



Kony's Ivory: How Elephant Poaching in Congo Helps Support the Lord's Resistance Army

Kasper Agger and Jonathan Hutson June 2013

This report is a co-production of the Enough Project, The Resolve, Invisible Children, and the Satellite Sentinel Project (with DigitalGlobe).



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Kasper Agger and Jonathan Hutson traveled to Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2013. In Garamba they were hosted by African Parks, which has the jurisdiction to manage the park and its surroundings under a management agreement with the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature, or ICCN. Recommendations about how to more effectively combat the Lord's Resistance Army are made in this report. All actions within Garamba and its surroundings, however, need to be approved by and in coordination with African Parks and the ICCN.

COVER PHOTO

Rangers in Congo's Garamba National Park display ivory seized from poachers in May 2012.
ENOUGH PROJECT / JONATHAN HUTSON

Introduction

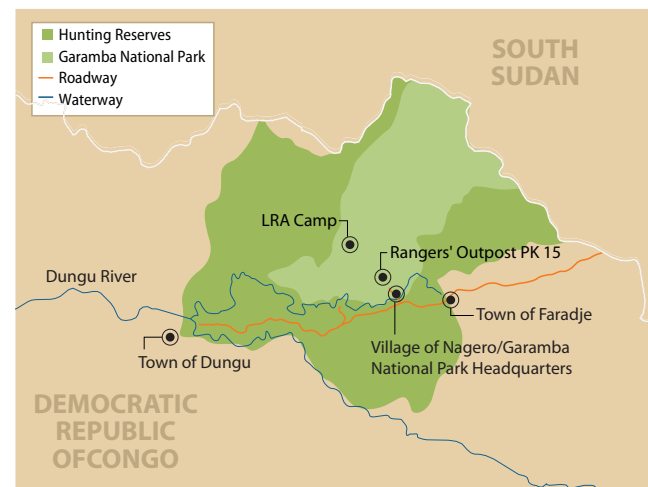
The Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, is now using elephant poaching as a means to sustain itself. LRA leader Joseph Kony—wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity¹—has ordered his fighters to bring him elephant tusks. Eyewitnesses report that the LRA trades tusks for much-needed resources such as food, weapons and ammunition, and other supplies.²

In a visit to Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, in January 2013, the Enough Project and the Satellite Sentinel Project documented evidence of LRA poaching operations through interviews with park rangers, LRA escapees, and recent senior defectors. This report demonstrates how killing elephants in Congo is helping to support the LRA's continuing atrocities across central Africa. It links the group's activities in Garamba to the growing regional and global ivory trade, which is threatening the survival of African elephants.³

With prices at record-high levels, trading illegal ivory offers the LRA another way to sustain itself in addition to its habitual pillaging. Former senior fighters who defected from the group report that the LRA trades ivory for arms, ammunition, and food. Former captives said that they saw LRA groups in the DRC and the Central African Republic, or CAR, trade ivory with unidentified people who arrive in helicopters.⁴

LRA fighters in the park have at times outgunned and outmaneuvered the Garamba park rangers through the use of automatic weapons, satellite phones, and GPS transmitters.⁵

In recent years, elephant poaching has reached record levels across Africa. The killings exceed their reproductive replacement rate, putting Africa's wild elephants at risk of local extinction.⁶ And the LRA is not the only group benefiting from the exploding demand for ivory from elephant tusks.





Top Inset: Rangers found mosquito nets and tarps used by the LRA to construct shelters. Bottom Inset: The LRA dammed up a spring in this ravine to make basins for drinking and washing. (Photos by Jonathan Hutson/Enough Project)

A number of armed groups participate in elephant poaching across the region.⁷ As a consequence, the United Nations estimates that there may have already been a 50 percent to 90 percent decrease in the elephant populations of the CAR and DRC.⁸ Park rangers in Garamba suspect that members of the Congolese, South Sudanese, Sudanese, and Ugandan armed forces, as well as state-sponsored militias including the Janjaweed from Darfur, are participating in killing the park's elephants at an accelerating pace.⁹ The LRA's involvement in the trade is particularly troubling since the resources it gains from ivory supports its continuing violence, undermining the international community's efforts to dismantle the group.

