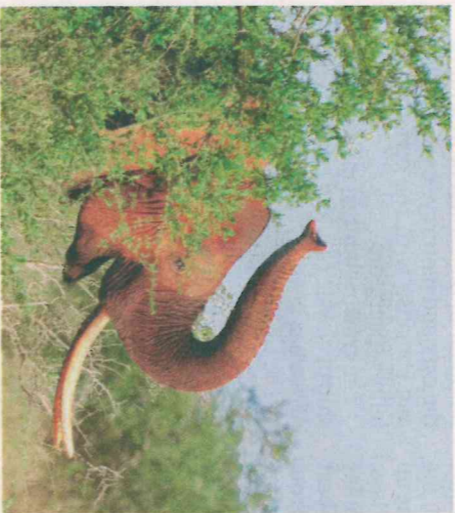


# DISCOVERY

ENDANGERED

## African elephant population on the decline



The African elephant population is in drastic decline, having shrunk about 30 per cent from 2007 to 2014, according to a survey published two weeks ago.

The deterioration is accelerating: Largely because of poaching, the population is dropping 8 per cent a year, according to the Great Elephant Census.

"The findings of the Great Elephant Census show clearly that poaching is still decimating elephant herds across Africa," Ibrahim Thaw, the deputy executive director for the UN Environment Programme, said about the survey. "This practice makes no sense on any level — moral, economic or political."

Patricia Awori, an official with the African Elephant Coalition, said, "These numbers are shocking for elephants across the continent. It proves that an urgent, cohesive, Africa-wide approach is required to save them."

The census results are the culmination of a \$7 million undertaking financed by the philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen.

Starting in early 2014, teams of researchers fanned out across Africa in several dozen aeroplanes covering nearly 470,000 km. They counted about 352,000 savannah elephants, accounting for 93 per cent of all those remaining in the 18 countries surveyed. More than half live in Botswana and Zimbabwe.

The researchers also counted elephant carcasses, finding an estimated 12 for every 100 living elephants — an unsustainable level — suggesting that the continent's population is in decline. Poaching is largely to blame for tits downward spiral, according to the census.

David Banks, the Nature Conservancy's Africa programme director, said: "We knew that the situation was bad on the ground, but the results are worse than expected." He added, "Even if poaching is stopped cold right now, it'll take decades for populations to recover."

"We have been desperately crying to the world that all is not well for the African elephant across the continent; now we feel sad that the results vindicate our position," Paul Udoto, a spokesman for Kenya Wildlife Service, said of the census.

"It's another golden chance for the world to unite and give elephants a new lease on life and save them from the inexorable descent into extinction."

—New York Times

**CONSERVATION:** Some 95 per cent of Grevy's zebra are found in Kenya, and 5 per cent in Ethiopia. They have declined at a rate of 80 per cent over the past 35 years. The greatest threat currently is loss of habitat

# WHO CARES ABOUT THE GREVY'S ZEBRA?

Susan Muumbi, The EastAfrican

Just 2,350 at last count. In the early 1970s, the Grevy's zebra in Kenya numbered between 14,000 and 15,000.

In January, the endangered species were counted during a rally organised by the Grevy's Zebra Trust in northern Kenya.

"Some 162 cameras captured 40,810 images, over an area of 25,000 square km. Of these, 15,246 were good, meaning that the animals were facing in the right direction and were identified and named," Daniel Rubenstein announced on September 3 at the Great Grevy's Zebra Ball held at the Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club in Nanyuki.

Dr Rubenstein is a professor of zoology at Princeton University, and a member of the technical committee that gives guidance to the Grevy's Zebra Trust.

"By counting the Grevy's, the numbers are now precise and believable, and policies can be made accordingly," he added.

Why are Grevy's zebra important? "They are an iconic species for Kenya. They are an early warning system, and they scout out good grazing areas for livestock. They eat stems that cattle don't like, and leave the grass blades for the cows," Dr Rubenstein said.

Last week-end, I went to Laikipia for the announcement of the census

results. The area is rich in wildlife; we drove past an agitated elephant, and a shy reticulated giraffe trying to hide behind shrubbery, unaware that its long neck was sticking out over the top.

Laikipia is home to a large population of Grevy's zebra that we saw on a game drive through Mpala Conservancy. The species is larger than the more common plains zebra, and has distinctive narrow stripes.

Laikipia is also home to the last remaining subspecies of the northern white rhino — one male, Sudan, and two females, Najin and Fatu. They face extinction, and are held in captivity under tight security.

Some 95 per cent of Grevy's zebra are found in Kenya, and 5 per cent in Ethiopia. They have declined at a rate of 80 per cent over the past 35 years. The greatest threat is loss of habitat through unplanned settlements and reduced grasslands.

So what can be done to increase the Grevy's zebra population?

A forum was held at Mpala Research Centre in Laikipia on September 3, to come up with solutions to raise the numbers. Officials from the counties inhabited by the zebra, and concerned stakeholders in Kenya's wildlife sector, mapped the way forward.

"Partnerships are necessary for the Grevy's zebra to thrive. Data is gathered by local scouts who know the animals and the terrain well. Governors and their designates can include resource development and

management in their policies," Dr Rubenstein said.

Kenya Wildlife Service Director General Kitili Mbatia said the organisation would organise a meeting for the governors of the concerned counties.

Isiolo deputy governor Mohamed Gulet suggested introducing wildlife conservation classes into the school curriculum, and sensitising communities to the value of the zebra.

Behinda Low Mackey, the executive director of the Grevy's Zebra Trust, cited the Westgate Conservancy in Samburu as a success story. At Westgate, a model of planned grazing and settlement, borrowed from Zimbabwe, has been used. The ecosystem has been rehabilitated by clearing undesirable plant species and re-seeding with indigenous perennial grass.

One of the undesirable plant species is the *Opuntia* cactus. The roots spread out widely just under the soil, leading to reduced grassland. In the wild, *Opuntia* is only eaten by elephants. I tasted its purple fruit. The juice is sweet and tangy, but small hairlike prickles on the peel got into my skin. I could understand why the Grevy's have no interest in the cactus. Eradication of *Opuntia* has already started, with Laikipia County allocating Ksh250 million (\$2.5 million) towards this effort.

As the census results were announced at the ball, we danced in the hope that all who care for the Grevy's zebra will ensure that it does not go the way of Sudan, Najin and Fatu.



The Grevy's zebra at Mpala Conservancy in Laikipia County. Picture: Courtesy Laikipia Wildlife Forum