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## Outside the Frame: Looking Beyond the Myth of Garamba's LRA Ivory-Terrorism Nexus

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### Abstract

There have been widespread reports of elephant poaching by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Garamba National Park (GNP) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), presenting a narrative that ivory poaching funds terror and that both can be solved by the same (military) intervention. This narrative distorts the complex dynamics. It identifies clear villains, edits out other poaching actors, and legitimises particular interventions. Poaching is portrayed as a moral, non-political issue and military intervention is portrayed as a logical outcome. The wider history and current context are neglected. The LRA's poaching threat, relative to other actors, is overemphasised. It ignores how the LRA poaching—real as it was—fits into a history of poaching caused by problems with state capacity and territorial control, including incursions by armed actors. The situation demands solutions that are more complex than merely defeating the LRA. More so, military intervention against the LRA has worsened poaching, due to state military implications in poaching. The article shows how the 'LRA ivory-terrorism' narrative is a discursive tool for particular agendas, which primarily allow particular interventions, legitimisation of resources, or wider readership. In this way, the actors involved create their own echo-chamber, which is less concerned with local dynamics and which does not include practical conservation actors in Garamba. The narrative has also begun to shift.

**Keywords:** poaching, terrorism, framing, conservation, conflict, LRA, Garamba, DRC

### INTRODUCTION

"Case proven: ivory trafficking funds terrorism" ran the headline in *The Guardian* (Kahumbwath and Halliday 2015). It was the latest chapter of a story that increasingly ran through NGO reports, films, and the press. The story told how Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was poaching elephant tusks from Garamba National Park (GNP, or Garamba) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to fund a campaign of brutal attacks on civilians. It was similar to stories of other

groups in Africa on the US State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations. The story implied that governments, NGOs, and private citizens could help combat two of the world's evils at once—poaching and terrorism.

The logic was appealing. Combating the source of finance would reduce the capacity of the groups. With state funding after 9/11 increasingly focused on counter-terrorism, conservationists could deal with major threats, and security policymakers who signed the checks could go home happy. Perhaps it was too good to be true? As we argue in this paper, in specific relation to the case of the LRA and Garamba, this 'two birds with one stone' argument was exactly that. Rather than helping both conservation and security, a focus on the LRA's poaching deflected attention from the much larger poaching threat from other actors, not to mention the related security dynamics.

This paper is based on field research conducted in Haut-Uélé around GNP in 2012 and 2013 (July–August 2012; March 2013; July–August 2013) and February–April 2018. Additional

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field research was conducted in Uganda (in particular, Arua, Gulu, and Kampala, between 2012 and 2018), other places in the DRC (in particular, Kinshasa, between 2012 and 2018), and Washington, DC (in 2013). In Uganda and the DRC, a variety of actors were interviewed, such as illegal ivory traders, active and former poachers, security officials, journalists, wildlife officials, local state and customary authorities, civil society representatives, and so on. In Washington, DC, governmental and non-governmental actors were interviewed on the LRA issue. Additionally, a review of the historical, academic, and grey literature on the issue was conducted.

This paper consists of four parts. We first look at the theory on the framing of conflict-related advocacy. We then look at the way in which the LRA ivory–terrorism link was framed in advocacy and media reports. We then show the messy and complex nature of poaching and conflict dynamics in Garamba. In this, the LRA emerges as a relatively minor—though not absent—actor poaching ivory in Garamba. We then explain why this narrative has been chosen, as well as its negative effects. We also discuss how practical conservation actors do not engage with this narrative.

### **THE DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF 'GREEN MILITARISATION'**

In response to commercial poaching, the better organisation of poachers, and their increasing use of heavy weaponry, an increasing militarisation of conservation practices has taken place (Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014). While there is a long history of military involvement in conservation (Ellis 1994; Lunstrum 2015; Masse et al. 2018), this is “quickly intensifying and vastly expanding within a broadly framed conservation context and sense of ecological crisis” (Masse et al. 2018: 203). In other words, a qualitative shift in violence has happened, leading to “more rigorous militarized training, more lethal weapons, and permission to use more deadly force” (Lunstrum 2014: 819), normalisation of shoot-on-sight directives (Neumann 2004: 829–830). This “green militarization” (Lunstrum 2014) views the “heavy-handed policing of protected areas and the use of violence is a necessary, viable, and responsible way to address the illegal hunting of wildlife” (Duffy 2014; Masse et al. 2018; Masse 2019).

This approach draws strong criticism, mainly for causing human rights abuses (Duffy et al. 2015), such as the unprecedented killing in South Africa of “several hundred suspected rhino poachers by rangers and soldiers since 2008” (Lunstrum 2017: 3). These abuses can escalate conflicts with poachers, alienate local communities, or simply be ineffective (Duffy et al. 2015: 346; Masse 2019). Moreover, critics argue that effective solutions to poaching must “engage with issues of broader regional stability and the wider political context” (Lunstrum 2014; Duffy et al. 2015: 346).

There is a growing literature on the discursive dimensions of green militarisation, which particularly focuses on the role of social media and online platforms in the way in which conservation is communicated (Büscher 2016, 2017;

Lunstrum 2017), a process which Büscher called ‘Nature 2.0’ (Büscher 2016, 2017). On these platforms, “information is not simply consumed, but actively (co-) created, shared, liked or otherwise modified by users, for example through social media” (Büscher 2016: 984).

Broadly speaking, this literature shows how these discursive dimensions legitimise and normalise militarised conservation (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Lunstrum 2017; Masse 2019). This is done in different ways. First, framing the conservation problem as one of war and insurgency justifies militarised interventions. The widespread deployment of the war metaphor has bred “a normalization of violence in the enforcement of conservation laws” (Neumann 2004: 816).<sup>1</sup> Second, through discursive constructions of conservation’s ‘enemies’ (Lunstrum 2014: 819), poachers are ‘othered’ by portraying them as ruthless and barbaric, while wildlife is incorporated into an expanding moral community, legitimising military practices against poachers to protect wildlife (Neumann 2004).