There are steps that can be taken to address LRA elephant poaching and hasten the demise of the group. Greater support and more sophisticated equipment would enable park rangers to track and combat the LRA and the other highly organized, heavily armed poachers in Garamba. Real-time intelligence sharing, coupled with increased airborne reconnaissance and satellite surveillance, could help rangers, special forces from the African Union Regional Task Force, or AU-RTF, and U.S. military advisors in their fight against poachers and the LRA.

In addition, increased capacity to gather and share reports from the ground, combined with geospatial information, could improve ongoing efforts to predict the LRA's likely future movements and behaviors.



Garamba National Park rangers train to engage the LRA and other poachers in January 2013. ENOUGH PROJECT / JONATHAN HUTSON

The Economic Community of Central African States, or ECCAS, recently endorsed a \$2.3 million emergency initiative to combat the elephant-poaching epidemic in the region.¹⁰ The planned 1,000 civilian police and military forces will engage in joint operations to protect the area's remaining savannah elephants.¹¹ If its member states can adequately equip and support the forces, the ECCAS aspires to establish a joint military command and use aerial support, land vehicles, satellite phones, and real-time information analysis systems to track and stop poaching in the region.¹²

U.S. advisors have significantly increased the capacity of the African forces opposing the LRA. Ensuring that those forces can operate in and around Garamba with U.S. assistance could lessen the group's use of the area as a safe haven and a source of material support.

It is essential for donors and governments to support a comprehensive effort to stop groups that commit mass atrocities with impunity, such as the LRA, from supporting their crimes by killing elephants and smuggling tusks. The work to restrict the ivory trade by targeting poachers must be accompanied by initiatives focused on making the countries in the region a less hospitable environment for the LRA and the other armed groups that profit from governance, livelihood, and security vacuums. Curbing demand is just as important. Governments, donors, and nongovernmental organizations should continue to pursue strategies to reduce the demand for ivory and isolate countries that trade tusks.



Top Inset: Bullet-riddled truck. In January 2009, approximately 150 LRA fighters attacked Garamba headquarters, killing 16 people. Bottom Inset: The LRA looted and burned this storage facility and caused nearly \$2 million in damage to headquarters. (Photos by Jonathan Hutson/Enough Project)

Inside LRA poaching operations

“In the minds of the LRA, they own the park, not the rangers.”

— Garamba National Park Manager Luis Arranz¹³

The LRA is a brutal, elusive group led by messianic warlord Joseph Kony. The fight between the Ugandan government and the LRA began in northern Uganda in 1987. Although the LRA’s original mission was to increase political power for Uganda’s mar-

ginalized Acholi ethnic group, it currently does not have a stated political agenda.¹⁴ It is notorious for committing human-rights violations including murder, mutilation, rape, widespread abductions of children and adults, sexual slavery, large-scale massacres, and the looting of villages.¹⁵

Although the LRA left Uganda in 2006, it continues to attack and displace civilians in the DRC and CAR.¹⁶ LRA units have also been sighted in South Sudan and in the Kafia Kingi enclave, a disputed area that Sudan controls, on the border between Sudan and South Sudan.¹⁷ As of March 2013 there are estimates that the LRA may have only 250 to 400 fighters.¹⁸ Despite its small size, the group continues to terrorize large areas of central Africa. The LRA is responsible for the continuing displacement of 440,653 people,²¹ and between December 2009 and April 2013, it caused at least 1,260 civilian deaths and carried out 2,842 abductions.²⁰

For more than a year, U.S. military advisors have provided on-the-ground training and logistical support primarily to the Ugandan forces fighting the LRA.²¹ During the same time period, the African Union, or AU, created a regional military and civilian task force, which relies on the Ugandan army but seeks multilateral support and troop contributions from other governments in the region in the effort to defeat the LRA.²²

