In 2014, Global Eye and the Elephant Action League launched a 12-month investigative project with the intention of infiltrating an elephant poaching and ivory trafficking network in order to better understand how these syndicates operate in East Africa. What our assets in the field were able to confirm fits well within the established knowledge of the various operating models that organized crime utilizes. However, in some respects our analysis of the intelligence is at odds with the accepted law enforcement and conservation narratives on ivory trafficking networks.

This report is based on information collected across East Africa through the infiltration of four separate ivory trafficking networks. In addition to specific information on persons-of-interest that has been shared with law enforcement agents, the work has so far generated several key points that contribute to understanding the continuation of Africa’s elephant poaching and ivory trafficking crisis, and why these issues will potentially remain a global problem for the foreseeable future.
There continues to be substantial demand for ivory and as a result elephant populations in Africa have been – and continue to be – decimated. Population estimates recently released by the governments of Tanzania and Mozambique indicate an alarming decline in each country’s respective elephant population: between 2009-2014, Tanzania’s elephants declined by over 60% (more than 85,000 elephants),¹ and Mozambique’s elephants declined by over 48% (more than 9,000 elephants).² In trafficking terms, since 2009, a staggering 43 tons of seized ivory has been traced back directly to Kenya’s port in Mombasa alone.³

Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are East African hubs for sourcing and/or trafficking ivory. There are a number of factors that contribute to creating an environment conducive to these crimes. In addition to geographical location ripe for transit and vulnerabilities at select air and sea ports, other contributing factors include weak governance and extensive corruption, as well as conflicting agendas among stakeholders.

Alongside these overarching problems, the regional ivory supply chain of East Africa presents an even more complex picture spanning a variety of human, logistical, financial and operational nodes. Intricate cultural norms conflate the issue to even greater complexity and criminal networks utilize this to continually adapt, knowing that much of the complexity remains opaque to the key stakeholders trying to stop the problem; namely national and international NGOs, governmental organizations, and governments. Cutting through this opaqueness was a key objective for this project.

East African trafficking networks are culturally and socially sophisticated. They are not necessarily criminally sophisticated however, and vulnerabilities do exist that could be readily exploited if there was strong political will and greater input from professionals in the field of law enforcement.

Based on information collected and intelligence analysis throughout the course of this investigation, three stark components of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking were identified:

1. **Ivory is PUSHED out of East Africa as much as it is PULLED out by foreign consumers.** ‘Pushing’ ivory entails East African nationals exerting significant control over access to ivory and its subsequent movement along the supply chain to consumer nations.

2. **Elephant poaching and ivory trafficking syndicates do not always use a hierarchical ‘kingpin’ chain-of-command model.** These non-hierarchical networks can reorganize and remobilize quickly in the event of the removal of a single paymaster.

3. **Poachers may be rural or urban-based.** Conservation tools that focus on community-based natural resource management and alternative livelihoods will not have the intended effect on urban-based poaching cells.

This report is based on work conducted across East Africa and the infiltration of four separate ivory trafficking networks.
Adding these concepts to the broader anti-poaching and anti-trafficking conversations will hopefully allow interest groups and stakeholders to become more effectively involved in reducing the pressure elephant populations have been facing for the better part of a decade. However, **there is much to learn about the business and dynamics of ivory trafficking and a worrying reality of the three points above is that trafficking networks are adaptable and fluid, which helps explain why they are not being defeated by existing conservation and law enforcement efforts.** East African traffickers know the political, law enforcement, logistical and cultural terrain better than any outsider and some networks possess the ability to reorganize their network relationships rapidly. This in turn means that conservation programs and ideas must be innovative, nimble, and highly responsive and should consider approaching subject matter experts not usually associated with conservation – or ultimately remain ineffective.

The data underpinning this report remains highly sensitive and, where appropriate, has been transferred to trusted law enforcement agents for follow-up. As such, we are limited in our ability to present full details of the networks and the operations, and recognize that this is problematic for the wider community to obtain a complete picture of the issues outlined in this report. However we do present data from one specific case study to support our assertions.