In recent years, poachers have come to be portrayed as threats to global security (Duffy et al. 2015; Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Masse et al. 2018; Masse 2019). Consequently, it is argued that the decline of wildlife is directly linked to terrorism and organised crime. It is argued that terrorist and criminal actors in sub-Saharan Africa are using illegal wildlife artefacts such as ivory to fund their activities (Duffy 2014, 2016; Masse et al. 2018: 11; Kelly Pennaz et al. 2018). A 2012 report by the Elephant Action League (Kalron and Crosta 2012) was particularly influential in launching the narrative on the nexus between illegal wildlife trade and terrorism. The report claimed that illegal ivory financed up to 40% of Al Shabaab’s activities (Bergenas and Medina 2014),<sup>2</sup> through the direct poaching of Kenyan elephants and through ivory trafficking (Maguire and Haenlein 2015: 5). After the report’s release, the ivory–terrorism claim (particularly relating to Al Shabaab) was repeated and magnified by politicians, NGOs, and the media.

The narrative was quickly applied to other regions and repeated in high-level policy circles such as the US congress (Maguire and Haenlein 2015: 11), where it led to the Global Anti-Poaching Act of November 2016. The link with terrorism was specifically made. Chairman Royce (one of the Bill’s sponsors) argued that “cracking down on poaching and wildlife trafficking will not only help protect some of the world’s most majestic animals, it will strengthen U.S. national security” (Daly 2016). Think tank actors claimed “profits from wildlife crimes are filling the coffers of terrorist organisations”, calling for cooperation between the military and conservationists (Bergenas and Medina 2014). Thus, while the illegal wildlife trade was long “treated mostly as a specialist niche within conservation work” (WWF and Traffic 2014: 4), it was now at the centre of international attention. The International Fund for Animal Welfare argued that “illegal wildlife trade is no longer only a conservation or animal welfare issue. It is a national and global security issue and must be addressed accordingly” (IFAW 2013: 7).

These claims provided urgency and drew attention to conservation and (anti)poaching. The narrative strongly resonated among NGOs, the media, and policymakers. For

such actors, it added messaging urgency because the “terrorists killing elephants to fund their atrocities is a powerful, troubling story that deftly taps two hot-button issues” (McConnell 2014). It was therefore an effective discursive tool allowing these actors to pursue their agendas. It allowed NGOs to make more urgent and wider appeals for fundraising. It allowed media actors to write more sensational stories to attract a wide(r) readership. It allowed policymakers to legitimise resources, military action, and external involvement in particular conflicts (Duffy 2015; Lombard 2016; Masse et al. 2018: 211). In this context, the voices of these various actors became self-perpetuating, where high-level outlets and political actors mutually reinforced each other (Maguire and Haenlein 2015: 9, 12).

This narrative drew criticism. First of all, ‘ivory–terrorist’ reports were criticised for relying on weak or non-existent evidence (McConnell 2014; Duffy et al. 2015: 346). This was particularly the case for Al Shabaab; a widely-cited claim that 40% of the group’s operational costs were financed through ivory (Kalron and Crosta 2012) relied on a single, unverified source and implausible assumptions (Maguire and Haenlein 2015). Second, the narrative was criticised for over-simplification, for obscuring broad and complex drivers of insecurity and poaching. For example, although Boko Haram is said to be responsible for much of the poaching in the area, in reality major poaching predated the Boko Haram presence. Third, the ‘poacher-as-terrorist’ narrative was criticised for its negative consequences, allowing “Boko Haram violence against mobile pastoralists to continue” (Kelly Pennaza et al. 2018: 1). In this context, the ‘poacher-as-terrorist’ narrative was not only considered to provide a spurious diagnosis but also suggest the wrong intervention. That is, it was “unlikely to have helped in the design of responses tailored to the actual operational dynamics of organised criminality” (Maguire and Haenlein 2015: 39).

This article builds further on these findings. Concretely, we aim to show how an ‘ivory terrorism’ narrative about the LRA was created, the ways in which it differed from local realities, and the ways in which the narrative—by advocating for a military intervention—led to harmful consequences. In order to do so, we take inspiration from Igoe’s (2010) article *Spectacle of nature*. By relying on Debord’s *Society of the spectacle* (Debord 1995), Igoe (2010, 2017) shows how nature is “heavily mediated by mass-produced and -disseminated images” (Igoe 2017: x). Organisations play a central role in this phenomenon. They communicate urgent problems “in desperate need of the timely solutions that these organizations claim to be uniquely qualified to offer” (Igoe 2010: 378). A process of framing takes place, through which clear binaries are constructed, between good and bad—identifying clear villains<sup>3</sup> and ‘editing out’ others (Igoe 2010: 385)—while legitimising particular interventions (Neumann 1997: 561). With specific reference to (anti)poaching, Masse (2019) calls this the “politics of (in)visibility”, whereby certain issues are highlighted and others made invisible. This creates a range of negative effects. As Igoe (2010: 382) notes, “Missing from these presentations are the complex and messy connections

and relationships that are invisible”. In other words, these narratives rely on a simplified version of reality, an “Alienation and fetishisation” (Igoe 2010: 288).

### POACHING BY THE LRA

The LRA emerged in 1987 in northern Uganda in response to marginalisation and alleged abuses experienced by the Acholi people under the regime of President Museveni. From December 2005, the LRA settled in Garamba where it refrained from attacking the civilian population until December 2007. On 14 December 2008, ‘Operation Lightning Thunder’ was launched, in which the LRA camps in Garamba were attacked. The LRA escaped practically unharmed, and then launched a series of massacres. Between 24 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, the LRA killed at least 815 Congolese civilians and 50 Sudanese civilians. Killings and abductions continued throughout 2009 until the final massacre on 22 February 2010. From then, LRA violence reduced to survival attacks for food and short-term abductions. This continues today in an area covering the DRC, the CAR (Central African Republic), Sudan, and South Sudan (Adam et al. 2007; Titeca and Costeur 2015: 99–100).

