'A mere 100 years ago, the elephants of the Serengeti were few and far between.'

ISSUES &

RETURN OF THE POACHERS

One of the last pristine wilderness environments on Earth is experiencing an upsurge of elephant poachings

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Elephants walk through the Serengeti national reserve in northern Tanzania.

Tanzania's Serengeti National Park is home to the largest number of wild animals in any one place in the world. The pastoral Maasai tribe who live around the park call it "*Serengit*," which means endless plain. It is what the Earth looked like when our ancestors left this rift valley country a mere 50,000 years ago, to populate the rest of the world. The Serengeti has changed little since then. For that reason, many visitors have nicknamed it "Pleistocene Park," as it gives sightseers a taste of what the world was like when human beings were a mere dot on the landscape, centuries before the rise of agriculture in the ancient civilizations of the Nile Valley. No film or book can substitute for the visceral experience of a wildlife safari in one of the last pristine wilderness environments on Earth.

Today, the Serengeti is still home to herds of elephant, giraffe, zebra, lion, buffalo and the more than one million wildebeest, who each year migrate between the Serengeti in Tanzania and its northern extension, the Maasai Mara park over the border in Kenya. This great migration is one of the world's most impressive natural events. It involves about 1.3 million wildebeest, 500,000 Thomson's gazelle, 97,000 topi, 18,000 eland and 200,000 zebra.

These migrants are followed along their annual, circular route by hungry predators such as lions and hyenas. The Serengeti also contains crocodiles, hippopotamuses, gazelles and more than 450 species of tropical birds. Some anthropologists argue that the story of the Garden of Eden is an traditional tale that harkens back to the time when the world was young and our ancestors were all hunters and gatherers, scavenging and surviving among wild animals in environments such as the Serengeti — a place that happens to be close to Olduvai Gorge, where archaeologist Louis Leakey discovered early man.

The more than 2,000 elephants that are now part of the Serengeti Park ecosystem are protected by trained and armed Tanzanian Park Rangers. They are materially and logistically supported by a range of international conservation organizations, such as the Frankfurt Zoological Society, which sponsored the 1959 Academy Award winning documentary film that called for the future conservation of Serengeti, *Serengeti Shall Not Die*.

Recent ecological studies have shown that the elephants of the Serengeti "know" that it is safer to stay in the park than range outside of its borders, where villagers may hunt them for meat and tusks, as scientists have shown that elephants learn and communicate effectively with one another and that they have memories that are longer than their trunks.

Today, Africa is experiencing another continent-wide upsurge of elephant poaching. Each year, about 25,000 elephants are killed across the land. During the last decade, poachers have killed off 60% of Africa's elephants. Experts believe that poachers kill at least 25 elephants each day in Africa.

This is not a new phenomenon. A mere 100 years ago, the elephants of the Serengeti were few and far between. During the late 19th century, their numbers were declining, as Swahili hunters were killing them off in record numbers to provide Britain and Europe with billiard balls and white piano keys. Only when Tanzania (then Tanganyika) came under British control, were the lessons of modern biology and ecology applied to Britain's East African dominions. In 1940, the Serengeti was declared a protected area. Big game hunting was banned and the elephant herds bounced back. In 1951, it became a national park. During the early days of Tanzanian independence, elephant numbers were up, but during the 1970s and '80s, poachers across Africa were decimating elephant herds and selling their ivory to buyers in the Far East, who were using it to make ivory sculptures.

In 1989 my former employer, Richard Leakey, of archaeological and wildlife conservation fame, managed to convince then president of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, to support his campaign to ban ivory sales worldwide. Together they succeeded, and within a decade, elephant populations once again bounced back across Sub_Saharan Africa. But then something happened that no one had foreseen.

China, which was experiencing an industrial revolution, realized that Africa could become its source of raw materials, its breadbasket and a place of emigration from its crowded cities. Almost overnight, the Chinese became the most powerful economic and political force in sub-Saharan Africa. There are now more than one million Chinese living across the continent, and as their economic prospects improve, they would almost all like to buy ivory or ivory products. This has triggered the most recent wave of elephant poaching in Africa and facilitated equally massive amounts of smuggling along the Indian Ocean coast, which is used to bring this illegal ivory to Asian markets. Although the Serengeti's elephants are still well protected, other herds from Mali to the Red Sea are suffering serious losses due to poaching.

