

# WILDLIFE WOES IN WEST AFRICA

The trade in endangered species, and how corrupt governments sanction it.

*keith harmon snow*

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## Important note on editorial censorship related to this article and this newspaper:

This article appeared in the Greenfield Recorder, Greenfield Massachusetts, in 1997. It was the first and only article the Recorder editors would allow me to publish after returning from a mission to investigate the relationships between multinational corporations, human rights and dictatorship in West Africa. The editor at the Recorder agreed to consider a series of articles, but insisted on beginning with an article about the wildlife trade. Surprised by the professional quality of the writing and the photos—how could a local boy come up with anything professional if he doesn't work for the Associated Press of the New York Times?—the editor nonetheless provided excuse after excuse for not running another (and the more important) story about the petroleum genocide against the Nigeria's Ogoni minority people committed (primarily) by Chevron and Royal Dutch Shell. I eventually confronted the editor, and, an inside employee later told me, due to my failure to express my frustrations with compassion and patience for the editor, he thereafter refused to run anything about Africa—nothing, for several years. He punished an entire continent and millions of innocent people in order, he seemed to think, to get back at me. People at the newspaper knew this.

June 2007: I take some responsibility for my part in the dissolution of this relationship.

keith harmon snow

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**A**n hour on the smog-choked streets here in Cotonou, Benin is enough to convince anyone of the epidemics of tuberculosis, brain damage, miscarriage and immuno-collapse, which plague this city, and so many like it. With widespread pollution amid uncoordinated development—where restrictions like those on lead content in vehicular fuels are ignored or non-existent—it is no surprise that the decimation of wildlife populations is proceeding unchecked.

Cotonou's "Grande Marche" offers a literal jungle of species for sale. An estimated 150 stalls, 6-by-8-foot square, are packed with "product" peddled for traditional medicinal or spiritual needs: Horns, skins, skulls, feathers, glands, hair, bones, claws, organs and fangs of dismembered species, all sold for a pittance.

Sold along with domestic and common wild species are those protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), a treaty signed by every West African state, most over a decade ago.

There are skins and skulls of lesser cats (genus *Felis*) like genet, civet, serval and leopard cats, and a plethora of parts of lesser primates, species whose rapid population declines are certain. Openly sold are the remains of the world's rarest and most prized: hands and skulls of the great apes, gorilla and chimpanzee; skins and skulls of leopard and lion (genus *Panthera*), and crocodile; bones of elephant; parts of eagles, hawks, owls, parrots and other rare birds; small creatures of every niche.

Less openly sold are live species, from lizards, songbirds and tree frogs to giant pythons. For other specimens, like baby chimps, gorillas and cats, local sellers place orders with traders plying coastal markets from Ghana to Gabon. A shipment might take weeks; but with ample money and time, most requests are satisfied.

At the timber market in Accra, Ghana, the story is the same. Lions are reportedly poached from Savannah parks and reserves in northern Ghana, Benin, Togo, Nigeria, southern Burkina Faso and Niger. Other species are captured in degraded bush country increasingly fractured and polluted by general commerce, or by mining, agribusiness plantations, and timber and petroleum extraction.

Both locally and internationally rampant, the pillage of wildlife knows no geopolitical borders. Throughout the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS, region, the last vestiges of a once vast wild kingdom are disappearing.

In a world where everything has its price, sellers report that species abundant in recent years are harder to acquire, not from a tightening noose of regulations, they say, but from environmental scarcity. Many species already face widespread local extinction.

In Douala, Cameroon, as at seaports around the world, animals dead and live board freighters bound for the big "consumers" – Europe, North America and Japan. Live animals are destined for public and private zoos, collections, and scientific research. Though banned by CITES, trade in many species remains both illicit and officially sanctioned by Africans and foreigners alike.

The big regional wildlife "producers" are Zaire, Gabon, Central African Republic, Congo Republic and Cameroon, where the last contiguous tracts of the vast triple-rainy-season forests, which once girdled all sub-Saharan Africa, are rapidly disappearing. Less than seven percent of the ECOWAS region receives any kind of conservation protection.

Telling indicators of regional ecological losses are the revolving stocks of mammoth hardwood logs piled high and stacked for miles at Douala harbor. Along with fast-forwarding regional hydrological and habitat collapse, logging is also flooding once isolated ecosystems with hunters, poachers and settlers.

In Yaounde, Cameroon, over-inquisitive buyers are chased out of city markets rife with animals and parts. According to the World Society for the Protection of Animals, in one district of

Cameroon alone, an estimated 800 gorillas are killed annually for a bush meat trade assisted in every aspect by foreign multinational logging companies. One survey found that 67 foreign companies operated in Cameroon, controlling eighty-one percent of the forest resources.

Wildlife conservation is entangled with human rights issues as well. In Togo, where development aid has been contingent on the success of conservation initiatives prioritized by donors, human rights groups have verified tortures and massacres perpetuated by soldiers ordered to protect wildlife reserves.

In Nigeria, oil operations have decimated the Niger River delta, where the military government sanctions hunting of rare species. Custom documents show that Royal/Dutch Shell Co. imported shotguns and handguns used by the military to suppress indigenous dissent in oil producing areas. Shotguns were reportedly procured for embassy officials and private wildlife safari interests.

Plagued by corruption, the political and economic systems of Nigeria, Gabon, Togo and Cameroon are dominated by foreign logging, mining and petroleum interests. These countries are epicenters for the wildlife trade. They are also four of the world's most brutal and entrenched military dictatorships.

Development aid provided by international banks for extractive industries further subsidizes the destruction of wildlife. In these trickle-down economies, funds are skimmed by military elites while the general population wallows in epidemics of poverty and disease. The impact on wildlife is immediate and acute. ~ **end.**