

Current challenges to elephant conservation in Kenya

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya's elephants are an important national asset. Wildlife tourism is one of the country's major sources of foreign exchange, and elephants are one of the most important elements in wildlife tourism. The status of Kenya's elephants has always been controversial. During the 1970s and 1980s it is estimated that Kenya lost over 80% of her elephants due to infamous poaching for ivory.

Threats facing Kenya's elephant populations differ across the country

- Kenya's major forest populations of Mt Kenya, Aberdares, Shimba Hills and Mt Elgon are at present not threatened by poaching. The greatest threats to these populations come from conflict with surrounding communities, encroachment of human settlement and agriculture, habitat loss and changing land-uses. These populations are becoming increasingly isolated; former migratory routes have been cut-off by human settlement and local communities have cultivated adjacent to the forest boundaries.

- Land-use changes pose a threat to the Mara and Amboseli elephant populations. The Maasai pastoralists have adopted a more sedentary way of life and recent expansion of large-scale farming has reduced the elephant range. Both of these populations are relatively secure from poaching at present, this is as a result of a combination of factors including high tourism, presence of resident researchers and a buffer zone provided by the surrounding Maasai communities.

- In Kenya's northern and Tsavo populations, poaching has increased over the last 2-3 years. The situation of elephants in these areas has become more precarious with an increase in the number of firearms in the hands of the local communities. Banditry has increased over the last few years and with this has come an upsurge in the level of poaching. The local communities in these areas are heavily armed and have the potential to turn to large-scale elephant poaching should the incentive for ivory increase. The KWS readily admit that with the current resources and manpower they could not contain the poaching should it intensify.