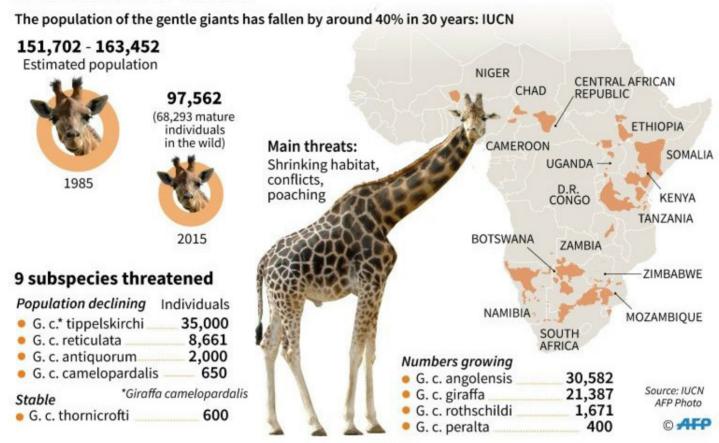
Soon there will be no Giraffes

Gentle giraffes threatened with 'silent extinction'

In 2010, giraffes were a species of "least concern" on the IUCN red list. But six years later they leapt to "vulnerable", one step down from critical, catching many by surprise



Yahoo/AFP | Loisaba, Kenya

or most of his life as a ton Lengoloni thought giraffes and okapis. nothing of hunting giraffes, the he roamed.

"There was no particular a lion... (But) a single giraffe could feed the village for more than a week," the community fell 60 pc in the roughly three elder said, leaning on a walking decades to 2018, the IUCN says. stick and gazing out to the broad plateau of Laikipia.

across Africa, populations of the world's tallest mammals are quietly, vet sharply, in decline.

Giraffe numbers across the witnessed an 85 pc decrease. continent fell 40 per cent beservation of Nature (IUCN).

have created a false impression that the species was doing well," said Julian Fennessy, co-chair of Samburu warrior, Lesai- the IUCN's specialist group for

The rate of decline is much squarely on the global consergraceful giants so common a fea- higher in central and eastern reture of the Kenyan plains where gions, with poaching, habitat destruction and conflict the main drivers blamed for thinning pride in killing a giraffe, not like herds of these gentle creatures.

In Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, reticulated giraffe numbers

The Nubian giraffe meanwhile has suffered a tragic de-But fewer amble across his cline of 97 pc, pushing this rarer path these days: in Kenya, as variety toward total extinction. Further afield in Central Africa, the Kordofan giraffe, another of the multitude subspecies, has

In 2010, giraffes were a spetween 1985 and 2015, to just un- cies of "least concern" on the der 100,000 animals, according IUCN red list. But six years later to the best figures available to they leapt to "vulnerable", one the International Union for Con- step down from critical, catching many by surprise.

But unlike the clarion calls "This is why for the giraffe sounded over the catastrophic we speak of the threat of a sicollapse of elephant, lion and lent extinction," said Jenna Starhino populations, less attention cy-Dawes, was paid to the giraffe's private research crisis. coordi-"The giraffe is a big animal, nator at and you can see it pretty easily the San

vation Research.

Mysterious giants

Despite this, an international effort underway to put giraffes vation agenda has divided professional opinion. Six African nations are push-



Compared to other charismatic species like elephants, lions and rhinos, we know very little about giraffes. Nowadays, we are still far behind, but we are making progress

SYMON MASIAINE

A COORDINATOR IN THE TWIGA WALINZI **GIRAFFE STUDY AND PROTECTION** PROGRAM, WHICH BEGAN IN KENYA IN 2016.

in parks and reserves. This may Diego Zoo Institute for Conser- ing to regulate the international there is little evidence the intrade in giraffes under the UN ternational wildlife trade is re-Convention on Trade in Endan- sponsible for dwindling giraffe gered Species (CITES), which numbers. A lack of reliable data rently does, and permits would meets from August 17 to 28 in

Geneva. Those advocating for the change, including Kenya, want the giraffe classified as "a species that, although not necessarily currently threate n e d with extinction, could become so if trade in their specimens were not closely controlled".

Critics

howev-

er say

forts to protect

them. rhinos, we know very little about giraffes," Twiga Walinzi giraffe raffe numbers. study and protection program, which began in Kenya in 2016. still far behind, but we tions," he said. are making progress."

Somalia, South Sudan late. and eastern parts of information is herbivores.

perilously dif-

conflict zones has been patchy. Arthur Muneza, from the Giraffe Preservation Foundation, said the first long-term study of giraffes was not carried out until 2004. Data on giraffes is often gathered as an afterthought by researchers focussing on other wildlife, he added.

"Without reliable data, it is more difficult to take appropriate conservation measures," Muneza said.

It was not until 2018 that the IUCN had enough statistics to be able to differentiate the threat levels facing many giraffe subspecies.

The reticulated and Masai giraffes, for examples, were classified as "endangered" while the Nubian and Kordofan were "critically endangered".

Trophy hunting

Under the proposal before CITES, the legal trade in giraffe parts, including those obtained by trophy hunters on Africa's legal game reserves, would be globally regulated.

Member countries would be required to record the export of giraffe parts or artefacts, something only the United States curhas long hindered ef- be required for their trade.

But observers say the limited information available suggests "Compared most of this trade originates to other charis- from places where giraffe nummatic species like bers are actually rebounding, elephants, lions and like South Africa and Namibia, where game hunting is legal.

Muneza says there isn't a clear said Symon Masiaine, enough picture that the legal a coordinator in the trade is linked to declining gi-

"The first step should be to conduct a study to find out the extent of international trade and "Nowadays, we are its influence on giraffe popula-

Those supporting the propos-Almost nothing is al before Geneva talk of a "prereliably known about cautionary principle" -- doing giraffe populations in something now before it is too

For Masiaine, the Kenyan gi-Democratic Repub- raffe researcher, any publicilic of Congo, where ty is good publicity for these collecting such poorly-understood long-necked

"It means that people are talk-

ficult. ing about the giraffe," he said. But even "And the species really needs research that." outside