



PRESS RELEASE

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New FZS census finds a 98% decline in the Hippopotamus population of the Virunga National Park, DRC

A census carried out this morning revealed that there are only 629 hippos left in the Virunga National Park, DRC. In the late 60's and early 70's there were around 30,000 hippos living in the park. The aerial census carried out earlier today by the Frankfurt Zoological Society with funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, shows that this population has now declined by 98%.

With the second round of presidential elections in Congo less than one week away, the Mai Mai and other non integrated local militia groups are poaching at an unprecedented rate because they believe their days in the park are numbered. The Congolese army who operate in the park without sufficient rations or salary have also been accused of poaching the hippos, often in collusion with the militia troops.

The problem has now become so serious that the Ugandan military have deployed troops along the banks of the River Ishasha, which separates Congo from Uganda, to help deter the Mai Mai from killing the park's largest remaining group of hippos consisting of only 134 individuals. The Mai Mai and other poachers have been targeting hippos and elephants for their ivory, which is collected regularly from the militia camps and is thought to leave Congo through Uganda and Sudan to be traded illegally on the international black market.

The Mai Mai have refused to engage in dialogue with the rangers and have recently begun launching attacks on their patrol posts. Despite that fact that over 100 rangers have been killed over the last few years trying to protect Virunga's wildlife populations, and that they have not received a proper salary for more than a decade, the rangers continue to show remarkable commitment, determination and fortitude. After years of hardship, some support from the European Union and other donors is enabling the Congolese rangers to take control of the situation, but this positive development may be too late for the hippos.

Poaching has now become so prolific and the threat to rangers so serious, that a combined operation between the park rangers and the UN peace keeping troops is needed. The Mai Mai camps are well known to both the rangers and the UN, and an operation needs to be mounted quickly. However, the UN is preoccupied with the lead up to the second round of elections and the militia forces have taken advantage of the situation. Over the last few weeks the park has seen unprecedented levels of poaching, ambushes, violence, and violations of human rights.

The Virunga National Park's best chance now lies in the hands of its elite ranger force, trained by Frankfurt Zoological Society and deployed to help protect the last few hippos from extinction. The Congo Rangers are massively under resourced and are outnumbered five-to-one by poachers armed with machine guns and rocket launchers. UNESCO and the EU are engaging at the highest political levels in Kinshasa, but support is desperately needed on the ground. Frankfurt Zoological Society is committed to providing the rangers with vehicles, fuel, rations, and further training next year, and a pioneering initiative has just been launched by the Africa Conservation Fund to gather international support and provide desperately needed patrol equipment and salary supplements directly to the field.

The efforts of this team of rangers to protect the last of Virunga's hippos can be tracked day to day on their recently established weblog at www.wildlifedirect.org/congo-rangers

FACT FILE

- The hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) is a large, plant-eating African mammal, one of only two extant, and three or four recently extinct, species in the family Hippopotamidae
- It lives in groups of up to 40 animals, called a pod, herd, school or bloat
- A male hippo is known as a bull, a female, a cow, and a baby, a calf. A hippo's lifespan is typically 40 to 50 years
- Hippos average 3.5 metres (11ft) long, 1.5 metres (5ft) tall at the shoulder, and weigh up to 3,200kg (7,000 lb)
- The eyes, ears and nostrils of the hippo are placed high on the roof of the skull, allowing it to spend most of the day with most of its body submerged in water to stay cool and prevent sunburn
- For additional protection from the sun, a hippo's skin secretes a red substance that is a natural sunscreen
- Hippos are still found in the rivers and lakes of Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, The Gambia and also in southern Africa
- Three species of hippo became extinct within the Holocene epoch in Madagascar, one of them as recently as about a thousand years ago
- A dwarf species, *Phanourios minutis*, existed in Cyprus but became extinct at the end of the Pleistocene era.

Source: Wikipedia