When the LRA initially established itself in GNP, it remained peaceful for 2 years (late 2005–late 2007). Historically, the LRA hardly engaged in natural resource exploitation; it survived from looting and external sponsors, particularly the Sudanese government. However, by the time of its arrival in Garamba, sponsorship had largely stopped, and the group did not engage in looting. Therefore the LRA started poaching elephants; bushmeat and ivory were primarily exchanged with local populations around Garamba for agricultural and manufactured goods, including medicines (Titeca 2013b). When the group turned violent, trade with the local population was replaced by trade with foreign businessmen. As an ex-LRA commander summarised:

“The businessmen came from Darfur. They were Sudanese. In exchange for the tusk, they were going to give boxes of bullets, foodstuffs like sugar, cooking oil, soap... the LRA would use either tusk, gold or diamond, for foodstuffs and other things. We would meet only occasionally, perhaps once within a month or two, and often sparked by the need for goods. What we would get would depend on the size of the tusk we take... a [typical] tusk would give us: 20 boxes of bullets, 10 bags of beans, 10 bags of sugar, 10 jerry cans of cooking oil, 10 boxes of soap and medicine.”<sup>4</sup>

Echoing our other interviews, this quote demonstrates how ivory was used by the LRA as a form of barter, largely for their basic necessities. The LRA would operate in rotating teams of two to four poachers each, hunting for around one week or until they had killed an elephant. Poaching would be conducted particularly in Garamba and the tusks would be brought to Joseph Kony’s group operating along the CAR border and Kafia Kingi (LRA Crisis Tracker 2016: 7).

Summarising, although the LRA did engage in poaching, it remained minor compared to other groups, as will be

explored later. In the early period of the LRA presence, park management saw the LRA as a limited threat relative to South Sudanese poachers. Rangers even conducted patrols with the LRA.<sup>5</sup> Yet, when reports started being published about the LRA's poaching, they did not reflect this reality.

### THE LRA IVORY-TERRORISM NARRATIVE

In 2013, the first report on the 'LRA ivory-terrorism' link appeared. The Enough Project, in collaboration with Invisible Children and Resolve—organisations which had been working on the LRA issue for a considerable amount of time—published the report titled *Kony's ivory: how elephant poaching in Congo helps support the Lord's Resistance Army*. It was the first report to outline the LRA ivory-terrorism linkage. It stated that "killing elephants in Congo is helping to support the LRA's continuing atrocities across central Africa" (Agger and Hutson 2013: 1), and that "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" (Agger and Hutson 2013: 2).

The report caught the attention of the press, including the Independent (Akumu 2013), the Guardian (Moses 2013), and the CNN (Quarterman 2013). CNN introduced the LRA as part of "armed groups [who] take advantage of the increasing value of ivory to fund their atrocities. Their fighters have the training and weapons to kill large numbers of elephants and trade their tusks for arms, ammunition and food" (Quarterman 2013). Policy actors also took up the narrative. The UN Security Council called for a joint investigation with the African Union into the LRA's ivory poaching. Ban Ki Moon called poaching a "grave menace to peace and security" (Goldenberg 2013a).

In 2014, film director Kathryn Bigelow made the animated short documentary film *Last days* about elephant poaching, highlighting the need to save the elephant population from terrorist groups such as the LRA, who "use the sale of illegal ivory to carry out attacks" (Annapurna Pictures 2019). Bigelow's writing also focussed on the LRA's "new method of terror that doubles as an income stream", "slaughter[ing] elephants for ivory" (Bigelow and Dranginis 2015). Bigelow also made the virtual reality film *The protectors: walk in the rangers' shoes* about the park rangers of GNP (Bigelow and Ismail 2017). At the film premiere, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued:

"It became clear to everyone that this was not just a terrible crisis when it comes to the elephant population, it was a trade, a trafficking... it was funding the Lord's Resistance Army, it was being used to take ivory and sell it in order to buy more weapons, and support the kind of terroristic activity that these and other groups were engaged in." (Invisible Children 2017a).

In 2015, National Geographic launched the multimedia project *How killing elephants finances terror in Africa* (Christy

2015), told through an article, a film, and interactive web content. Artificial ivory tusks with GPS trackers were put on the black market in a village believed to be "on the path of ivory headed to Kony's base in Darfur" (Christy 2015). Over a few weeks, the tusks moved to a Sudanese market town, finishing 500 km southwest of Khartoum, supposedly transported by the LRA. The project's findings were amplified in the media. For example, an article in *The Guardian* reported on how the project has conclusively "proven", the "first direct evidence", that "ivory trafficking funds terrorism" (Kahumbwath and Halliday 2015). This narrative is still strong. A recent piece describes Garamba as the place "where terrorism and the ivory trade collide" (Brooks 2017).

Importantly, the solution for this threat also was quite uniform across these various reports—a military intervention against the LRA to stop the poaching crisis. After 'Operation Lightning Thunder', Ugandan troops pursued the LRA, first in the DRC, then in the CAR. In November 2011, the Ugandan troops formed the heart of the 'African Union Regional Task Force' comprising the four affected countries (Uganda, South Sudan, the DRC, and the CAR). In October 2011, the US sent around 100 Special Forces soldiers to back the Ugandan army's hunt for the LRA (Guardian 2011). Support for these military operations was not always guaranteed; for example, the Congolese government no longer wanted Ugandan troops on its territory (Titeca and Costeur 2015). The 'LRA ivory' reports advocated for these military interventions. For example, the 2013 report of the Enough Project argued the following: "The LRA is able to hunt elephants in Garamba in part because the Ugandan forces deployed to combat the group, which are supported by US 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" (Agger and Hutson 2013: 6).

In other words, the report had a clear agenda—lobbying for the access of the Ugandan and American armed forces in the DRC to track down the LRA. The report explicitly recommends to "pressure the DRC to allow capable forces to pursue the LRA in enclaves such as Garamba" (Agger and Hutson 2013: 12). Similarly, Bigelow asked the US congress, considering withdrawing the military in 2015, to "finish the job [and] keep fighting Joseph Kony's LRA" (Bigelow and Dranginis 2015).<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the way in which the poaching crisis in Garamba is presented is an example of the dynamics presented in the literature overview. 'Nature 2.0' communicated through a variety of platforms—virtual reality, short documentaries, and old-school reports—all of which argue that the LRA, using ivory to finance terror, was the primary poaching threat in Garamba. It should be emphasised that this this narrative was restricted to policy, journalism, and advocacy actors, in *international* arenas; the way this played out in *local* arenas was profoundly different. This will be shown in the following sections—i.e., how the local situation was very different and how local conservationists working in Garamba did not ascribe to this narrative. As explored in the section titled 'African

parcs network and the ‘ivory-terrorism’ narrative’, the park management has consistently represented the poaching threat in a manner fully consistent with the realities outlined in this paper, the most important being the present but relatively minor poaching impact of the LRA. In the following sections, we show how the particular discursive framing of the ‘ivory terrorism’ narrative and the presented solution pose a range of problems.

