

Tuesday, 22 January 2008, 01:18 GMT

Refugee link to wildlife decline By Richard Black

Environment correspondent, BBC News website



Hunters with dogs. Image: Simon Milledge / Traffic

Hunting is widely established in reserves, according to Traffic Conservation groups say they have found an unusual threat to East Africa's wildlife - hunting by hungry refugees.

A report from the wildlife trade monitoring body Traffic says wild meat is covertly traded, cooked and consumed in Tanzanian refugee camps.

Traffic suspects species affected may include chimpanzee, buffalo and zebra.

Tanzania hosts more refugees than any other African nation, a legacy of conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Relief agencies are turning a blind eye to the real cause of poaching and illegal trade

George Jambiya, Traffic

The UN says there are more than half a million refugees in the country, mainly living in camps near the western border.

The border is also home to important wildlife refuges such as Gombe National Park, which achieved international fame as the site of Jane Goodall's pioneering studies of chimp behaviour.

Basic 'failure'

In its 60-page report, Traffic says the refugees are turning to wildlife because agencies supplying food are not providing meat.

"The scale of wild meat consumption in East African refugee camps has helped conceal the failure of the international community to meet basic refugee needs," said the report's principal author Dr George Jambiya.

"Relief agencies are turning a blind eye to the real cause of poaching and illegal trade - a lack of meat protein in refugees' rations."

The great apes: Status check

In pictures

The World Food Programme (WFP), which supplies food to more than 200,000 refugees in Tanzania, said it did not believe there was a big problem.

A survey conducted last year showed little response to a question on whether refugees were obtaining food from hunting, gathering or fishing.

"The refugees are given a balanced diet of cereals, dried beans, vitamin-fortified blended food, vegetable oil fortified with Vitamin A and iodised salt," a WFP spokesman told BBC News.

"To continue to meet the nutritional requirements of the refugees with meat as suggested by the report would require substituting canned meat for the much less expensive beans that we currently provide."

This would almost double the budget for food provision, WFP calculates.

Tale of decline

Traffic admits that the real scale of the hunting problem is not known, but offers a raft of observational evidence and first-person testimony to back its case.

In 1994, when intense ethnic fighting in Rwanda drove an estimated 600,000 refugees into the area of Tanzania surrounding Burigi National Park, wildlife in the park declined sharply.

Refugee with eggs. Image: Simon Milledge / Traffic

Rearing livestock and poultry could provide a good supply of protein

Buffalo numbers fell from about 2,670 to just 44. Roan antelope declined from 466 to 15 and zebra from 6,552 to 606, while the estimated population of 324 Lichtenstein's Hartebeest, a type of antelope, vanished completely.

Similar trends have been found in other parks near camps.

And when camps have closed, numbers have often recovered.

Long-time residents of camps, meanwhile, told researchers that a clandestine network of hunters and processors continues to supply illegally caught wild meat.

Traffic, which is a joint operation of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and WWF, recommends that refugee agencies and the Tanzanian government look for ways to increase the supply of meat protein to the refugees.

Livestock rearing, ranching of wild species, and regulated hunting are all measures that could help provide a sustainable supply of meat in some areas, the agency says.

Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk