

AU

African Union

Wildlife Exploitation and Endangerment

Overview

The term wildlife refers to all non-domesticated plants and animals. This category encompasses a wide range of living things ranging from large animals to microscopic organisms, with every species playing a vital role in the planet's various ecosystems. Ensuring our ecosystems are biodiverse and stable is crucial to humanity's survival, as wildlife is a huge contributing factor to food security and economic prosperity. Without wildlife, most populations would lose significant access to food, clean water, and raw materials for construction and energy. These species need protection not only for humanity's benefit, but for their own as well, preventing further extinction and contributing to a greener earth. Unfortunately, wildlife exploitation and endangerment is still a prominent issue that demands urgent attention. Various forms of wildlife are being harmed due to exploits like poaching, habitat destruction from agricultural expansion, and air pollution. As a result, biodiversity is at a greater risk than ever.

What is AU?

The African Union (AU), founded in 2002, aims to promote unity between African countries, accelerate political and socioeconomic growth through collaboration, and strive for coordination between member states on policy matters.¹ The AU consists of 55 member states who collaborate on the implementation of tangible change through the assembly, executive council and commission, in which members make high-stakes decisions which impact the entire African Continent.² This highly collaborative organisation allows African countries to work on finding solutions to the prominence of wildlife exploitation and endangerment, and the Union is committed to ending these issues with haste.

Flora

¹“Au in a Nutshell.” *AU in a Nutshell* | African Union, 10 Sept. 2024, au.int/en/au-nutshell.

²“Au in a Nutshell.” *AU in a Nutshell* | African Union, 10 Sept. 2024, au.int/en/au-nutshell.

Over the last century, African vegetation has become greatly impoverished. This has mainly stemmed from three causes: fire, farming and livestock grazing. These primary contributors have long-term consequences on the ecosystem and can alter the natural landscapes, often leading to reduced diversity in the ecosystem and increased soil erosion. The combination of these factors poses a serious threat to Africa's unique flora and ecosystem.

To start, man-made fires have become much more widespread, leading to the destruction of forests and other vegetation and preventing the natural ecosystem's recovery. These uncontrolled fires are often set by humans for agricultural purposes in order to clear land or manage grazed areas. However, they can easily get out of control and cause significant ecological damage, as fires in dryer, semi-arid regions can drastically reduce diversity of plants and species. Forests take decades or centuries to grow and can be wiped out in a matter of hours by uncontrollable fires. African countries have attempted to manage fire usage through fire control measures such as community based fire management and information campaigns. Sadly, the sheer scale of the problem remains a significant challenge.³ Increasing awareness about sustainable land-use practices and promoting controlled, intentional burns (rather than uncontrolled wildfires) can help preserve natural vegetation.

Unsustainable farming factors are another huge contributor to the impoverishment of African vegetation. As the population grows, demand for food increases and more land is cleared for farming, which leads to the large-scale deforestation and the destruction of grasslands and wetlands. As mentioned above, this issue is exacerbated through the use of uncontrolled wildfires, which destroy much more land than alternative methods. Another issue is monoculture farming, a practice wherein farmers grow only one type of crop at a time in a specific field.⁴ Monoculture farming decreases fertility of the land and can lead to soil erosion and decline of native vegetation. In regions such as the Sahel- which includes the countries of Nigeria, Mali, Chad, South Sudan and Sudan, among others- where fragile ecosystems already exist, the over-expansion of farmland has resulted in desertification, as once-productive land becomes

³ Pooley, Simon. "Fire in African Landscapes." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. October 29, 2021. Oxford University Press.
<https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-984>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

⁴ Petruzzello, Melissa. "monoculture". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Nov. 2023,
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/monoculture>. Accessed 14 October 2024.

barren and unable to support plant life.⁵ Farming is essential for food and economic security on the African continent, but doing so improperly can damage future agricultural viability of the land. Polyculture farming as well as crop rotation can help restore soil fertility, reduce land degradation, and preserve natural vegetation.