### Problematic evidence and framing of the LRA ivory–terrorism link

Similar to the ‘ivory terrorism’ literature mentioned in the earlier section, there is a problem with the evidence base for the main reports involved.

In National Geographic’s multimedia project, a fake tusk was claimed to be taken by the LRA. Although this was the project’s main claim, no proof was given that the artificial tusks were transported by the LRA, rather than any other actor on the same route. In the words of an expert:

They would not say how it was picked up or how National Geographic knew this. So, in the absence of this info, it is hard to know or make a clear statement... We can’t just assume that the LRA picked it up and it ended in Darfur just because the LRA only did that... It could have been Mbororo, Darfuri riders [or] local poachers who eventually gave or sold to others.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, the project’s claim that the LRA transported the ivory was unproven.

The 2013 Enough Project report (Agger and Hutson 2013), at the heart of the ‘LRA ivory’ narrative, based its findings on limited proof—a single seizure of six ivory tusks from the LRA.<sup>8</sup> This was the only seizure tied to the LRA in between January 2012 and October 2013. To put this into perspective, during this period, neighbouring Uganda—the main trading route for Garamba ivory—confiscated 191 unweighed pieces and 5 kg of worked ivory as well as 28 unweighed pieces and 3,594 kg of raw ivory (UNSC 2013, Annex 86; UNSC 2014, Annex 106). 6 tusks—as confiscated from the LRA—would weigh between 48 and 60 kg. These numbers demonstrate the limited scale of the LRA’s ivory poaching, while highlighting another and more important issue—although the LRA poached elephants, it was a limited threat relative to other poaching actors, including armed groups. The initial report and other media initiatives hardly referred to the other armed groups active in poaching;<sup>9</sup> in doing so, they presented the LRA as the main—and almost only—threat. In the next section, we will show how this is a misrepresentation of the situation.

### THE LRA’S MINOR POSITION IN GARAMBA’S ‘POACHING SCAPE’

The area currently known as Garamba National Park (Figure 1) has a long history of poaching by a multitude of actors (Titeca et al. Forthcoming). Within the space available,

this section will outline the longer history of poaching in GNP and highlight the most important poaching actors in GNP’s more recent history since the 1980s.

### History of poaching in GNP

In 1920, legal restrictions were introduced on hunting in the Aka-Dungu Hunting Reserve, which became Garamba National Park in 1938. The hunting domains had proscriptions on hunting large mammals during gestation seasons, and by the 1990s they were extended to throughout the year. Although enforcement was lax during several periods, the legal status of hunting within these areas has long been clear to local populations. For the purposes of this paper, ‘poaching’ is used to describe hunting practices forbidden under the DRC law, not only for elephants but also for other species such as northern white rhinos (until their assumed eradication by 2006).<sup>10</sup>

Heavy poaching has occurred during several periods in GNP’s history. The first such period occurred in the early 1960s during the Simba rebellion, following Congo’s independence. Rebels—primarily Congolese, but also Sudanese and Ugandan—occupied and frequented the Park area, living off its fruits. Curry-Lindhal estimated 900–1100 rhinos were killed during 1963–1966, leaving around 100 specimens (Curry-Lindhal 1972). During this period, elephant populations also fell drastically—from 5,594 to about 700—though some may be attributed to regular migratory patterns (Curry-Lindhal 1972).

Another such period occurred from the late 1970s, as rhino horn prices rose and civil wars in neighbouring countries drove demand and capacity (Figure 2; Hillman Smith 1990).

New war in the 1990s brought new poaching (Figure 2). Encounters with poachers peaked significantly in 1997, with a second spike in 1999 (Figure 3). When troops of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire rebellion arrived in February 1997, the guards were disarmed. Elephant deaths increased significantly from this point. Poaching in 1997

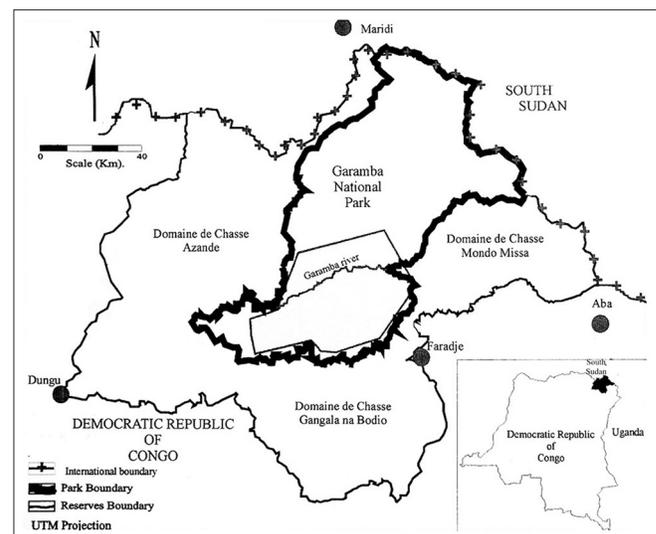
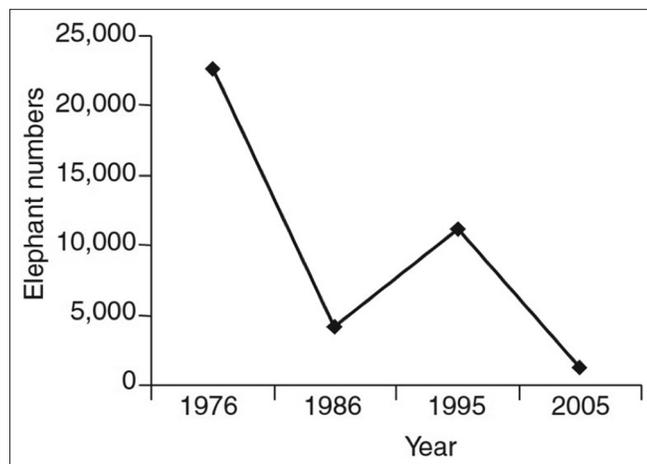


