



in the tradition of The Cove and Virunga, Netflix's latest real-life ecological thriller showcases a shocking threat to the future of the African Elephant.

Eric Kohn

Sep 2, 2016 9:00 pm

🐦 @erickohn



"The Ivory Game"

The numbers don't tell the story, but they're alarming enough to set it in motion: 150,000 elephants have been killed for ivory in five years; today, one elephant is killed every 15 minutes. At this rate, the African Elephant will go extinct in 15 years. These figures provide a statistical foundation to "[The Ivory Game](#)," a globe-spanning investigative look at a species under serious duress. However, the movie's real suspense emerges out of the astonishing footage — from the heated battleground of Southern Africa, where elephants face constant threat from poachers, to the black market in China where the goods wind up, "The Ivory Game" reveals the full scope of a human-driven push toward mass extinction. A real-life ecological thriller in the mold of "The Cove" and "Virunga," directors Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani's engaging overview makes up for its occasionally scattershot approach with first-rate suspense.

If James Bond turned his attention to animal rights issues, he might find himself in the middle of this hidden war. (It could also provide good material for Leonardo DiCaprio, who executive produced.) The film follows countless activists and officers engaged in a clandestine and often dangerous battle with an underground economy. From the wilds of Kenya, where the filmmakers visit scene after scene of mutilated elephant corpses, the movie tracks the problem to backroom dealings in China, where a single kilogram can sell for \$3,000 on the black market.

See More [The 2016 IndieWire Telluride Bible: Every Review, Interview and News Item Posted During the Festival](#)

Using concealed cameras — sometimes, though, not concealed enough — the filmmakers capture numerous shady conversations between traders and undercover agents. These tense scenes are matched by similar showdowns in Africa, where officers routinely find poachers in the immediate aftermath of their malicious hunts. The resulting collage of personalities turns "Ivory" into a global war movie in which



...the film also provides a more sobering view of the geopolitical conditions that continue to keep the ivory business in flux. "One person has the destiny of an entire species in his hands," says one activist, placing the blame solely in the lap of China's president — and the film's revealing footage makes it easy to see why. Despite official regulations limiting the amount of ivory allowed into the country, many traders gleefully flaunt their illegal wares, with few locals willing to speak up. One exception: the determined Hongxiang Chang, a young man driven to upend assumptions about his country's ambivalence even as he acknowledges the possibility of being deemed a traitor.



"The Ivory Game"

Meanwhile, "The Ivory Game" traces the ivory trade back to its grisly source: the gun-wielding poachers roaming through African parks and slaughtering hordes of elephants without any semblance of restraint. While these offenders remain largely off-camera, the film acknowledges some of the broader systematic issues allowing the killing to persevere: In villages where roaming elephants inadvertently destroy farmland, locals welcome hunters the way one might greet an exterminator, prompting activists to intervene with mixed results. Flying high above the African planes, they come across scene after scene of dismembered animals — shriveled under the sun, their corpses become tragic signposts of environmental indifference.

The filmmakers fuse these disparate settings together with sweeping aerial footage, murky nighttime encounters and hidden camera footage alike, providing an immersive collage into every level of interaction that contributes to this international crisis. This approach sometimes leads to an episodic quality that impedes the prospects of getting too invested in any single narrative. However, as an essayistic breakdown of a widely misunderstood threat, it excels at capturing nearly every angle of the equation.

"The Ivory Game" may be a harsh wakeup call to anyone concerned about the future of the largest land mammal, but it's also a keen evaluation of the efforts being made to correct the situation. Even as it captures a dire situation, Davidson and Ladkani single out a series of engaged personalities risking everything to bring illegal traders to justice — and in some cases, making actual progress. By transforming its urgent message into the sensationalistic language of pulse-pounding blockbuster — replete with dramatic music cues and frantic editing sequences — "The Ivory Game" risks overstating its message, but at the same time it makes the underlying didacticism more palatable. The you-are-there approach to tackling this subject mea