Despite a history of operating in remote savannah grasslands and forests with easy access to elephants, LRA elephant poaching was not documented previously. In mid-2012 rumors surfaced indicating that the LRA was killing elephants in Garamba National Park. A December 2012 statement by the president of the United Nations Security Council, or UNSC, referenced these reports:

The Council also calls on the United Nations and AU to jointly investigate the LRA's logistical networks and possible sources of illicit financing, including alleged involvement in elephant poaching and related illicit smuggling.²³



Garamba staff examine the carcass of a poached elephant in May 2012. NURIA ORTEGA / AFRICAN PARKS NETWORK

The LRA enters the trade

In 2012 park rangers in Garamba received confirmation of the LRA's role in the ivory trade from an 18-year-old woman who escaped from the LRA on May 4, 2012. Abducted five months earlier from a small village east of Garamba, she told park rangers and security forces that the leader of her group, a man called Mandela, spoke regularly with Kony using a kind of telephone.²⁴ She reported that Kony had asked the group to kill elephants and send the tusks to him and that she had once seen LRA rebels with ten tusks.²⁵

Further information came on June 6-7, 2012, when Garamba Park Manager Luis Arranz observed a large herd of elephants from his aircraft and sent park rangers to monitor them.²⁶ When the rangers approached the area, they heard people shouting in Acholi, a language spoken by people from northern Uganda, where the LRA originated.²⁷ The people fired at the rangers with automatic weapons.²⁸ Low on ammunition, the rangers retreated. Although the LRA typically conserves its ammunition because the group is resource poor, the park rangers noted that these fighters seemed more willing to spend their rounds.²⁹

The rangers returned to the scene the next day and, according to Arranz:

[They] encountered a small group of LRA with three to four armed fighters and some children. The group threw their bags and ran away. Some of our rangers picked up the bags, which were full of elephant meat. The rangers also found the carcasses of two elephants without any tusks.³⁰

The LRA is able to hunt elephants in Garamba in part because the Ugandan forces deployed to combat the group, which are supported by U.S. advisers, are denied access to the DRC. Since these forces lack access to pursue the LRA in Garamba, the park has become a refuge as well as a source of revenue.³¹ Since January 2013 16 of the 29 attacks carried out by the LRA that resulted in civilian death, injury, abduction, displacement, or looting occurred in or around Garamba.³²

Firepower and phones

A Garamba ranger—a former special-forces soldier with 15 years of international experience followed by a year of tracking and engaging poachers in the CAR—said that LRA fighters in Garamba and elsewhere typically carry AK-47 assault rifles. He displayed an AK-47 bullet wound, which he said he received in a firefight with the LRA in the CAR. In a written statement to the Enough Project, the ranger said that other highly organized groups of poachers are generally even more heavily armed.³³

While in Garamba National Park, the Enough Project interviewed several people abducted by the LRA who had recently escaped. One of them, a 29-year-old man who spent a year in captivity with the LRA until his escape in December 2012, said that the LRA groups in Garamba were using Thuraya satellite phones to communicate with each other and with outside groups.³⁴ He reported that:

*We were also shooting elephants. The LRA fighters would kill the elephants and cut off the tusks. Then the prisoners were brought to the elephant carcasses to strip off the meat and carry it back to the main camp. During the one year that I was a prisoner of the LRA, I took part in carrying meat from six elephants.*³⁵



A man who recently escaped the Lord's Resistance Army after a year of captivity reports that fighters shoot elephants and cut out their tusks before bringing in captives to strip the meat. ENOUGH PROJECT / JONATHAN HUTSON

Garamba National Park

Garamba National Park was established in 1938 to preserve wildlife, particularly the northern white rhinoceros.³⁶ The park spans an area of 1,892 square miles, or 4,900 square kilometers, in the far northeast corner of Congo.³⁷ Open savannah grasslands cover the southern part of the park, whereas the northern part, reaching up to the South Sudanese border, is thick bush and wooded savannah. The park is surrounded by three hunting reserves. The complete Garamba complex including the reserves covers 4,798 square miles, or 12,427 square kilometers—an area roughly the size of Connecticut.³⁸