Figure 1  
Garamba National Park (source: Hillman Smith Archive)



**Figure 2**  
Elephant population trends in GNP during 1976–2005  
(source: de Merode et al. 2007)

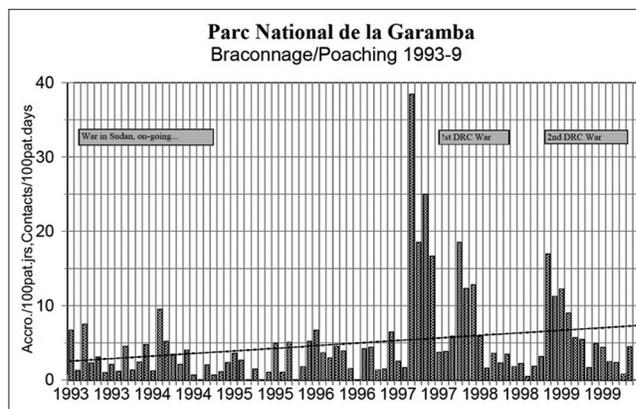
reduced elephant numbers by half—from 11,175 ( $\pm 3,670$ ) to 5,874 ( $\pm 1,339$ ) (Hillman Smith 2003).

It is in this context that the LRA’s threat should be viewed—as one among the many actors in a long historical pattern of armed entrepreneurship and subsistence from park-protected resources by both state and non-state actors, whose exploitation of ivory is particularly acute during times of conflict. In the following sections, we present the main actors involved in poaching in GNP.

### Sudanese actors

Sudanese actors have always constituted a threat to wildlife in GNP. Monthly reports of GNP describe Sudanese actors entering GNP for poaching, right from its inception with an uptick in incidents, including by state actors, following civil war and independence in Sudan beginning in 1955–1956.<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1980s, war in Sudan brought thousands of refugees to the border. From the 1980s, civilian and military Sudanese have been the dominant poaching and ivory trade actors, whether installed in Congo or making cross-border incursions. During 1991–2003, over 70% of armed contacts “were with Sudanese and the minority with Congolese” (Hillman Smith 2003, 148).

Between 1997 and 2005, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) had an official permanent presence in the Mondo Missa hunting domain, supposedly to round up SPLA ‘deserters’ who had been poaching independent of the SPLA. However, the SPLA themselves poached significantly, and began demanding support from the Park under the threat of wiping out park animals (Hillman Smith et al. 2003). A UNESCO report identified the poachers as “predominantly SPLA rebels aided by Congolese porters” (UNESCO 2004). Since the end of their official presence in 2005, poaching by SPLA and splinter groups such as the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) has continued. Even during the LRA’s greatest activity around GNP, Sudanese



**Figure 3**  
Contacts per 100 patrol days, GNP (Hillman Smith and Smith 2000)

armed poachers maintained their activities. South Sudanese poachers remain the main actors responsible for elephant poaching.<sup>12</sup> In summary, Sudanese actors—both civilians and military—have constituted a major threat over many decades.

### Local population

Local populations have hunted for meat and ivory since precolonial times. Decades of legal proscriptions and park enforcement, including increased militarisation of anti-poaching measures in recent years, have not changed the fact of local poaching (UNSC 2015: §221; Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 37, 41–42). Bushmeat markets have long been common (de Merode 1998), and open markets continue to operate, such as at Dungu and at Nsambia. Clandestine traders circulate in towns that do not have open bushmeat markets. Small arms proliferation driven by porous borders and the multiple armed groups through successive civil wars has meant that access to weapons has long been easy for local poachers (Marks 2007).

Locals have long operated alongside other poaching actors. First, they engage in joint poaching. Throughout the Congo wars and beyond, the proliferation of soldiers, both Congolese and Sudanese, would hire local hunters/poachers to provide them with meat and ivory. This practice is no longer prevalent, but connections still exist—individual soldiers regularly rent firearms to local poachers<sup>13</sup> or provide weapons and ammunition in exchange for ivory or bushmeat (Titeca 2013b; UNSC 2014: §229). Local poachers are occasionally fed information by *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; FARDC) or park guards.<sup>14</sup>

Second, locals engage in their villages with poachers. In particular, locals have established economic and social relations with Sudanese refugees, intermarrying and living side-by-side. A dense bush-product trade emerged from this. Interviewees said that these Sudanese poachers would often sell ivory to minor Congolese businessmen, as well as ship it directly to Sudan. Particularly during the 1990s, multiple markets were opened in the area, selling guns and ammunition as well as bushmeat and ivory. The markets’ customers were

predominantly Congolese, who would bring agricultural and household goods to barter. Sudanese poachers would also use local labour—both forced and bought—to assist in tracking, hunting, and portage. This latter practice continues even today. Local chiefs have often facilitated the passage of poachers, providing haven and information in return for economic benefits and ‘protection’ (Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017, p. 41).<sup>15</sup>

### Pastoralists and horsemen

Mbororo transhumance pastoralists are also a threat. These are a nomadic community of Fulani who moved south from Chad following droughts in the early 2000s. The first group entered the DRC from the CAR in 2003 (UNSC 2016b: §89, footnote 9), maintaining a consistent presence (Radio Okapi 2008), thereby presenting a security threat to the south and west of the park.<sup>16</sup> Many locals feel “invaded by foreigners” and feel their land is being taken from them (Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 34, 57–58).

Armed for the purposes of protecting themselves and their herds, Mbororo opportunistically hunt for both ivory and meat when near the Park.<sup>17</sup> Ivory taken by Mbororo is often carried back north on seasonal nomadic routes and sold in the CAR, Sudan, or Chad. Mbororo are also known to trade bushmeat with local resident populations, despite conflicts with them.<sup>18</sup>

A further—albeit non-unitary—group constitutes armed actors from various regions to the far north of Garamba, who arrive on horseback. These are not clearly categorised in practice, but are variously described as Ouda, Libyans, Chadians, and Janjaweed. They are all from nomadic communities from the areas between southern Libya, northern Chad, and Sudan (UNSC 2016b: §89). They can occasionally be confused with pastoralists. Some analysts view them as a subcategory of Mbororo (Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 42). Ouda are known to be involved in the trade of ivory and leopard skins (Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 42) and are known to have bought ivory from the LRA (UNSC 2016a: §175).