**PUSHING IVORY OUT OF AFRICA**

While consumer demand for ivory is undeniably contributing significantly to the current rates of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking, **East African nationals are consistently key players in these illegal activities** due to their control over the ivory resource and logistics, and their influence on social and business relationships that facilitate trafficking. We believe that this is critical to recognize, because conventional thinking suggests that ivory is being ‘pulled’ from Africa by consumers, most notably in China. However the control and influence exerted by East African nationals informs us that the commodity is also being actively ‘pushed’ to consumer markets by those African nationals, and much like the narcotics trade this has significant current and future implications. One immediate implication is that even if Chinese consumers immediately stopped buying ivory – which remains an important...
factor behind elephant poaching – vested business interests and distribution capability could potentially see new markets opening in different destination consumer countries, albeit at greater risk and possibly with fewer opportunities at the disposal of traffickers. The growing economies of Vietnam and Laos PDR wait in the wings, and even at lower consumer prices the risk is worth the reward for African ivory pushers. While ‘pulling’ and ‘pushing’ may reflect a superficial difference on the actual impact on the elephant species, it is an important distinction in how to tackle the problem.

**HIERARCHICAL vs. DISAGGREGATED NETWORKS**

One ivory trafficking network we infiltrated relies upon what is commonly thought of as a ‘traditional’ command and control structure.

However, our findings suggests that a great deal of ivory in East Africa is moved through non-hierarchical networks, whose links couple and decouple fluidly, depending on multiple internal and external influences. In the networks infiltrated by our assets, those links were based on existing tribal, business, and/or personal relationships. Trust relationships were strong inside the networks, and they were highly responsive to law enforcement threats.

While they are hierarchical or disaggregated links in a chain, all networks have strengths and weaknesses. They key to disrupting them is to understand their central, or gravitational, nodes and how those nodes can be removed. Hierarchical networks rely on leadership from one or more central figure, and removal of such a figure can cause severe disruption. But that is easier said than done, for our assets found that individuals in these leadership roles can be heavily buffered from the hands-on business of ivory trafficking and their personal security can be robust. Nonetheless they ultimately rely upon sourcing ivory and exposing their network to infiltration at lower levels. Law enforcement efforts can be most effective if the entire network is mapped out and the roles of individuals are properly understood.

We determined that the most likely gravitational center to these disaggregated networks is the primary logistician, who may never physically see the commodity.

While the removal of certain individuals may slow operations and cash flow through the supply chain in disaggregated networks, the remaining components of the network will continue to operate. In fact, during the course of the project two individuals from one network were shot and killed in a police ambush. While this made the remaining individuals in the network more wary, they simply continued business as usual but with less people to share the profits with.

Disaggregated network models like this will not respond to so-called ‘kingpin’ removal and we suggest there should be less focus on so-called ‘kingpins’ in the discussions on East African ivory networks.
Ivory is PUSHED out of East Africa as much as it is PULLED out by foreign consumers. 'Pushing' ivory entails East African nationals exerting significant control over access to ivory and its subsequent movement along the supply chain to consumer nations.

Elephant poaching and ivory trafficking syndicates do not always use a hierarchical 'kingpin' chain-of-command model. These non-hierarchical networks can reorganize and remobilize quickly in the event of the removal of a single paymaster.

Poachers may be rural or urban-based. Conservation tools that focus on community-based natural resource management and alternative livelihoods will not have the intended effect on urban-based poaching cells.

URBAN-BASED ELEPHANT POACHING & IVORY TRAFFICKING

Even at the very start of the ivory supply chain - i.e. the act of poaching an elephant - operating models can be diverse. For example, poachers and traffickers can be field or urban-based. They may have achieved direct infiltration into wildlife protection agencies, giving the network access to protected areas and inside knowledge of law enforcement efforts as well as fundamentally subverting the mandate of those agencies.