Yet another factor posing a threat to the African ecosystem is livestock grazing. In many African countries, pastoralism, or raising livestock, is a very common and widely utilized practice. Millions of Africans rely on livestock, such as cattle, goats or sheep, for food and income. Unfortunately, the expansion of livestock farming has led to overgrazing in many regions. This phenomenon occurs when livestock consume more vegetation than the land can regenerate, leading to depletion of grasses, shrubs and other plants. This not only reduces the amount of food for the animals but also weakens soil structure over time.⁶ Overgrazing leads to the land becoming barren and unable to support livestock. Fortunately, some initiatives have introduced more drought-resistant animal breeds and encouraged the diversification of livelihoods to reduce the reliance on livestock.⁷ An example of this is the plan is to reinforce climate change resilience for African livestock in sub-Saharan Africa, as proposed by the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism.⁸ It outlines drought forecasting proposals as well as specific pastoral development recommendations.

Fauna

Before the introduction of firearms into society, humans had relatively little effect on the wildlife particularly animal life in the region. However, a shift occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries, when Europeans ramped up trade with Coastal Africa to keep up with the heightening

⁵ “Bringing Dry Land in the Sahel Back to Life | UN News.” *United Nations*, United Nations, news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110322. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

⁶ Heumesser, Christine, and Holger A. Kray. *Productive Diversification in African Agriculture and Its Effects on Resilience and Nutrition*, World Bank Group, documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/942331530525570280/pdf/Productive-Diversification-in-African-Agriculture-and-its-Effects-on-Resilience-and-Nutrition.pdf. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

⁷ Heumesser, Christine, and Holger A. Kray. *Productive Diversification in African Agriculture and Its Effects on Resilience and Nutrition*, World Bank Group, documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/942331530525570280/pdf/Productive-Diversification-in-African-Agriculture-and-its-Effects-on-Resilience-and-Nutrition.pdf. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

⁸ Arara, Gordon O. *Building Climate Change Resilience for African Livestock in Sub-Saharan Africa*, World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism (WISP), Mar. 2010, portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2010-103.pdf. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

demands of the gold and slave trades.⁹ Since the 19th century, humans' effect on wildlife, specifically fauna in the region, has been immense. A primary example of this is a subspecies of antelopes known as the Black Zambian Lechwe.¹⁰ In the 1900s there was believed to be a million of these antelopes; nowadays, however, the population is drastically lower: “The black lechwe of northern Zambia are today confined entirely to one area, the Bangweulu floodplain. Numbers have shrunk from more than half-a-million as recently as 50 years ago to an estimated 16,000 today.”¹¹ At the time, European colonists and hunters were to blame for these extreme declines in population. However, nowadays, most of the population decline is mainly due to hunting and poaching by the citizens of African nations themselves.¹²

Illegal Wildlife Trade

Animal poaching and illegal wildlife trade result in “significant threats to global biodiversity, causing irreversible ecological, economic, and social consequences.”¹³ Poaching results in rare animals being killed due to perceived medicinal aesthetic or monetary benefits has a ripple effect on the larger ecosystem. When done excessively, this can lead to overpopulation in mammals below them in the food chain. Those mammals are often herbivores who, without the fear of being hunted by former predators, can overconsume grass and shrubs, leading to barren and destroyed habitats.¹⁴ The extinction of overly poached species is detrimental to the ecosystem and will change African habitats in ways that are difficult to determine in the near future. One of the most glaring examples of the illegal wildlife trade is the poaching of elephants and rhinoceroses for their horns. The horns are considered valuable either for their ivory content (for elephants) or simply for showing off status.¹⁵ This continues to happen despite international

⁹ White, Gavin. “Firearms in Africa: An Introduction.” *The Journal of African History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1971, pp. 173–84. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/180878>. Accessed 13 Sept. 2024.