### So what?

In summary, the LRA’s poaching activities have to be seen in the context described earlier. The LRA is but one actor in a broader context in which it did not constitute the biggest threat to elephants. Moreover, at the time the Enough Project report was written and appeared (in 2012), GNP saw a poaching upsurge, just as the LRA’s activities *diminished*—a reduction in the human security threat of the LRA meant that this actually gave more space to the *other* poachers, in particular Congolese and South Sudanese poachers.<sup>19</sup> In fact, as Hillman Smith and Amube Ndey argue, the “upsurge in poaching” was in fact driven more by “the ceasefire in Sudan, which left armed forces unoccupied and opened easier passage through parts of Sudan that were previously enemy occupied” (Hillman Smith and Amube Ndey 2005: 107). This was still the case when the LRA arrived in GNP. For example, between January and September

2014, GNP’s park authorities identified 143 poachers’ camps, of which only one was confirmed as a camp of the LRA (UNSC 2015: annex 68). In 2016, the UN group of experts argued that 10–15% of poaching incidents were attributable to “local groups, including LRA”, whilst “foreign groups”, including SPLA, were responsible for 85–90% (UNSC 2016b: §90).

The focus on the LRA therefore obscures a long history of both itinerant and stationary armed actors using GNP as a ground for ivory poaching, a situation that remains even today. As described earlier, the LRA is but one actor in a much broader ‘poaching-scape’, and certainly not the most important one. A few important questions therefore need to be addressed: ‘Why was this LRA ivory–terrorism frame used?’ ‘Which agendas did it serve?’ and ‘What were the consequences of this?’.

## BEHIND THE LRA IVORY–TERRORISM NARRATIVE

Conservation and security policy campaigns have a wider impact, in that they create particular interest and actors as well as engage in ‘world-making’ (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 7), holding ‘social construction power’ (Bourdieu 1977); policy actors, such as advocacy organisations, decide which problems are noticed and which neglected. Media, celebrity-experts, and advocates “take advantage of complex webs of influence that affect people’s decisions” using so-called ‘360-degree’ marketing strategies, online promotions, video, photography, magazines, etc. (Igoe 2010: 377). This was the case for the LRA ivory–terrorism narrative, bringing ‘social construction power’ (Igoe 2010) to define the GNP poaching problem with the LRA at the centre of an ‘ivory spectacle’. Advocacy groups not only decided that the LRA is a problem, but one of significant scale and centrality, which then swayed towards one solution—military intervention by the Ugandan armed forces or later the African Union Task Force.

More generally, danger and risk are not objective conditions, but rather an “effect of interpretation” (Campbell 1992: 1), giving actors leeway to frame situations. This is particularly the case for opaque and messy conflict situations, such as the ones around GNP. This framing happens by choosing a particular narrative and sidelining narratives that are hostile to the dominant one.

This was precisely the case for the LRA ivory–terrorism narrative and alternative narratives. In a striking example, this paper’s first author was contracted by two major humanitarian organisations to write a report on conflict dynamics in the Garamba region. This report was aimed at an academic background for a humanitarian award, around which an advocacy campaign was set up. In the draft report, the LRA was presented as a lesser of many actors, both in conflict and poaching. Pressure was exercised to place the LRA more centrally, emphasise its excessive violence, and reduce the importance of other groups and their violence. In the words of the donors, not doing so would reduce the report to “another narrative about violence against vulnerable people in a far off country”.<sup>20</sup> Strong force was exercised to transform the report

into an ‘LRA-only’ narrative, neglecting the multiplex nature of violence and poaching, due to which the author withdrew from the report.

### **The advocacy–foreign policy nexus**

The question is therefore ‘Why focus on the LRA and the ivory–terrorism narrative?’ It allowed advocacy organisations working on the LRA to tap into new ways of drawing attention to the LRA issue and to attract funding. Looking at the particular timing of these reports helps understand this reasoning. While the LRA was notorious throughout the 1990s and 2000s for its extreme brutalities and large-scale attacks and abductions, this had reduced by 2011.<sup>21</sup> The group was in survival mode, and limited exactions to small-scale attacks and abductions. The group itself had also shrunk to only around 150 fighters (Titeca and Costeur 2015). It became difficult to distinguish the LRA from other regional armed groups because all used similar tactics. The LRA was also not the greatest threat to human security in the broader context and region. Also at a global level, much crueller groups were active, such as Boko Haram and ISIS. The days of the LRA as the prime incarnation of evil were gone. Thus, it became much more difficult to draw attention to the LRA.

However, linking the LRA with ivory poaching allowed finding a way around this problem of lack of attention. Highlighting a new form of cruelty brought the LRA back in the global market of competition for humanitarian attention. Moreover, the international climate also was ready for this; as argued in the theoretical introduction, the ‘ivory terrorism’ narrative started being spread and reproduced in 2012–2013, first by focussing on Al-Shabaab and then on other groups. In other words, there here was a pre-established and recognised narrative—and audience—into which to fit the LRA. This also helps to explain the narrative’s delayed arrival—while the LRA had been poaching elephants since its arrival in Garamba in 2006, it was only in 2013 that reporting on this issue began.

This also allowed advocacy organisations to continue competing for funding in the global market, which had become much more difficult given the reduced security threat of the LRA. Particularly in the US, linking terrorism and wildlife crime ticked all the right boxes, fitting very much into funding and policy priorities. Such organisations—the Enough Project, Invisible Children, and Resolve—had long ridden US government policy priorities, advocating for continued efforts by the US government, particularly on the LRA issue (Fisher 2014: 692).

