



Killing of Pilot Highlights Tanzania's Struggle With Poachers



An elephant in Mikumi National Park in Tanzania. Tanzania's elephant population has been decimated by poaching, to just 43,000 now from 109,000 in 2011.

DANIEL HAYDUK / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

By **WILLY LOWRY** and **JEFFREY GETTLEMAN**

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ARUSHA, Tanzania — Roger Gower, an experienced British helicopter pilot, was flying low over a wildlife reserve near the Serengeti National Park in [Tanzania](#) on

Friday, searching for signs of poaching, when he spotted an elephant carcass. He circled back for a closer look.

Then gunshots rang out from below. Apparently he had happened on the carcass just after the elephant had been killed, and the poachers were still on the scene.

A bullet punctured the underside of the helicopter and sliced through Mr. Gower's leg and shoulder. He managed to crash-land the helicopter, but died of his injuries soon afterward.

"It's tragic, what happened, but this is the reality of what's going on," said Frank Pope, the chief operations officer for [Save the Elephants](#), a prominent wildlife organization in neighboring Kenya. "You've got desperate people who are armed and committing a crime. When you're doing antipoaching operations, you're on the sharp end."

Dozens of wildlife rangers [have been killed in recent years](#) across Africa, as elephant poaching has reached a frenzied pitch. Tens of thousands of elephants have been slaughtered for their ivory by the poachers, who have grown increasingly militarized and more ruthless.

Tanzanian officials said on Monday that they were closing in on the poachers who shot at Mr. Gower's helicopter, and that they had already arrested several accomplices, including two who the authorities said had helped hide the poachers.

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According to Pratik Patel of the [Friedkin Conservation Fund](#), a nonprofit wildlife charity that employed Mr. Gower as a pilot, the suspects in the shooting are

Tanzanian and have poached in the area before. “We know their names,” Mr. Patel said.

[Tanzania](#)’s elephant population has declined drastically because of poaching, to just 43,000 in 2014 from 109,000 in 2009.

The country’s National and Transnational Serious Crimes Investigation Unit has arrested several high-profile suspects recently, including Yang Feng Glan, a Chinese woman who Tanzanian officials say is “the ivory queen,” responsible for exporting thousands of tons of ivory to China. She is awaiting trial in Dar es Salaam, the country’s largest city.

Both poachers and wildlife rangers across Africa have turned to military-style tactics. In October, poachers [killed three rangers and a military officer](#) who were conducting an antipoaching operation in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Wayne Lotter, the director of the PAMS Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports antipoaching efforts in Tanzania, said that elephant poaching there decreased in 2015 but that it remained a serious problem.

“The more you go after them,” Mr. Lotter said, “the more situations where confrontation between poachers and rangers will take place. There are going to be risks.”

Mr. Gower, originally from Birmingham, England, had spent much of the last decade working in East Africa, often flying antipoaching patrols, a mission his friends said he believed in deeply.

“Very reliable, very safe pilot,” said Tom Lithgow, who knew him from a previous wildlife job. “He was a special character, he had a great sense of humor, he loved cricket and he loved his family.”

Willy Lowry reported from Arusha, and Jeffrey Gettleman from Nairobi, Kenya.

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