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African elephants still in decline due to high levels of poaching

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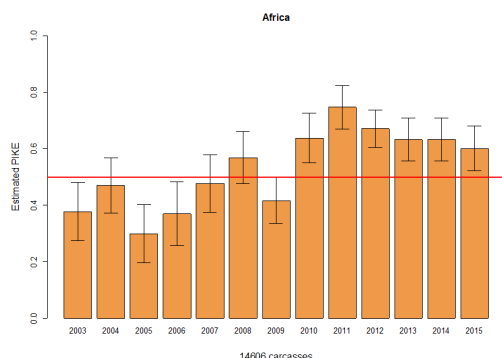
PRESS RELEASE

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS STILL IN DECLINE DUE TO HIGH LEVELS OF POACHING

Poaching levels continue to pose an immediate risk to the survival of African elephants with the overall poaching trends in 2015 showing the Africa-wide elephant populations still in decline, with serious threats to populations in Central and West Africa, and some improvements in parts of Eastern Africa

Geneva/New York/Nairobi, 3 March, 2016: CITES MIKE Programme (Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants) figures released today on the 2015 trends in the poaching of African elephants show that the steady increase in the levels of illegal killing of elephants witnessed since 2006, and peaking in 2011, has been halted and stabilised but at levels that remain unacceptably high overall.

Despite the slight decline and stabilisation recorded since 2011, estimated poaching rates overall remain higher than the normal growth rate of elephant populations, or above the sustainability threshold, meaning the elephant population overall is likely to have continued to decline in 2015.



The most positive news comes from Eastern Africa where, in 2015 and for the fourth consecutive year, there has been an improvement, with natural births overall now exceeding the levels of illegal killing. The situation in Eastern Africa in 2015 is now comparable to the levels recorded in that subregion in 2008. Yet, even within this subregion the situation is mixed, with increases in poaching evident in parts of the United Republic of Tanzania, and lower levels of poaching recorded in Kenya.

The most serious levels of poaching have again been recorded in Central and West Africa. While the overall poaching levels in Southern Africa remain below the threshold, a troubling upward trend in elephant poaching was for the first time observed in the Kruger National Park in South Africa. Although the overall elephant population in Kruger is not in decline, the situation could change if the trends observed in 2015 continue. Significant increased poaching levels were also found in Ruaha-Rungwa, United Republic of Tanzania and Chewore, Zimbabwe.

"African elephant populations continue to face an immediate threat to their survival from unacceptably high-levels of poaching for their ivory, especially in Central and West Africa where high levels of poaching are still evident. There are some encouraging signs, including in certain parts of Eastern Africa, such as Tsavo in Kenya, where the overall poaching trends have declined, showing us all what is possible through a sustained and collective effort with strong political support" said John E. Scanlon, CITES Secretary-General.

The CITES MIKE programme is supported with funding provided by the European Union with the support of the Group of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP).

CITES National Ivory Action Plans (NIAPs)

CITES has identified 22 countries that are most heavily implicated in the illegal trade in ivory. These are categorized as countries of 'primary concern' (eight countries and territories), 'secondary concern' (eight countries) and 'importance to watch' (six countries). 19 of these 22 countries were requested by the CITES Standing Committee to develop and implement National Ivory Action Plans (NIAPs).

The CITES Standing Committee considered the progress made by 19 Parties requested to develop and implement National Ivory Action Plans (NIAPs) at its 66th meeting held in Geneva in January 2016.

The Committee agreed that China (including Hong Kong SAR of China), Kenya, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, all countries of 'primary concern', have 'substantially achieved' the implementation of the activities outlined in their NIAPs, and commended these countries for the progress made. The determination of whether these Parties remain of 'primary concern' in the elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade chain was deferred until the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES to be held in September 2016 (CoP17), when the updated results of the CITES MIKE and the analysis of the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) will be available.