US administrations were interested in combatting the LRA<sup>22</sup> and providing Uganda—a key regional partner—with security support (Fisher 2013). The LRA ivory–terrorism narrative justified to legislators—who authorised spending—the US security investment. As American government actors summarised:

“the role of the advocacy groups was crucial. They have been raising important awareness in Congress. The political interest was already there in the administration, but the interest of Congress made it easier to implement

the agenda. And it was particularly the Invisible Children movie [Kony 2012] which changed things, which raised a lot of awareness on this issue... Our senior decision makers wanted Kony already, so because of the advocacy groups’ efforts they suddenly had a constituency cheering along.”<sup>23</sup>

Others went further, arguing that “Congress only did what they did because of the advocacy groups.”<sup>24</sup> By linking terror and poaching around the LRA, these organisations tapped into a second US priority—in mid-2013, President Obama had signed an executive order to combat wildlife trafficking, presenting it as a global security threat (Goldenberg 2013b). A close alliance emerged between these lobby groups and administration officials, both personally<sup>25</sup> and in policy implementation (Titeca and Costeur 2015: 109–110).

In summary, the LRA ivory–terrorism narrative served the agendas of both the LRA advocacy organisations and of US policymakers. By singling out, and taking out of context, the role of the LRA in Garamba’s poaching crisis, it allowed advocating for a straightforward solution—military intervention. Yet, as Garamba’s poaching-crisis—and its general poaching-scape—was much more complicated than the LRA alone, intervention did not stop poaching in the region.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, it may have worsened it, since military operations permitted poaching Congolese and Ugandan armed forces. This is explored in the next section.

### **POACHING BY MILITARY ACTORS, DRIVEN BY THE LRA IVORY NARRATIVE**

#### **Congolese soldiers**

The FARDC only had a limited presence before the arrival of the LRA. Yet, its soldiers, having arrived to combat the LRA, constituted a particular threat (Titeca 2013b; Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 41); they were widely involved in bush meat poaching as well as in the illegal trade of guns, ammunition, and ivory. This is typical across the DRC. CITES estimated that the FARDC was responsible for 75% of poaching on nine of the eleven protected areas in the DRC (Kakala 2013).

Importantly, the threat from the FARDC was intensified by the anti-LRA mission. Park staff noted that in 2010–2012, at the height of the operations against the LRA, the FARDC poached at a high rate.<sup>27</sup> This continued, including by high-ranking officers (UNSC 2015: §218). In February 2013, park guards violently intercepted—consistent with policy for all poachers—the FARDC who had killed two hippopotamuses for meat and had used civilians’ assistance with butchering and transport. The soldiers left behind uniforms with clear insignia (UNSC 2014: §230, annex 99). The same soldiers attacked some park guards the following day in retaliation and put out threats on park guards (Titeca 2013a). The FARDC units in garrisons, including at Dungu, are believed to be involved in ivory trade, using their authority to pass roadblocks without checks and therefore pass poached goods between major

trading stations across the north-eastern DRC (Ondoua Ondoua et al. 2017: 43; Vira and Ewing 2014: 37–40).

Since 2015, poaching by the FARDC has reduced. This is partly due to tighter restrictions. The FARDC are currently forbidden from operating in parts of the hunting domains—at the request of park management—due to past poaching. The departure of a particular FARDC commander has also reduced the threat of poaching.

Other state actors remain involved in poaching and trading. Local interviews, for example, show how an intercepted lorry carrying a consignment of hundreds of kilos of ivory was tied to senior police officers stationed to the south of the park.<sup>28</sup>

The threat posed by Congolese state actors is particularly complex because effective enforcement requires the park to work alongside the same actors. The FARDC conducted patrols alongside park guards in the recent past; currently, the FARDC are only used to guard communications equipment on hilltop posts due to a lack of trust in their effectiveness on patrols. Secondment to the park provides salary supplements for those involved, thus also constituting a deal with the FARDC commanders to steer their men away from poaching in return for these additions to their otherwise meagre pay.

### Ugandan security actors

In 2012, at the high point of the fight against the LRA, 22 elephant carcasses were discovered in GNP, many with bullet wounds in the top of their skulls indicating that they were fired upon from above. No tracks were found leading away from the carcasses. However, a variety of elements, such as its registration number and the spotting of an unauthorised Ugandan military helicopter, point at this being a Ugandan helicopter (Gettleman 2012; Titeca 2013c; UNSC 2014: annex 102–104; Vira and Ewing 2014: 44–45; UNSC 2015, annex 72).

Moreover, extensive research by the lead author (Titeca 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e) has shown the involvement of individual Ugandan soldiers in the illegal ivory trade. The mission to hunt down the LRA in GNP and the CAR gave individual Ugandan soldiers access to local suppliers of ivory, which was then smuggled into Uganda. This happened either through military trucks or through civilian contractors supplying the army. Ivory traders based in Uganda argued how the UPDF's presence in Garamba led to a large influx of ivory into the country (Titeca 2018a, 2018e).

In summary, these details show how the (military) actors presented as the solution to the poaching crisis—the Ugandan and Congolese armed forces—were part of the problem; individual Ugandan soldiers were involved in poaching and illegal ivory trade. An even bigger threat were Congolese soldiers, who constituted both a security and poaching threat.

### AFRICAN PARKS NETWORK AND THE 'IVORY-TERRORISM' NARRATIVE

African Parks Network (APN)—the international party managing Garamba, together with ICCN, the conservation

agency of the DRC—has an interesting relationship to this discourse. Based in South Africa, it has managed Garamba since 2005, and runs a network of 15 parks across Africa. APN takes a militarised approach to conservation; they have invested strongly in military-style training, capacities, and tools to protect wildlife in the park against militarised poachers. It might be imagined that it would be to their advantage to adopt and reproduce the 'LRA ivory terrorism' narrative as a means to raise necessary funds. However, interestingly, they have *not* contributed to the spread of this narrative, and never argued that the LRA was the primary poaching threat or that military intervention against the LRA would end poaching in GNP.

