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C Strong Structures for the Protection of Species
World order in crisis

Failure of bureaucracy and elephant protection

African Elephant Population

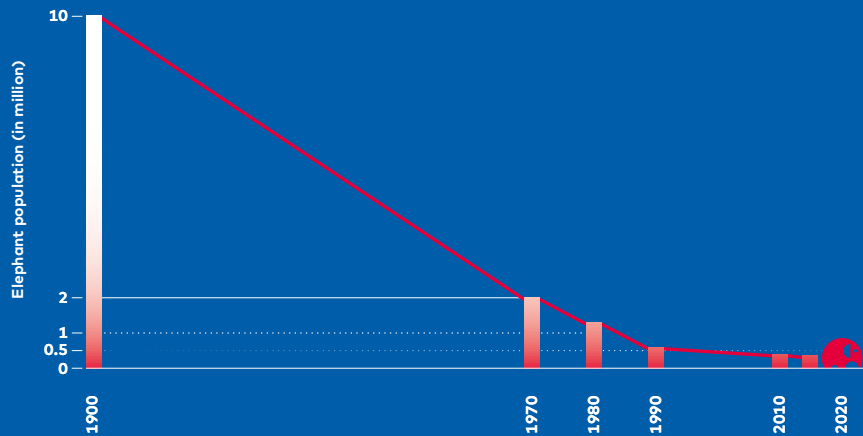

Elephant population (in million)

10
2
1
0.5
0

1900 1970 1980 1990 2010 2020

A highlight of every safari in Africa—a pet and a friendly mascot—elephants are very popular. But sadly, they are also valued as a hunting trophy, much sought after for their ivory. Elephant populations in sub-Saharan Africa are shrinking, dropping by roughly 30% between 2007 and 2014 alone. This decline is primarily due to poaching and loss of habitat. However, the trend varies greatly between countries. Elephant populations in South Africa and Uganda, for example, are increasing, while in Botswana and Zimbabwe—the two most populous countries on the continent—they remain relatively constant. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Tanzania, and Mozambique, by contrast, the numbers are falling significantly. The »Great Elephant Census« of 2016 provides a thorough survey of the situation at regional, state, and sub-state levels.

The elephant, as the largest land mammal, is also known as a »charismatic megafauna.« Like Bengali tigers and polar bears, among other animals in this category, it fascinates humans and has special cultural significance in many parts of the world. These animals are particularly suitable for use in campaigns because they evoke emotional reactions and, as prominent »testimonials« of species protection, can increase awareness of the threat to ecosystems.

Research on elephant protection can also contribute to the identification of many different interrelationships. The elephant crisis links the protection of nature and species with tourism, transnational crime, and questions of international law. Furthermore, the steppe elephant only exists in sub-Saharan Africa, so that political questions concerning relations between North and South often arise in elephant conservation. In principle, the decline in elephant populations indicates that acute crises are often manifestations of more profound problems—such as the failure of state institutions and international relations.

Anton Peez investigates the factors that contribute to compliance or non-compliance with elephant protection in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the multilateral Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), state parties must stop the international trade of ivory and thus indirectly counteract the decimation of the elephant population. Elephant populations tend to decline in states with higher levels of corruption and a less functioning organizational structure that could ensure that agreed-upon conventions are respected.

Much of the research on compliance with international norms asserts that this is achieved either through coercion or state capacity, meaning economic pressure or a stable bureaucracy within the country. Building on this, Peez points out that there can be no such either-or. Rather, numerous factors play a role, such as a country's more or less consistent measures to combat corruption, international pressure, and ostracism (shaming), the involvement of the local population in dealing with resources, and cross-border political action. Peez demonstrates that the explanatory models can only be fruitful if they complement each other and emphasizes the importance of international cooperation for the establishment of common standards and goals based on species conservation.