

From: The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland

Date: February 10, 2014



Wildlife CSI Techniques to Protect African Forest Elephants

The Gabonese president Ali Bongo Ondimba will later this week unveil a new initiative to help curb the illegal poaching of African elephants for their ivory. Gabon will utilise forensic DNA techniques from United Kingdom scientists based in Edinburgh to track elephants in an attempt reduce their slaughter due to illegal poaching.

President Ali Bongo Odimba will be in London as part of the [UK Governments Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference](#). Hosted by the David Cameron and in the presence of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the conference is also supported by the [Prince William's Royal Foundation](#). Also at the London meeting will be senior government representatives from over 50 countries, all with the joint aim of spurring action to combat the growing threat to endangered wildlife and producing new and improved multi-lateral agreements to combat the illegal trade.

Elephant poaching is on the increase in Africa as demand for ivory increases in some Asian countries. Statistics show that 96 elephants were killed every single day in 2012 and in 2013 large scale ivory movements were 20% higher than the previous peak in 2011.

“The elephants in Gabon are extremely susceptible to poaching activities as they live in forests rather than savannah and are therefore more difficult to monitor and protect,” says Prof Lee White, [Director of Gabon's National parks](#). Whyte adds, “The geographical proximity of Gabon, in central Africa, to more lawless states offers poachers easy access and retreat with their contraband.”

The ambitious project, funded by the European Union, is a collaboration between the National Parks Agency of Gabon and UK genetic and forensic expertise from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland

and TRACE Wildlife Forensic Network. Bone and tissue fragments from elephant carcasses killed by poachers will be recovered and forensic DNA techniques utilised to produce unique profiles for subsequent matching against blood stained clothing or ivory recovered locally or in Asia.

Dr Rob Ogden, Director of Conservation Science for the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland said, “We routinely use wildlife genetic analysis to provide information for conservation management, but the same DNA tools and data can be transferred into forensic investigations to support wildlife law enforcement. RZSS is extremely happy to be involved in this project which bridges the gap between conservation genetics and wildlife DNA forensics, enabling the Gabon authorities to understand elephant population structure in its National Parks and apply this information to the fight against poaching.”

“Elephant poaching can really be classified as an organised crime due to the level of coordination and logistics required to move shipments internationally,” says Dr Ross McEwing from the UK based NGO [TRACE Wildlife Forensic Network](#). “Terrorist organisations, such as Al-Shabaab, responsible for last year’s bloody shopping mall siege in Kenya, have recently been linked to deriving profits from illegal ivory shipments.” Dr McEwing adds “Combatting organised crime requires the use of all available enforcement tools, including wildlife forensic techniques, not only to save species at risk from extinction, but also to help with the investigations of criminal networks that can undermine national and international security.”

Funds for the project were provided by CEEAC under the ECOFAC V Programme (Fragile ecosystems of Central Africa), funded by the European Union.



Stéphanie Bourgeois, project manager and vet for ANPN (Gabon National Park), takes a sample from a poached elephant.

...ends...

Interviews and additional information from:

1. Prof Lee White, Director of National Parks, Gabon in relation to the extent of elephant poaching in Gabon. Email lwhite@parcsgabob.ga
2. Dr Ross McEwing, Director of TRACE Wildlife Forensics Network in relation to the use of forensic techniques to reduce the illegal wildlife trade. Email ross.mcewing@tracenetwork.org or 07715968906
3. Dr Rob Ogden, Director of Conservation Science for the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, in relation to DNA techniques in animal conservation. Email Rachel Goddard, PR Manager on media@rzss.org.uk or 0131 314 0312

Contact:

Rachel Goddard

PR Manager for the Royal Zoological Study of Scotland

rgoddard@rzss.org.uk

0131 314 0312