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Slaughter of the African Elephants

By SAMANTHA STRINDBERG and FIONA MAISELS

THERE is nothing a mother elephant will not do for her infant, but even she cannot protect it from bullets. About a year ago, poachers attacked a family of forest elephants in central Africa. The biologist who witnessed the attack told us that wildlife guards were completely outgunned. In the end, an elephant mother, riddled with bullets and trumpeting with pain and fear, was left to use her enormous body to shield her baby. Her sacrifice was for naught; the baby was also killed.

Such is the reality facing African forest elephants today.

This mother and child were just two of the tens of thousands of forest elephants that have been butchered over the past decade. A staggering 62 percent vanished from central Africa between 2002 and 2011, according to a [study](#) we have just published with 60 other scientists in the journal PLoS One. It was the largest such study ever conducted in the central African forests, where elephants are being poached out of existence for their ivory.

In China and other countries in the Far East, there has been an astronomical rise in the demand for ivory trinkets that, no matter how exquisitely made, have no essential utility whatsoever. An elephant's tusks have become bling for consumers who have no idea or simply don't care that it was obtained by inflicting terror, horrendous pain and death on thinking, feeling, self-aware beings.

One of us recently came face to face with this horror while walking through a forest in central Africa. The sickening stench provided the first warning. As the smell grew more pungent, the humming sound of death that surrounds the body of a dead elephant became more pronounced: thousands of buzzing flies, laying eggs and feeding on the corpse. The body was grotesquely cloaked by white, writhing fly maggots; the belly was swollen with the gas of decay. The elephant's face was a bloody mess, its tusks hacked out with an ax — an atrocity that is often committed while the animal is alive.

Both forest and savanna elephants, thought by some biologists to be separate species, have been killed off by poachers across vast areas of Africa, though it is the forest elephant point that is being pushed to extinction. The continuing slaughter of these animals is more than the loss of an iconic species. Forest elephants play a crucial ecological role



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forests they inhabit, places of incredible biodiversity and one of earth's most important carbon-sequestering regions.

These elephants are accomplished gardeners on a grand scale. As they move through their forest home, creating a network of trails used by other animals, they eat and scatter large quantities of seeds over many miles. Sprouting in countless piles of dung, new trees keep the forest healthy and contribute to the clean air we all like to breathe. Elephants also keep open salt-rich forest clearings that serve as giant salad bowls crucial for many animals, including gorillas.

While habitat destruction from the rapid increase in industrial agriculture looms for central Africa, the cataclysmic losses of forest elephants are almost entirely a result of poaching. This killing is also affecting behavior as these highly intelligent animals respond to the threats they face. They avoid roads not protected from poachers by wildlife guards. Once wide-ranging, the various population groups have become geographically isolated, hemmed in by a shroud of fear. They no longer garden on a grand scale, and they have been cut off from vital food, mineral and water resources they require to remain healthy. There is less time to feed and none for play or leisurely interactions between close and far-flung family.

Nor do young elephants develop secure social relationships when living in a state of terror, or mourning slain family members — and elephants do mourn. When mothers are killed, babies still dependent on their milk die slowly from starvation, heartbroken and alone. We increasingly see groups of young elephants without knowledgeable females accompanying them. Lost with these matriarchs are traditions and collective memories passed down through many thousands of generations that guide their offspring to that isolated salt lick or patch of fruiting trees that helped to sustain them.

Poaching is big business, involving organized-crime cartels every bit as ruthless as those trafficking narcotics, arms and people. Existing international laws against money laundering should be used to follow the money trail and to prosecute these criminals.

A universal attribute of humanity is compassion. We protect those in harm's way. We need to show this compassion to forest elephants, giving them space to roam and protection from danger. Most crucially, people must stop buying ivory. If we do not act, we will have to shamefully admit to our children that we stood by as elephants were driven out of existence.

Samantha Strindberg and Fiona Maisels are conservation scientists who work with the Wildlife Conservation Society to save elephants, apes and other wild animals.

