as it takes to get the job done, and builds local capacity to achieve lasting results. We focus on stopping elephant poaching and human conflicts, protecting habitat, monitoring populations, and strengthening policies against ivory trafficking. But another key facet of WCS's efforts includes emergency response—saving elephants in extraordinary situations, and tailoring landscape-specific solutions, in order to prevent setbacks that could damage elephants' overall recovery.

In February 2020, WCS conservationists rallied together with rangers and community members to [free a 20-year-old Asian elephant from a bomb crater](#) in Cambodia's Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary. A local villager discovered the trapped elephant and immediately alerted the sanctuary's authorities. WCS staff, rangers, and other villagers spent more than an hour digging an exit route for the animal, and the elephant was able to climb out safely.

This is the second elephant rescue in this landscape in recent years: In 2017, our team successfully helped 11 elephants escape from a mud hole. This herd represents an important part of the breeding population in Keo Seima, and as this landscape only contains about 115 elephants—with Cambodia containing less than 500 elephants total—the loss of this herd would have been a major step back for conservation.

WCS has worked to protect the Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary for nearly two decades. This landscape harbors more than 60 species of animals and plants on IUCN's global Red List of species threatened with extinction, and is of international importance for the conservation of Asian elephants. Keo Seima is also home to many Indigenous communities who have depended on the forest economically, culturally, and spiritually for generations. WCS ensures that these communities' needs remain a core focus of Keo Seima's management, and we work closely with them to advance our shared goal of protecting this natural stronghold.



# Tackling Global Threats: Wildlife Trafficking and the Ivory Trade

## Ramping Up Counter-Trafficking Efforts to Save Elephants

WCS leverages our scientific, technical, and policy expertise to push for stronger international regulations against illegal trade in elephants and other at-risk species, enhance legislation and enforcement at the national level, and strengthen cooperation among governments along the trade chain. On the ground, our experts are helping disrupt criminal networks, bring poachers and ivory traders to justice, and stop crime before it happens.

In the last year, WCS has ramped up our patrols, support for law enforcement and convictions, and other vital activities to counter wildlife trafficking globally. Highlights of our counter-trafficking successes for elephants include:

- ✓ Zero elephants poached in two key sites: Zero elephants have been poached in both Mozambique's Niassa National Reserve and Nigeria's Yankari Game Reserve since 2018 and 2015 respectively—thanks in great measure to WCS's guidance and help in strengthening the governments' law enforcement and anti-poaching efforts.
  - In Niassa, our field teams have stepped up the frequency and intensity of foot, air, and boat patrols across the region, and helped install new check posts along known trade routes—preventing criminals from trafficking wildlife products across the reserve's border.
  - And in Yankari, WCS has provided intensive ranger training, field rations, arrest bonuses, and essential field equipment for authorities, and we supplement ground patrols with aerial surveillance operations to detect illegal activity and guide law enforcement efforts. The reserve's elephant population is now holding steady and is expected to grow. We are working to replicate our success in Yankari in other vulnerable areas and develop action plans to conserve all of Nigeria's remaining elephants.
- ✓ WCS-supported ranger patrols: With WCS's assistance, ranger teams in Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia protected Asian elephants as well as tigers, orangutans, and other highly vulnerable species by patrolling more than 10,000 kilometers of protected areas over the last year. Intelligence from WCS and partners helped authorities make more than 100 arrests and remove 255 snares.

## Ending the Ivory Trade

WCS is advancing the global push to close all elephant ivory markets by providing policy expertise to governments, guiding them to implement effective domestic ivory bans that will help put a stop to the elephant poaching crisis.

WCS has successfully advocated for market closures in the United States, China, and the United Kingdom. We also recently celebrated Singapore's decision to ban its domestic trade in ivory after we provided formal input to the proposed action during the public comment period; the law will go into effect in 2021. And at the most recent CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Conference of the Parties, WCS scientific and policy experts joined government delegates from some 180 nations and other NGO representatives to help secure strong global trade regulations for elephants and other important species. As a result, CITES Parties agreed not to open any ivory trade, meaning no international commercial ivory trade is permitted.

On May 12, WCS coordinated a [joint NGO letter](#) to EU top officials urging the European Commission to close its domestic ivory market and implement a ban on all ivory imports and exports without further delay. Then on May

20, the European Commission released its new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which includes a commitment to propose a further tightening of the rules on EU ivory trade later this year. While we welcome this announcement, it is not only about tightening rules—we believe the EU must close its domestic ivory market for good. We will not stop stepping up our advocacy in the EU and other nations until all ivory trade ends so that elephants can recover and thrive.

## Looking Ahead

These wins prove that we can prevent poaching and safeguard elephants by helping governments and our other partners develop targeted, collaborative enforcement efforts—and by working with communities on low-tech crop guarding solutions to reduce human-elephant conflict.

The stabilization and recovery of elephant populations is a long process; WCS will remain vigilant across all of our sites and work with local and international partners to hold on to—and build upon—our hard-won successes. As we ramp up law enforcement and monitoring efforts on the ground, we will help dismantle criminal networks. We will also intensify our advocacy to urge countries that still have legal domestic ivory markets, especially Japan and the European Union, to close their markets and the commercial ivory trade, and end the poaching it drives.





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