In the 1970s there were 20,000 elephants in the area.³⁹ Now, according to Garamba's most recent aerial census, approximately 1,800 elephants roam the park.⁴⁰

Garamba is managed by African Parks, an international nongovernmental organization that works to protect wildlife and conserve parks. African Parks has jurisdiction to manage the park and its surrounding area under a management agreement with the Congolese wildlife authority, the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature, or ICCN. It employs 130 rangers in Garamba who are armed with a limited number of AK-47 assault weapons.⁴¹ The rangers patrol the park and combat the LRA and other poachers. Soldiers from the Congolese army and U.N. peacekeepers from the U.N. Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or MONUSCO, also help patrol some of the major roads that run through the adjacent hunting reserves, but their capacity is limited, and they rarely go inside the park.

The LRA established a semi-permanent presence in the Garamba area starting in 2005.⁴² The precise number of LRA fighters currently there is not known. Recently escaped abductees report that the LRA establishes camps in Garamba for up to three months and that it operates in three main groups. These eyewitnesses estimate that the LRA presence in the Garamba area totals 70 to 100 armed fighters accompanied by 150 to 200 women, children, and recent abductees who are often used as porters.⁴³ Rangers report that this estimate appears to be consistent with their own encounters with LRA groups and their discoveries of LRA campsites.⁴⁴ In 2010 former LRA fighters reported to the Enough Project that Kony regarded the Garamba area as important enough to maintain a consistent presence.⁴⁵



Motorcyclist carrying goods to market on the road from Nagero to Dungu, DRC. The LRA ambushes bicyclists and motorcyclists carrying trade goods on this road about twice a month. ENOUGH PROJECT / JONATHAN HUTSON

How the LRA transports and trades the tusks

Although there is strong evidence of LRA elephant poaching in Garamba, the details on how it gets its ivory to market are murky. “Only very few people who are trusted by Kony will know the details about how and with whom the ivory is traded,” a former LRA rebel told the Enough Project.⁴⁶ Since it lacks the networks and logistical capacity needed to move the ivory to major regional transit hubs, the LRA is probably not capable of selling the ivory on the international market. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that middlemen set up ad-hoc markets in predesignated places where poachers can deliver their wares.

Multiple sources report that a group of heavily armed LRA fighters have picked up the tusks from rendezvous points in the central part of the park along the Garamba River and transported them north towards the CAR, where the LRA has operated since 2008.⁴⁷

According to Arranz:

We have information from MONUSCO [the U.N. peace operation in Congo], from our rangers and from returnees that a group of LRA came from CAR just for killing elephants, to take the tusks and take them back to CAR.⁴⁸

A former LRA junior officer, who was a member of the group for 17 years before escaping in October 2012, confirmed this practice. He told the Enough Project that a senior LRA rebel leader and former personal bodyguard to Kony, Brigadier Vincent Binansio “Binany” Okumu, was in charge of ivory hunting in Garamba. He further reported that he had met face to face with Binany in the northern part of the CAR and that Binany and a group of heavily armed fighters were transporting ivory to Kony.⁴⁹ Binany was killed in January 2013 in an ambush by the Ugandan army in the northern part of the CAR.⁵⁰



Rangers display ivory tusks recovered in Garamba. NURIA ORTEGA / AFRICAN PARKS NETWORK

In February 2013 additional evidence revealed that the LRA organizes the transport of ivory from Garamba to Kony through the CAR. The Ugandan army, acting on information provided by LRA defector Michael Oryem, found six elephant tusks that the LRA had hidden north of Djema in the CAR.⁵¹ According to debriefing notes from the Ugandan army, Oryem also confirmed that Kony had issued an order demanding that fighters kill elephants and bring him ivory as early as 2010.⁵²

Another former LRA combatant has told the Enough Project that the group that he was a part of sold tusks poached in the DRC to members of the Sudan Armed Forces, while based in the Kafia Kingi enclave.⁵³

An employee of African Parks who routinely interviews and takes care of LRA returnees told the Enough Project of another possible way in which the LRA poachers link to the ivory trade. She said that:

The children tell us that they have seen white helicopters landing next to LRA fighters and that the fighters are given food, guns, and ammunition in exchange for the ivory, which is then loaded onto the helicopters.⁵⁴

There are also reports of helicopters landing in the CAR to trade with the LRA for ivory. In January 2013 a group of civilians who escaped the LRA in the CAR reported that the LRA was hunting elephants there and that a helicopter was providing them with food in exchange for the ivory.⁵⁵ The Enough Project has been unable to confirm the identities of the owners and operators of the helicopters described in these eyewitness reports.