¹⁰ “Africa - Conservation, Wildlife, Biodiversity.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 11 Oct. 2024, www.britannica.com/place/Africa/The-effects-of-humans. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

¹¹ Thirdgood, S. J., et al. “Population trends and current status of Black Lechwe (*kobus*: bovidae) in Zambia.” *African Journal of Ecology*, vol. 32, no. 1, Mar. 1994, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2028.1994.tb00549.x>.

¹² Rija, Alfian A et al. “Global extent and drivers of mammal population declines in protected areas under illegal hunting pressure.” *PLoS one* vol. 15,8 e0227163. 21 Aug. 2020, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0227163

¹³ Chavan, Akash S, et al. “Animal trafficking and poaching: Major threats to the Biodiversity.” *Journal of Entomology and Zoology Studies*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1 Sept. 2023, pp. 45–49, <https://doi.org/10.22271/j.ento.2023.v11.i5a.9231>.

¹⁴ Skirble, Rosanne. “Loss of Predators Impacts Food Chain.” *Voice of America*, Voice of America (VOA News), 19 July 2011, www.voanews.com/a/loss-of-predators-has-ripple-effect-down-food-chain-125811788/158524.html.

¹⁵ “Poaching for rhino horn.” *Save The Rhino*, 22 Feb. 2023, www.savetherhino.org/rhino-info/threats/poaching-rhino-horn/.

bans, including the 1989 decision by Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)'s ivory ban.¹⁶ According to the World Wildlife Fund, “poachers killed an estimated 100,000 elephants across Africa between 2010 and 2012”.¹⁷ In particular, countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa remain key targets for poachers. Rhino populations, such as the critically endangered Black rhino, have been decimated by the demand for their horns. There is high demand for these primarily in Asian markets, where it is believed to have medicinal properties.¹⁸ The poaching industry has a large impact to the point where it often affects African countries' entire Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While poachers profit, their practice is detrimental for others, as wildlife trafficking fuels organised crime, destabilises regions, and deprives local communities of legitimate income from ecotourism and sustainable use of wildlife resources.¹⁹ The African Union (AU) has acknowledged the gravity of this problem and works to combat illegal wildlife trade through collaborations with member states, international organisations, and law enforcement agencies.

Questions to Consider

1. Are there laws protecting wildlife in your country?
2. Does animal poaching negatively or positively affect your country's economy?
 - a. How important of a role does animal poaching play within your country's economy? Would it be detrimental to impose regulations on the practice?
3. How does animal poaching affect your country's flora and fauna?
4. Are there solutions your country can implement that will increase biodiversity?

¹⁶ Lemieux, Andrew M., and Ronald V. Clarke. “The International Ban on Ivory Sales and Its Effects on Elephant Poaching in Africa.” *OUP Academic*, Oxford University Press, 1 July 2009, academic.oup.com/bjc/article/49/4/451/325177.

¹⁷ “100,000 Elephants Killed in Africa, Study Finds.” *WWF Conserves Our Planet, Habitats, & Species like the Panda & Tiger*, wwf.panda.org/es/?227630%2F100000-elephants-killed-in-Africa-study-finds#:~:text=By%20Jason%20Straziuso%20Associated%20Press.new%20study%20published%20Monday%20found. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

¹⁸ “Poaching: Rhino Threats: Save the Rhino International.” *Save The Rhino*, 22 Feb. 2023, www.savetherhino.org/rhino-info/threats/poaching-rhino-horn/.

¹⁹ Kkiernerm. “Wildlife, Forest & Fisheries Crime Module 1 Key Issues: Implications of Wildlife Trafficking.” *Wildlife, Forest & Fisheries Crime Module 1 Key Issues: Implications of Wildlife Trafficking*, www.unodc.org/e4j/en/wildlife-crime/module-1/key-issues/implications-of-wildlife-trafficking.html. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.

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