

## Government Ivory stock piles secure, says KWS Director

By Gatu Mbaria

**T**he Kenya wildlife Service has fully secured Kenya's ivory stock piles contrary to claims that they were stolen and sold by unscrupulous members of staff, said the Kenya Wildlife Director.

In an exclusive interview with *animal welfare*, Julius Kipng'etich, the Director, allayed fears that something could have happened to the ivory stockpile. "The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) has stocked 65 tons of ivory in a very secure manner. There is no way the government stock piles can be stolen."

At the same time, Kipng'etich said that though elephant and rhino populations in Kenya are facing significant threats from poachers, they are relatively secure when compared with the populations in other African countries. "As far as poaching in Africa is concerned, we are the least hit country. We cannot be compared with South Africa which proposed a one-off sale of ivory during the 2007 CITES' meeting but has ended up with a massive poaching crisis on its hands." He said South Africa lost 448 rhinos last year and that the rhinos killed in the continent have been the "collateral damage" occasioned by the decision to sell ivory.

To Kipng'etich, KWS has diligently studied poachers' *modus operandi* and has now sealed off all the loopholes. "For us in Kenya, 2011 was the pick of poaching activities. But we have now understood the criminal gangs involved and how they operate. We know that the first layer of poachers is made of local people who do the actual killing upon being contracted by Somali dealers who occupy the second layer. In the third layer are the Chinese exporters." He says KWS has also been able to map out the exit routes and that initially, poachers used Jomo Kenyatta International



Dr Julius Kipng'etich inspecting elephant tusks

Airport in Nairobi. "But when we sealed it, they resulted to the Mombasa Port. Now they have run away to other countries. Indeed, 99 percent of all the seized ivory emanated from outside Kenya. Only 278 elephants were killed last year.

He attributed the relatively few incidences of poaching in Kenya to what he termed "effective policing of parks by KWS." He said that it was unfortunate that some of the rangers have paid the ultimate price.

"We have indeed secured our rhinos from poachers' guns. We protect them tightly by deploying a ranger for each two rhinos." However, he says the challenge has been in securing rhinos in private ranches but that KWS has been training ranch scouts as well as community rangers to enable them protect rhinos more effectively.

To fight wildlife crimes, Dr Kipng'etich said that he has strengthened KWS's ability to mobilize science for the purpose. "In



Marked elephant tusks

the coming weeks, we will be involved in a groundbreaking ceremony for the first molecular and DNA laboratory in East and Central Africa. Our aim is to be able to prove to courts what animals poachers might have killed." He says that this has gone hand-in-hand with raising KWS' scientific staff from 36 to over 100.

Dr Kipng'etich disputed claims that elephant and rhino numbers in Kenya have been on a decline. "When I came in, we had 28,000 elephant but today, we have 38,000 meaning that in 8 years, the population has risen by 10,000." He added that he found 700 rhinos when he became director, but that now they are 1,006.

He told *animal welfare* that as a result of upsurge in elephant numbers, the animals are now re-colonizing some of their old range. "For instance, two elephants were cited in Modogashe area in Garissa, 30 years after the last elephant was seen there."

According to Dr Kipng'etich, what remains to be done is to change the law so that it can create a more coherent wildlife industry and impose stiffer penalties on poachers. "Penalties for wildlife crimes are so low. Indeed the relevant Act treats wildlife crimes as misdemeanors yet the resource is one of the key drivers of the Kenya's economy as it contributes about 25 percent of Kenya's GDP." He opined that those committing a crime against the country's wildlife should be regarded as economic saboteurs.

Dr Kipng'etich also told off critics who have complained that KWS has over-emphasized on marketing at the expense of its core mandate. He says that he found an institution whose accounts were on the red and that his first task was to seal off all the loopholes through which KWS was being fleeced by its staff and those it had entered into agreements with. "As a result of the measures we put in place, we have raised

KWS's budget from Ksh1.1 billion to Ksh7 billion which has enabled us to operate more smoothly." He terms this "fixing KWS' economic engine which has enabled him to fix the conservation issues. "In any case, everything done at the wildlife body has a financial implication... and I did not want KWS to be relying on donor cash...I had to generate it from within."

On his legacy, Dr Kipng'etich says he would like to be remembered as the man who formalized operations within KWS and set it on a path to success and continuity. "From the very word go, I did not want KWS staff to wonder what to do when I leave the institution neither do I want to come back here. I have put efficient systems in place including park operations' manual." Further, he says KWS has documented everything and that it was now fully computerized. "Indeed, we are the only public institution whose board operations are paperless.