The Standing Committee agreed that Malaysia, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania as countries of 'primary concern' have not yet 'substantially achieved' their NIAPs and these countries, together with Cameroon, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mozambique and Nigeria, as Parties of 'secondary concern', and Angola, Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, as Parties of 'importance to watch', were directed to enhance their efforts with NIAP implementation, and to further report on their progress at the 67th meeting of the Standing Committee on 23 September. The Committee agreed to recommend that Parties suspend commercial trade in CITES-listed specimens with Angola, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nigeria (since lifted for Nigeria) for failing to submit their reports on progress with NIAP implementation to the Committee.

"The momentum generated over the past few years is translating into deeper and stronger efforts to fight these crimes on the front line, where it is needed most – from the rangers in the field, to police and customs at ports of entry and exit and across illicit markets. Governments must continue to strengthen these front line efforts, whilst the UN, other intergovernmental bodies and civil society must further enhance their much needed support, if we are to move from stabilising to reversing the devastating poaching trends of the past decade. On this World Wildlife Day we reach out to everyone to play their part in this collective endeavour" added Scanlon.

TRENDS IN LEVELS OF ILLEGAL KILLING OF ELEPHANTS IN AFRICA TO 31 DECEMBER 2015

Background on MIKE

The CITES programme for Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants, commonly known as MIKE, was established by the Conference of the Parties (CoP) to CITES at its 10th Meeting (Harare, 1997) in accordance with the provisions in Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP16) on *Trade in elephant specimens*. The MIKE Programme is managed by the CITES Secretariat under the supervision of the CITES Standing Committee. Since implementation began in 2001, the operation of the MIKE Programme in Africa has been possible thanks to the generous financial support of the European Union.

MIKE aims to inform and improve decision-making on elephants by measuring trends in levels of illegal killing of elephants, identifying factors associated with those trends, and building capacity for elephant management in range States. MIKE operates in a large sample of sites spread across elephant range in 30 countries in Africa and 13 countries in Asia. There are some 60 designated MIKE sites in Africa, which together hold an estimated 30 to 40% of the African elephant population, and 27 sites in Asia.

MIKE data is collected by ranger patrols in the field and other means in designated MIKE sites. When an elephant carcass is found, site personnel try to establish the cause of death and other details, such as sex and age of the animal, status of ivory and stage of decomposition of the carcass. This information is recorded in standardized carcass forms, details of which are then submitted to the MIKE Programme. A database of more than 15,000 carcass records has been assembled to date, providing the most substantial information base available for making a statistical analysis of the levels of illegal killing of elephants.

MIKE evaluates relative poaching levels based on the Proportion of Illegally Killed Elephants (PIKE), which is calculated as the number of illegally killed elephants found divided by the total number of elephant carcasses encountered by patrols or other means, aggregated by year for each site. Coupled with estimates of population size and natural mortality rates, PIKE can be used to estimate numbers of elephants killed and absolute poaching rates.

While PIKE provides a sensitive measure of poaching trends, it may be affected by a number of potential biases related to data quality, carcass detection probabilities, variation in natural mortality rates and other factors, and hence results need to be interpreted with caution. However, the fact that the quantitative results presented below are in good agreement with quantitative information available from other sources, gives confidence as to the robustness of the results.

Details of the MIKE trend analysis for 2015

Trend analyses of MIKE data using standardized methodology have been presented to the 15th and 16th Meetings of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, in 2010 and 2013 respectively; to the 61st, 62nd, 65th and 66th Meetings of the CITES Standing Committee, as well as to other meetings such as the African Elephant Summit (Gaborone, December 2013) and its follow-up meeting (Kasane, March 2015). In addition, analyses of MIKE data have been published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature (Burn et al. 2011; Wittemyer et al. 2014).

Since the report submitted to the 66th Meeting of the Standing Committee (SC66) held in Geneva in January 2016, which included records received up to the end of 2014, records for 1,334 elephant carcasses encountered in the course of 2015 were received from 40 sites in Africa. While the number of reporting sites has declined compared to 2014, when 46 sites reported, the number of carcass records received is comparable.

The data set used for analysis consist of 14,606 records of elephant carcasses found between 2003 and the end of 2015 at 54 MIKE sites in 29 range States in Africa, representing a total of 505 site-years. Data for Asian sites is still being compiled and will be presented in the MIKE report to the 17th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, which will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September-October 2016.

Figure 1 shows empirically derived time trends in PIKE at the continental level for reporting African MIKE sites, with 95% confidence intervals. The chart shows a steady increase in levels of illegal killing of elephants starting in 2006, peaking in 2011 and slightly declining and leveling off thereafter. The PIKE level in 2015 remained virtually unchanged compared to 2013 and 2014.

Despite the slight decline since 2011, estimated poaching rates overall remain higher than the normal growth rate of elephant populations. Therefore, the elephant population at MIKE sites overall is likely to have continued to decline in 2015.

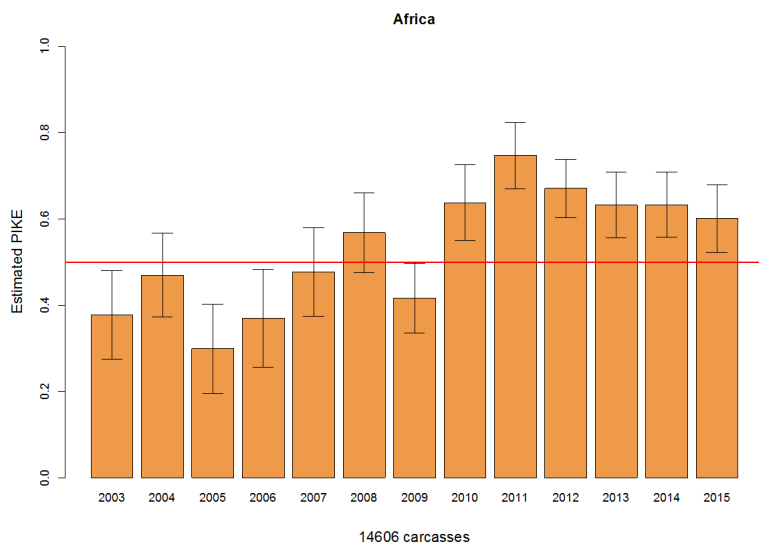


Figure 1. PIKE trends in Africa with 95 % confidence intervals. PIKE levels above the horizontal line at 0.5 (i.e. where half of dead elephants found are deemed to have been illegally killed) are likely to be unsustainable. The number of carcasses on which the chart is based is shown at the bottom of the figure.)

It is difficult to estimate poaching impact at the site level, especially in sites that do not have sufficiently large carcass sample sizes, or where there may be indications of bias in reported PIKE levels. Among sites that have reported 20 or more carcasses in 2015, where the site-level PIKE can be taken to be relatively reliable, those that remain of particular concern (with a PIKE of 0.7 or higher) in 2015 include Pendjari (Benin); Garamba (Democratic Republic of the Congo); Niassa (Mozambique); Katavi-Rukwa, Ruaha-Rungwa and Selous-Mikumi (United Republic of Tanzania).

Sites where a substantial decline in PIKE was recorded in 2015 were Tsavo (Kenya), where PIKE dropped from 0.49 in 2014 to 0.33 in 2015—a 16% decrease—and Pendjari (Benin), where PIKE declined by 10%.

A substantial increase in PIKE was recorded in Kruger (South Africa), which went from 0.17 in 2014 to 0.41 in 2015 (a 23% increase). While the PIKE level in Kruger is still below the sustainability threshold in 2015, the substantial increase of poaching in what had been one of the most secure sites for elephants in Africa is a cause for concern. PIKE also increased substantially in Ruaha-Rungwa (United Republic of Tanzania; by 16%) and Chewore (Zimbabwe; by 12%).