The map on the following page illustrates an actual example of an elephant poaching and ivory trafficking network in Kenya infiltrated by our assets and referred to as the ‘Cerberus Network’. The network comprised several cells, including an urban-based cell. This particular network was also disaggregated, so while the poaching cells had a preferred buyer they did not conduct their activities under his command nor were they obliged to sell ivory to him. Full details have been passed to law enforcement authorities.

We identified multiple nodes within this single network, including one poaching cell labeled ‘CN1’. This cell had weapons cycling in from Somalia to Kenyan nationals, and had a Port Authority contact. Ivory was sourced in Northern Kenya, Galana and Tsavo-East National Park, and then was transported via car and motorcycle by multiple lower level individuals to Mombasa, where it was
eventually shipped through the Port. This separation of tasks limited the exposure of each person to risk as the predominant and simplistic law enforcement model in Kenya is to catch perpetrators of wildlife crime ‘red handed’. All individuals identified in this (as well as the three other networks our assets infiltrated) were East African nationals. In Cerberus the network relationships were defined variously by tribal affiliations, business associations and family ties. CN1 had obtained access to the Kenya Wildlife Service, and we strongly suggest that non-aligned intelligence operations be established to tackle these sorts of issues.

CN1 was an urban-based cell with certain individuals engaged in other serious crimes, including auto theft and robbery, thereby creating several sources of revenue. These individuals were also highly mobile, regularly traveling widely across the coastal areas of Kenya. We agree that established activities such as beekeeping initiatives, chili-farming projects, curio sales, and revenue generated by tourism do offer valuable alternative income sources to rural communities adjacent to protected areas, but these activities are highly unlikely to influence their urban-based counterparts. Even if an entire community pulls together to close down hunting opportunities for an urban-based poaching cell, this cell can easily shift its area of operation.

Figure 1. Illustration of routes and nodes used by the ‘Cerberus Network’
Political will and law enforcement measures must be extremely deterrent in their design so that urban-based cells cannot justify the ‘risk vs. reward’ of elephant poaching or ivory trafficking. Additionally, the creation, handling, processing, and sharing of information gleaned from effective undercover intelligence operations must be encouraged and developed more widely. These tools would have a greater impact against urban-based poaching and trafficking cells than current community-based natural resource management models.

The network infiltrated by our assets is urban-based and has achieved direct infiltration into the Kenya Wildlife Service, having turned a long-serving officer holding the rank of Sergeant, based at a station in northern Kenya.
African government officials and politicians often use the substantial demand for ivory from foreign countries and the purported role of Asian-based criminal networks as excuses to shed responsibility and accountability for the elephant poaching and ivory trafficking crisis in their countries. Our physical infiltration into the African component of the crisis confirms that African nationals play a crucial role in supplying ivory and facilitating the trafficking of ivory, and must be held accountable for their contribution to the crisis.

Weak governance and widespread corruption in African nations remain the two biggest obstacles to effectively slowing down elephant poaching and ivory trafficking. These two factors nullify both national and international good intentions and the millions of dollars invested in protecting elephants by both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Broadening the anti-poaching and anti-trafficking conversations to include other important factors contributing to the crisis is also critically important. The diverse nature of African organized crime, trafficking syndicates, and the role of urban-based poaching/trafficking cells call for additional collaboration between law enforcement entities, at both the national and international levels.

From a law enforcement perspective, an effort must be made to avoid the over-emphasized assertions regarding the current (and past) understanding of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking models. Conservation models must also be nimble and highly adaptable in order to reach as many potential stakeholders as possible. Wherever possible, a collaborative approach should be utilized.
Elephant Action League (EAL) was founded in 2013 with a mission focused on fighting wildlife crime through concrete, innovative and collaborative projects. It is a registered nonprofit, tax-exempt charity under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by U.S. law.

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Global Eye is a new type of NGO, employing professionals in criminal intelligence & policing, international trade & supply chains, legal specialists as well as conservation and human rights experts. Working closely with national and international agencies, GE runs various programs to tackle the far-reaching and complex area of crimes against the environment and human rights.

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