Today, it is the religious beliefs of the Chinese and South East Asians (including Catholic Philipinos) that is driving the trade and causing this latest drop in Africa's elephant populations. Now, most smuggled ivory ends up as carvings of Baby Jesuses and Saints in the Philippines, which is considered even more valuable than gold.

Researchers who have studied the trade have noted that many Buddhist and Catholic priests are well aware that the ivory is smuggled. Because these are very religious countries where ivory is considered sacred, it is easy to smuggle either raw ivory or carved sculptures in and out of these states. In the minds of many, ivory is the opposite of contraband drugs, which are deadly and profane. So there is little motivation to curb the trade, as, in many countries, the sacred trumps the secular law and the international treaties that are ignored by almost everyone.

> The best way to stop this is to reduce the demand for ivory and support the nature preserves

Going undercover for *National Geographic*, researcher Bryan Christy wrote, "If someone in the Philippines wants to smuggle an ivory statue of the baby Jesus to the U.S., Msgr. Cristobal Garcia is happy to advise, 'Wrap it in old, stinky underwear and pour ketchup on it so it looks sh---y with blood.... This is how it is done.' Monsignor Garcia is head of protocol for the archdiocese of Cebu, the largest in the Philippines, giving him a flock of nearly four million in a country of 75 million Roman Catholics, the world's third largest Catholic population. The tradition of carving ivory into religious pieces in the Philippines is so deeply rooted that in Cebu the word for ivory, garing, also means 'religious statue.' "

Christy also met with corrupt Buddhist monks in Thailand who deal in smuggled ivory and heard of one who even poisons local elephants to get their tusks. This takes place in a land where Buddhism is the state religion and the elephant is a national symbol.

To aggravate matters even further, the Chinese authorities have recently and dramatically raised the price of ivory. This increases its black market value in Africa, and acts as an incentive to poachers and smugglers throughout the continent, especially in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, whose coastline gives them easy access to Asian markets. During the last three years alone, on the once-sleepy tourist island of Zanzibar, Tanzanian authorities seized a number of shipments of illegal ivory, including a 40-foot container that held several tonnes. These seizures are just the tip of the iceberg. Bear in mind that the illegal sale of two tusks of Tanzanian ivory on the black market is the equivalent to a year's salary for many people in the region.

Even the Hollywood glitterati are beginning to show concern for the elephant. At an event held in Malibu, Leonardo DiCaprio, Barbra Streisand and a host of other celebrities raised millions of dollars for the Elephant Crisis Fund. But the fund's director is Kenya-based conservationist Dr. Ian Douglas Hamilton, who has been unsuccessfully fighting to protect African elephants for the last 50 years. Perhaps this money should be directed somewhere else.

Conservation organizations in Europe and the United States have been slow to wake up to the fact that, in order to save the African elephant, they will have to get involved with massive publicity campaigns in China and other Asian countries. One survey carried out in China suggested that a majority of those polled thought that ivory falls out of elephants' mouths like old teeth, and they had no idea that most of it was poached and smuggled into their country.

Unlike Hamilton, Peter Knights heads a pressure group called Wild Aid. He has argued that only a "demand-side" approach to elephant conservation will reduce poaching. This means working with Chinese celebrities, such as basketball star Yao Ming, to persuade China's newly empowered middle class that ivory statues made of smuggled tusks will not bring the blessings that their priests have promised them. Towards the same end, the American Buddhist Confederation has lobbied New York and other states to ban ivory sales, as Manhattan has been central to the ivory trade.

During my 17 years in East Africa, I met many of the first Chinese entrepreneurs who had come to the continent to make their fortunes. I found them to be interested in, and open to, the world. They are also interested in wildlife and enjoy going on Safari in game parks such as the Serengeti, as much as anyone else. If a concentrated media campaign was aimed at them, utilizing Chinese media celebrities, the demand for ivory could disappear in a short period of time. In the meantime, we in the West can help in another way.

We can make sure that we still visit Africa's game parks. Every dollar spent on a Safari in Tanzania goes toward park fees, local employment, food, hotels, tented camps, transportation and park patrols. And it provides poor countries such as Tanzania with the hard currency and tax base that their governments need to persuade their own citizens that game parks can pay their own way and contribute to national development. If Western tourists stop coming, it will be impossible for the conservation organizations alone to save the elephant. We have to do our part by showing up.

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Anthropologist Geoffrey Clarfield will be visiting the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Olduvai Gorge this winter. Those interested in joining him can call Thomson Safaris at 617-923-0426 and ask for "Geoffrey Clarfield's Tanzanian Safari."