The elephant-poaching frenzy

“I’m asking the intelligence community to produce an assessment of the impact of large-scale wildlife trafficking on our security interests so we can fully understand what we’re up against.”

— Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, November 2012⁵⁶

In recent years, the poaching of African elephants has reached record levels.⁷ The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that the “global illegal ivory trade has more than doubled since just 2007.”⁵⁸ Raw ivory is said to fetch a price of more than \$1,300 per pound⁵⁹ due to a sharp rise in demand from Asia, particularly among consumers in China and Thailand.⁶⁰

The enforcement body for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES—which banned the international ivory trade and the killing of African elephants—recently attempted to crack down on the demand side of the illegal trade by requiring the worst offending countries—China, Kenya, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Uganda, Tanzania, and Vietnam—to submit their plans to deal with the illegal ivory trade.⁶¹ Applauding the move, Carlos Drews, the World Wildlife Fund’s head of delegation at CITES, stated, “After years of inaction, governments today put those countries failing to regulate the ivory trade on watch, a move that will help stem the unfettered slaughter of thousands of African elephants.”⁶²

The U.S. government is engaged on this issue. Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly called for building stronger cooperation among regional wildlife-enforcement networks to counter transnational poaching. She pledged \$100,000 specifically for the enforcement effort in addition to the more than \$24 million that USAID has committed to the conservation movement in the past five years.⁶³

Militias, members of armed forces, bandits, and criminal gangs are engaged in this bloody trade.⁶⁴ A recent U.N. report on elephant poaching explains that, “Environmental crime is particularly attractive to these groups when compared with other forms of criminal activity because of its high profit margin coupled with a low probability of being caught and convicted due to the fact that transnational law-enforcement in this sector is virtually non-existent.”⁶⁵ This accelerating trend of poaching, together with habitat loss and human-elephant conflict, threatens wild elephants with local extinction in some parts of Africa within 50 years, according to the World Wildlife Fund.⁶⁶



Rangers discovered bush meat smoking on a rack at an LRA campsite in Garamba.
NURIA ORTEGA / AFRICAN PARKS

Garamba park rangers suspect that members of the armed forces of DRC, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda are poaching elephants. Criminal gangs, long a part of the poaching business, continue to kill elephants in Garamba and elsewhere in Africa. Most troubling is the way in which revenues from poaching are enabling some armed groups to finance their atrocities. There is evidence, for example, that Somalia's al Shabab terrorist group is poaching elephants in Kenya to fund its domestic and international terrorist activities.⁶⁷



A Garamba ranger discovers footwear once worn by a female captive at an LRA campsite in a heavily wooded ravine fed by a spring. ENOUGH PROJECT / JONATHAN HUTSON

Conclusion

The LRA gains vital resources through its participation in the illegal ivory trade. Although the full extent of the LRA's poaching remains unknown, this source of support undercuts the efforts of the African Union and Uganda to combat the LRA and undermines the mission of the U.S. troops deployed to the region to advise and assist their work.

Relevant authorities must undertake significant policy changes and provide support to disrupt the resource stream that poaching provides to the LRA and other armed groups that commit mass atrocities. As with other armed conflicts in Africa, it is imperative to cut off the lifelines provided to these groups by the illicit markets in minerals, timber, ivory, and cigarettes.

The LRA is part of the larger poaching crisis that puts wild African elephants at risk of local extinction. The ivory trade should therefore be addressed where poachers are found—at the supply level. But the intricate networks that move the ivory through Africa—the middlemen and artisans in Asia who ship and fashion the bulk of the ivory, as well as the Asian consumers who buy the majority of ivory products—must also be targets of law enforcement.

