

# LOOKING AHEAD

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With each passing season, I look with amazement at how perfectly new life springs forth from all the seemingly dead branches of the previous dry months. We are at that time of year again when the glowing, waxy leaves of a new season and a new year holds unexpected promise of abundance and life. I wish I could write with the same enthusiasm about the future of elephants in Africa today. However recent continental trends leave me hoping that they too will have the resilience of the surrounding flora to bounce back with vigour, no matter what hindrances man's greed will put in their way.

The illegal wildlife trade is booming with a \$19 billion annual turnover. Laundering ivory has become more profitable than heroine or raw diamonds with \$3 000 being offered per kilogram at final markets outside of Africa whilst \$100-\$300 per kilogram is being offered locally. One elephant is killed for its tusks every 15 minutes with estimates of 35 000-40 000 being killed annually. The onslaught started in West Africa leaving only fragmented almost non-viable populations in its wake. Central Africa was next in line and has already lost over 60% of its populations. In East Africa, Tanzania has lost 50% of its population in six years. Kenya's populations have nose-dived from 167 000 in the 1970s to just over 30 000 today leaving

predictions that there will be no elephants left in East Africa in 10 years' time if current rates of decline don't slow down. With the recent cyanide poisoning of 300 elephants in Zimbabwe for their ivory and counts of up to 600 dead vultures at a single elephant carcass in Namibia and elsewhere where elephants have been poisoned, southern African states have come to realise that the entire continent is now under siege. For us in South Africa, the rhino-wars have been the forerunner of what our elephants may still be facing.

Why is elephant poaching or any poaching for that matter, so deeply disconcerting and why should we do our best to combat it? Firstly, there is tie between wildlife trafficking and human security that affects us all. The illegal wildlife trade is tangibly connected to human trafficking, drugs, arms sales and more recently, violent extremist organisations such as the terrorist group, Al-Shabaab who fund part of their activities through killing elephants for their ivory. Secondly, we are slowly witnessing the striping of our natural resources and heritage to feed China's global ivory consumption which seems insatiable. Thirdly, it has recently been scientifically proven that severe anthropogenic disturbance leads to acute social disruption in close-knit cognitively advanced animals such as elephants. Shannon *et al.* (2013) found that elephants subjected to severe disturbance were unable to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar elephant callers in play-back experiments and could not discriminate age- and size related cues with increased social dominance. These findings follow on evidence from other scientists of post-traumatic stress disorder and lack of social learning in survivors (Bradshaw et al. 2005, Gobush et al. 2008, Archie et al. 2011, Wittemyer et al. 2013). Results such as these indicate that remnant populations of elephants which may survive the onslaught, although seemingly intact socially will be psychologically scarred by man's actions with far-reaching effects which will influence the social cohesion of future generations of elephants.

The particularly glossy and rain-washed leaves of the Buffalo thorn (*Ziziphus mucronata*), catch my eye. There is yet another botanical analogy to be found. Triumphantly the green leaves speak of hope for the elephants with politicians like President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, making \$ 10 million and \$ 80 million respectively available to help combat poaching. Not to mention the countless brave people who are fighting on the ground to safe-guard our wildlife. The zigzag branches represent the twisted road that lies ahead for the elephants where the straight thorns of the branches will remind us that we need to look ahead without wavering while the curved thorns will tell us to look back and to remember the need to continue the struggle to maintain the social integrity that we presently enjoy in our intact elephant populations.

### References

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