

The African Elephant is divided into two species: the larger Savannah Elephant and the smaller Forest Elephant, which only lives in Central and West Africa. Elephants are a keystone species for the forest ecosystem: They contribute to plant diversity and create conditions for other animal species by spreading seeds and keeping the forest paths and other areas open. They are hunted intensively for their ivory and meat, and even in National Parks they are no longer safe. From 1980 to '90, the Forest Elephant population was diminished from 380 000 to 198 000 animals.

On average, elephants give birth every 4 years to one calf after 22 months of pregnancy. During her life time, a cow can give birth to 8-9 calves, of which only around 50% grow to adulthood. Herds of elephants consist of related cows and their calves and are headed by one leading cow. Bulls leave after reaching sexual maturity. While the family groups of Savannah Elephants have around 12 members, Forest Elephants live in smaller troops of 3-6 animals.

Forest Elephants feed on around **140 different plant species**, and for a third of the tree species, elephants are the most important or even the only seed distributors. Elephants eat preferably large, hard-skinned fruits, the seeds of which pass through the intestines undamaged and quite often sprout only through this process. Since dispersal of the seeds in the faeces usually occurs a long way from their origin, elephants **contribute considerably to the distribution of plants.**

It is very likely that the spreading of forest after the Ice Ages was mainly due to elephants.



Forest Elephants in a clearing in a Central African rainforest.

J. J. Hines/WWF

110 different species of grass have been counted in such clearings. Many other species also come here for grazing.



J. J. Hines/WWF



C. Schiller

Elephant tusks - Ivory.

Ivory poaching is very common in Africa and is being carried out by criminal gangs and members of all social classes. Customers are mainly the arts and craft industry in East Asia. **In 1979-88, 120 000-250 000 elephants were killed for their tusks.** During the eighties, a general ban on the ivory trade was introduced. Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe lifted this ban in 1997 because of their large and destructive elephant populations. Following this, **a systematic butchering of elephants began again across the whole Africa**, illegally smuggling ivory across the borders to countries where it could be sold legally - with falsified certificates!



K. Ammann/WSPA

Slaughtered Forest Elephant. Its meat is sold in 1-kg portions.

The meat trade has become more lucrative than the one for ivory: The meat of one elephant can be sold by the hunter for US\$ 200, the tusks alone for US\$ 50!

During 1999-2000, **98% of all elephants were killed** in a 300 ha area alone in the Kahuzi-Biega National Park of the DR Congo. The poachers also supply markets across the borders, e.g. in the CA Republic. In one single town the meat of 3-4 elephants was sold. The increase of commercial trade in this region is related to two factors: Falling world market prices for coffee, and the drastic decrease of elephants in the CA Republic.

During the last CITES Conference in April 2000, the **ivory trade was declared illegal again because of an increase in poaching. Trade in elephant skins and live animals was still allowed to continue for nations with high elephant population densities.** It is hoped that the less valuable skin does not cover the cost for organised butchering. **However, this does not solve the initial problems!**