

ground up and served in a tea or snorted as a party “drug.” Dearer even than cocaine, it commands upward of twenty-five thousand dollars a pound. The high price of horn and ivory has attracted organized crime and, more deadly still, armed militias. The Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, has reportedly profited from elephant poaching, and so, too, has al-Shabaab, the group behind last year’s shopping-mall attack in Nairobi. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, there is “growing evidence that the terrorist groups stalking Africa” are funding their activities “to a great extent from ivory trafficking.”

All this news recently prompted the White House to announce a near total ban on the sale of ivory in the U.S. The proposed rules have prompted grumbling, including, predictably enough, from the N.R.A., which is worried about the resale value of guns with ivory components. But such rules are a critical step. The White House has also pledged ten million dollars to train police and park rangers in Africa, a pledge that was matched by the Chinese premier, Li Keqiang. The British have committed an additional seventeen million dollars to anti-poaching efforts, and, in January, Congress, in a rare show of caring, appropriated forty-five million dollars to be used by the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development to combat poaching and trafficking. A couple of weeks ago, lawmakers in Albany also voted to ban nearly all sales in New York of items containing ivory and rhino horn, a move that should make wildlife crime easier to prosecute at a state level.

But, as Satao’s slaying indicates, these pledges haven’t yet translated into change on the ground. Right around the time Kenyan authorities announced Satao’s death, the director of the Garamba National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, reported that sixty-eight elephants had been killed there in the previous two months. “The park is under attack from all fronts,” the director, Jean-Marc Froment, said. Photographs show elephants with their faces hacked off and their rotted brains emerging from the wounds.

Meanwhile, as disturbing as the recent carnage is, the long-term view is, if anything, worse. Elephants and rhinos are among the last survivors of a once rich bestiary of giants. Australia was home to thirteen-foot-long marsupials. North America had mammoths and mastodons, South America glyptodonts and enormous sloths, Madagascar massive elephant birds and giant lemurs. Before people arrived on the scene, these megafauna were protected by their size; afterward their size became a liability. The giant beasts couldn’t reproduce fast enough to make up for the losses to human hunting, and so, one after another, they vanished. In this sense, what’s happening today in Africa is just the final act of a long-running tragedy.

Mike Chase, an American conservation biologist, is currently conducting an aerial census of Africa’s elephants. He started work on the project in February, when, he told the Huffington Post, he hoped to “leave people inspired and motivated with some good news.” But the opposite has happened. At a reserve in Ethiopia, where his team had expected to find three hundred elephants, they counted just thirty-six. Now, Chase said, “I feel as though the only good I’m doing is recording the extinction of one of the most magnificent animals that ever walked the earth.” ♦