

In the Line of Fire

ELEPHANT AND RHINO POACHING IN AFRICA

In Africa, elephant populations on the whole are in decline and the illicit killing of rhinos has escalated sharply over recent years. The actors involved in poaching these animals include armed militias, rogue military officers, commercial poachers, and bush meat and subsistence hunters. Poachers are making widespread use of military-style weapons and high-calibre hunting rifles in their pursuit of elephants and rhinos, complicating the efforts of wildlife rangers to stop them.

Poachers use a range of weapons, including hunting and Kalashnikov-pattern rifles and craft firearms.

This chapter draws on interviews with leading wildlife conservation experts and open-source material to examine the challenges facing and strategies adopted by anti-poaching forces and wildlife management agencies in African range states with elephant and rhino populations. Based on original field research conducted in Kenya, the chapter also offers insight provided by rangers, conservationists, and others affected by poaching in the country.

The main findings are that:

- Poachers use multiple means to kill elephants and rhinos, including firearms and non-firearm methods.
- As demand for ivory and rhino horn remains high, some poachers and anti-poaching forces are becoming increasingly militarized, using military-style weapons and adopting more aggressive tactics.
- Firearms and ammunition found at poaching sites are not systematically identified, recorded, or traced despite the potential use of such techniques in identifying the sources and trafficking routes of poacher weapons.



From a helicopter, a park ranger with an FAL-type rifle searches for a fugitive poacher in Kruger National Park, South Africa, November 2014.

- Armed groups have been responsible for major cases of large-scale elephant poaching, yet poaching allegations have also been levelled against some government military forces.
- Small groups of poachers also target elephant herds and rhinos, killing significant numbers of animals over time, particularly in rangeland where elephant and rhino populations are dense.
- Without a substantial reduction in the demand for ivory and rhino horn, efforts to deter poachers through armed interventions may disrupt poaching, but not stop it.

Poaching of various types takes place across African range states. In Central Africa, where some elephant populations have decreased significantly, poachers include armed militias, rogue law enforcement officers, commercial poachers, and subsistence hunters. At the *global* level, demand for illegal ivory is a strong predictor of poaching trends. The strongest *national-level* factor influencing rates of illegally killed elephants is poor governance. Large-scale poaching is the targeting and illegal killing of a concentrated population of elephants in a short period of time. Documented cases have involved the use of firearms, large quantities of ammunition, and even military helicopters. Small-scale poaching is the targeting of an individual elephant or rhino, or small numbers of such animals, for profit. In contrast to large-scale poaching, small-scale poaching tends to be conducted over a significant period of time. The poachers make use of firearms as well as traditional methods to kill elephants and rhinos.

Firearms, large quantities of ammunition, and even military helicopters are used in large-scale poaching.

Armed groups involved in poaching encompass a variety of actors and include pro-government militias and armed opposition forces, as well as economically motivated bands of former or current state military. Most armed groups are active within Central Africa. As these groups can potentially operate in large numbers and possess considerable firepower, they can pose unique challenges to rangers and others charged with protecting wildlife. Among armed groups in Africa, those in Central Africa have had the most significant impact on elephant herds; the UN Security Council and other international bodies have condemned their poaching activity in the region.

Firearms commonly used to hunt elephants and other big game can be classified into three groups: hunting rifles of various calibres; automatic military-style small arms, including assault rifles and light machine guns; and shotguns. Traditional weapons and methods, such as spears and poison, are also used to poach elephants and rhinos. Although information on weapons and ammunition used by poachers can provide insight into the networks that support and conduct poaching, including weapons sources and supply lines, it is not systematically collected.

Across African range states that have elephant and rhino populations, anti-poaching initiatives take many different forms. In some cases, they involve a combination of state and private rangers, government soldiers, and locally based organizations working jointly to combat poaching through the use of force or through grassroots work aimed at influencing local behaviour and attitudes. Anti-poaching rangers and units form the first line of defence against poaching, along with supporting law enforcement structures. While holding poachers accountable for poaching is important, so is the arrest and conviction of the people running the criminal syndicates that sponsor and facilitate the trafficking of ivory and rhino horn. To be effective, initiatives against poaching must be able to rely on cooperative efforts by government agencies (including judiciaries), local conservation organizations, and national and international organizations and conservation groups. 📌