The overall stability in PIKE levels over the last three years is reflected at the subregional level, with the PIKE values in all four African subregions in 2015 being statistically indistinguishable from those reported in 2014 (Figure 2). PIKE levels remained below 0.5 in Eastern and Southern Africa, while they remained above that level in Central and West Africa. It is worth noting that 2015 was the fourth consecutive year in which the PIKE value declined in Eastern Africa since the peak in 2011. The PIKE value for eastern Africa in 2015 is comparable to the levels recorded in that subregion in 2008.

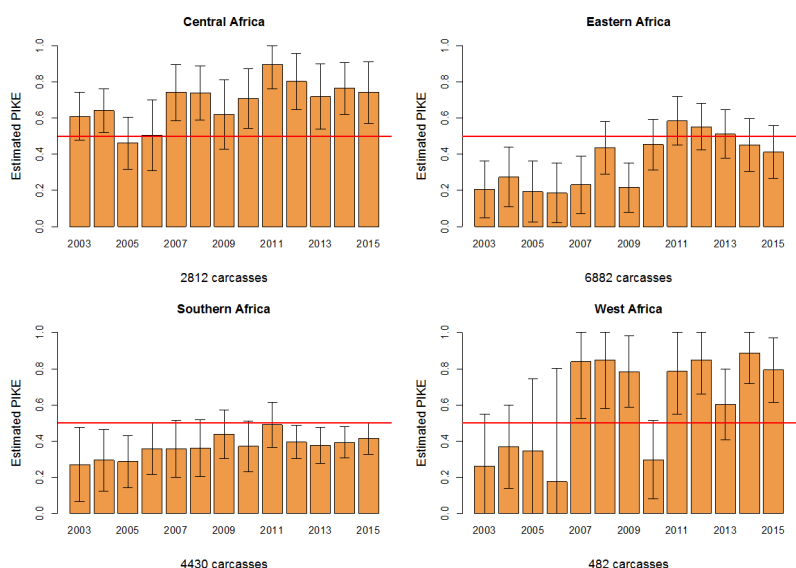


Figure 2. Subregional PIKE trends with 95 % confidence intervals. The numbers of carcasses on which the graphs are based are shown at the bottom of each graph.

With only eight sites reporting data for 2015, West Africa continues to be a cause for concern in terms of data quantity and quality, making reliable inference on trends impossible for the subregion. In this context, it is worth mentioning the case of Gourma (Mali), for which 18 carcasses were reported to MIKE in 2015, whereas the United Nations Peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) reported at least 57 dead elephants in Gourma between January and June 2015 (Farge 2015).

Despite variation at the site level, poaching levels remained stable across African MIKE sites overall in 2015, albeit at unacceptably high levels, especially in Central and West Africa and specific sites in Eastern and Southern Africa.

See also:

- [CITES National Ivory Action Plans](#)
- [A good week for wildlife – CITES meeting takes bold decisions in fight against illicit wildlife trafficking and on ensuring sustainability](#)
- [ICCWC](#)
- [UN World Wildlife Day](#)

Further reading

Burn, R.W., Underwood, F.M. & Blanc, J., 2011. Global trends and factors associated with the illegal killing of elephants: a hierarchical Bayesian analysis of carcass encounter data. *PLoS ONE*, 6(9), p.e24165.

Farge, E., 2015. Poaching threatens Mali's rare desert elephants: UN mission. *Reuters Africa*. Available at: <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN0S30MR20151009> [Accessed February 23, 2016].

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Note to editors: For more information, contact Liu Yuan at +41 22 917 8130 or Yuan.Liu@cites.org

About CITES

With 182 Parties, CITES remains one of the world's most powerful tools for biodiversity conservation through the regulation of trade in wild fauna and flora. Thousands of species are internationally traded and used by people in their daily lives for food, housing, health care, ecotourism, cosmetics or fashion.

CITES regulates international trade in over 35,000 species of plants and animals, including their products and derivatives, ensuring their survival in the wild with benefits for the livelihoods of local people and the global environment. The CITES permit system seeks to ensure that international trade in listed species is sustainable, legal and traceable.

CITES was signed in Washington D.C. on 3 March 1973 and entered into force on 1 July 1975.

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