Both in their publications and interviews, they did not adhere to the LRA ivory–terrorism narrative, instead emphasising the (accurate) complexity of the broader 'poaching-scape'. For example, their regular updates on the poaching crisis mention the wider landscape of threats, not just the LRA (e.g., African Parks Network 2014), as do their annual reports. If anything, they have emphasised more the threat of South Sudanese poachers. In an interview with the EU, the Park's director emphasises 'broader' issues such as the border, the conflict in South Sudan, and the area's history of attracting armed poachers. Instead of blaming one particular actor, he argued the need for "a better understanding of when these groups are moving" (Barret 2018). Staff are dismissively aware of the consequences of narratives around the LRA. As a Garamba staff member shared: "There is a perception that if you talk about the LRA, people will pay more attention. For example, MONUSCO will send a patrol or a military observer. Whereas if you talk about other groups, this is not the case. But we in Garamba, we don't use it that way. In 2017, we had 50 armed contacts, of which only 1 was from the LRA."<sup>29</sup> The LRA's reputation has even harmed law enforcement efforts. At the high point of the LRA's activities, guards would flee any contact with other poachers, knowing that they could claim they had met the LRA. Their reputation for violence was used by guards to justify poor enforcement, to the frustration of the management.<sup>30</sup>

This illustrates that the 'ivory terrorism' narrative is not for practical conservation actors. It is a discursive tool for other agendas, such as raising funds or justifying interventions (for the advocacy organisations or the US government) or widening readership (for the media outlets reporting on this). The narrative lives in an echo-chamber, which is less concerned with local dynamics.<sup>31</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

Mamdani states the strategies of advocacy movements in the US on Darfur as "a full-blown pornography of violence, an assault of images without context." This would "drive a wedge between your political and moral sense, to numb the former and appeal to the latter." That is, the "central thrust" was "a moral and not a political issue." This rendered Darfur as "a place without history and politics" (Mamdani 2009: 56–57).

The LRA ivory–terrorism narrative can be described in similar terms through the process of de-contextualising, in which ivory poaching is reduced to the LRA and directly linked to terrorism. The LRA ivory–terrorism link becomes a ‘spectacle of nature’ (Igoe 2017), editing processes out and identifying clear villains. Poaching is portrayed as a moral, non-political issue, in which military intervention is portrayed as a logical outcome of this (again) moral, non-political struggle. Yet, in doing so, the wider history and current context are neglected. First, the reports frame poaching in a particular way, over-emphasising the LRA vis-à-vis other actors. Second, these reports neglect how the LRA’s poaching fits into a larger tradition of poaching, which is caused by problems with state capacity and territorial control, and which has historically led to incursions of various armed actors. The situation demands solutions that are more complex than merely defeating the LRA, which will not stop poaching. Third, in suggesting this particular solution, the particular nature of the armed forces was neglected, particularly their relationship with poaching and illegal wildlife trade. As has been shown earlier, the military intervention had particularly negative effects on poaching, with the implications of Ugandan and (particularly) Congolese soldiers active in poaching and ivory trade.

This does not mean that the LRA did not poach. They did. They also committed terrible exactions upon local populations, whilst partly relying on ivory to fund their activities. This is not in dispute. What is contested is a representation that suggests that tackling the LRA would solve Garamba’s poaching problems, and that tackling poaching would remove the LRA’s capacity. Neither is true. The misrepresentation is likely harmful to both animal and human security.

Lastly, it also is important to mention that these frames are not static. While parts of the LRA terrorist frame continue to appear in various media from time to time, the underlying thread is changing.<sup>32</sup> For example, the Enough Project which, as highlighted earlier, played a central role in the establishment of the LRA ivory–terrorist narrative, has largely shifted their narrative. Their latest report on ivory poaching and trade (Cakaj and Lezhnev 2017) no longer focusses on the LRA, but instead on the role of corruption (in South Sudan and Uganda). In doing so, they present a much more complex and nuanced narrative of poaching and ivory trade, as well as moving away from earlier solutions.

## NOTES

- 1 “By framing the militarization of biodiversity protection as the prosecution of a just war, wartime violence, such as the abrogation of basic human rights and extra-judicial executions, becomes normalized and even morally tolerable” (Neumann 2004: 827).
- 2 The organisation later retracted this, changing the claim to be 40% of the fighters’ salaries (Kalron and Crosta 2016: 8).
- 3 i.e., “people who are clearly bad, and thus not part of the ‘we’” (Igoe 2010: 385)

- 4 Interview, high-ranking former LRA-commander, Gulu, October 15, 2018.
- 5 Interview, park management, November 7, 2018.
- 6 US troops were withdrawn in 2017.
- 7 Interview with expert: August 22, 2018.
- 8 Which occurred in CAR on 7 February 2013 (UNSC 2013, Annex 86).
- 9 The report mentions this in two phrases on p.2 and p.11 (Agger and Hutson 2013).
- 10 For more on the complex history and politics of poaching and anti-poaching in Garamba, see Titeca et al. Forthcoming 2019.
- 11 Multiple files, Africa Archives, Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs, Brussels.
- 12 Interviews, two park security managers, 21 and 23 February 2018.
- 13 Interview former poacher, Faradje, 7 March 2018.
- 14 Interview, military training contractor, Nagero, 23 February 2018.
- 15 Multiple interviews with locals, Faradje Territory, February-March 2018.
- 16 Interview, two park security managers, 21 February 2018.
- 17 Interview, two park security managers, 21 February 2018.
- 18 Interview, two park security managers, 23 February 2018.
- 19 Interview, park management, November 7, 2018.
- 20 Donor organisation *in litt.* to K. Titeca, August 2013.
- 21 Its last large-scale attacks were in 2008 and 2009: Between 24 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, the LRA killed at least 815 Congolese civilians and 50 Sudanese civilians (Titeca and Costeur 2015).
- 22 Also tying into the Obama administration’s interest in the prevention of mass atrocities and the focus on regional collaboration to address cross-border threats, and conflict prevention in Africa.
- 23 Interview, American government officials, Kampala, 12 November 2013.
- 24 Interview, US former government official, Washington, 26 November 2013.
- 25 For example, one of the three founders of Resolve—formerly Uganda Conflict Action Network—was for some time the Special Assistant for LRA Issues at the US State Department.
- 26 Importantly, we make no comment here on the impact of these military interventions on the LRA itself, but rather on Garamba’s poaching crisis.
- 27 Interview, park guard officer, Nagero, 21 February 2018.
- 28 Interview, chief, Faradje, 19 March 2018.
- 29 Interview, Garamba National Park staff, Nagero, 21 February 2018.
- 30 Interview. Former park management. 28 February 2019.
- 31 See also White (2014).
- 32 A 2015 report by Enough (Cakaj 2015) acknowledged more explicitly the involvement of other poaching actors and emphasised the small number of tusks which were traded by the LRA; however, the report still primarily focussed on the LRA.

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