Governments in Asia must take responsibility for the disappearance of elephants and the resources that poaching provides to armed groups. Asian governments can play their part by shutting down all national trade in ivory and educating consumers about the devastating effects of poaching. Thailand recently committed to take steps to institute a domestic ban on the ivory trade.⁶⁸ Comprehensive enforcement by national authorities to ban the trade of ivory, including imposing significant penalties, is necessary to save the elephants and cut off significant revenue streams for armed groups.

Recommendations

Expand U.S. advisory programs to encourage LRA defections in Congo

In LRA-affected areas in South Sudan, the CAR, and the DRC, U.S. military advisors and the nonprofit organization Invisible Children initiated “come home” flyers—messages broadcast over radio stations and airborne speakers to identify sites to which LRA rebels can safely defect. This program led to the defections of 33 LRA fighters in 2012, many of whom cited the flyers and loudspeaker messages as influential in their decisions to defect.⁶⁹

Most of the defectors are Ugandan males, and the number of defections is increasing. Because Ugandan commanders and fighters are difficult to replace, this represents a significant blow to the group’s size, strength, command, and cohesion.⁷⁰ A flyer that was distributed in February 2013 over three locations in Garamba and three locations in CAR detailed the locations of safe reporting sites.⁷¹ The United States should support efforts to evaluate this approach and build on its success, especially in Garamba in partnership with the government of Congo, African Parks, and MONUSCO.

Further investigate the role of the LRA in elephant poaching

Neither the United Nations nor the African Union has made progress on fulfilling the December 2012 call by the U.N. Security Council for both institutions “to jointly investigate the LRA’s logistical networks and possible sources of illicit financing, including alleged involvement in elephant poaching and related illicit smuggling.”⁷² Both organizations should undertake this task with urgency.

Pressure the DRC to allow capable forces to pursue the LRA in enclaves such as Garamba

Although the Congolese army, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, or FARDC, sometimes fights the LRA, its communications and transport

capabilities are limited. The restrictions on the AU-RTF, including those on the Uganda People's Defence Force, leave a significant gap in anti-LRA efforts in Congo.

Improve information on LRA activity for park rangers and other forces pursuing the LRA

Geospatial analysis of satellite imagery of the Garamba area and intelligence on how and why the LRA in Garamba chooses its hiding places, campsites, and water sources can help those tracking the militia to understand its movements. Maps tracing historical LRA activity, including the LRA Crisis Tracker's documentation of abductions, raids, firefights, and poaching, will be useful resources for this analysis. Charting elephants' movements and data on the LRA's activities and predilections would enable better tracking and interdiction of the LRA and other armed groups engaged in poaching. U.S. military advisors should assist with this effort.

Increase support from interested countries and private donors to park rangers to fight the LRA and other armed poachers

Park rangers are already engaged in efforts to stop poachers such as the LRA from killing elephants. Although Garamba's rangers are receiving combat training, they need better weaponry, more ammunition, and more sophisticated equipment. The park needs 30 to 40 more rangers and better rapid-response capabilities, additional airstrips in the park, and aircraft with remote sensing capabilities. Park rangers could use infrared sensors on unmanned aerial vehicles to detect heat from campfires and warm bodies hiding in the bush. Commercially available radar systems including Synthetic Aperture Radar, or SAR, could be used to peer below the clouds and through the forest canopy to detect physical changes in the environment caused by the LRA through such activities as gardening and the damming of streams.⁷³

Improve governance and support local communities by making investments in livelihood improvement and infrastructure

Armed groups such as the LRA are able to operate in remote areas of central Africa due to weak governance, poor infrastructure, and the absence of security forces. To help improve livelihoods and build local infrastructure, African Parks opened a school and hospital near Garamba's headquarters in Nagero, DRC, in 2012. Additionally, African Parks builds local roadways and fords.⁷⁴ Sustainable incomes, education, infrastructure development, and improved employment opportunities can play an instrumental role in providing alternatives to rebel activity and large-scale wildlife poaching.

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Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

