

Species die out at a rapid rate

Elephants

THE future of Africa's rich biodiversity depends on its mighty elephant.

Scientists consider the animal a keystone species because of its ability to influence forest composition and density.

In forests, elephants create clearings and gaps in the canopy that encourage tree regeneration. On the savannas, they reduce bush cover to create the habitat that supports the grazing animals of the African plains.

It's estimated that at least a third of tree species in west African forests rely on elephants for the distribution of their future generations.

The survival of the African elephant is paramount - and in doubt.



Once wandering the continent in its millions, the elephant is now identified as one of 35 endangered priority species by the World Wildlife Fund.

By the mid-1980s elephant populations had been devastated by land clearing and poachers who

target the elephants for their large and valuable ivory tusks.

"It's been a cross between habitat loss and poaching," WWF's Lydia Gaskell says.

In the 10 years preceding an international ban on the ivory trade in 1990, the African elephant population was more than halved from 1.3 million to some 600,000.

But because of its high profile, there is a huge conservation effort to save the elephant.

"There have been some very successful projects in Africa, so much so there are even problems that there are so many animals now within national parks that we have had to relocate them," Gaskell says.

"That said, they're still threatened and they're still endangered, and that's still largely due to habitat loss and poaching."

