African elephants belong to the family *Elephantidae*, and one of the two existing species of this family. The other member is the Asian Elephant, also known as the Indian elephant. African elephants have been classified into two subgroups - savanna elephant/bush elephant and forest elephant. They are bigger than Asian elephants and savanna elephants are larger in size, when compared to forest elephants. African elephants, which are the largest mammals on land, are now in the list of endangered species. Loss of habitat and poaching are said to be the reasons for the dwindling number of these animals in the wild. The population of these gigantic animals have reduced drastically from a whopping 1.3 million in the 1970s to somewhere between 470,000 and 690,000 in 2007.

**Physical Features and Habitat**

African elephants are distinguished from their counterparts by their large ears and bigger size. They are less hairy and have a concave back. Both males and females possess tusks, whereas only males have tusks in Asian elephants. These elephants have two fingers at the end of their trunk, but Asian elephants have only one. (Trunk is elongation of upper lip and nose, with the nostrils at the tip). African elephants are not domesticated like Asian elephants.

Males have a shoulder height of up to 3.64 meters and the females can grow to a height of 3 meters. The body length ranges between 6 to 7.5 meters in males, whereas in females, it would be 5.4 to 6.9 meters. While males can attain a weight of up to 5,455 kilograms (sometimes 6,800 kg), females can weigh between 3,636 kg to 4,545 kilograms. Most of these animals have brownish-gray skin color. The tusks (two incisor teeth of upper jaw) of African elephants weigh between 22 to 45 kilograms and can have a maximum length of 2.5 meters. The bush/savanna elephants have 4 toenails on front feet and 3 on hind feet, whereas the forest elephant have 5 on front feet and 4 on hind feet. Compared to savanna elephants, forest elephants are smaller, and have straighter and thinner tusks bending downwards. They have narrow jawbones and their ears are more rounded in shape.

Savanna elephants are found in open grasslands, marshes and lake shores in the savanna zone located towards south of Sahara, whereas forest elephants live in deep rain forests of central and western Africa. Sometimes, they come out of their respective habitats by mistake and this results in interbreeding.

**Food and Behavior**

Elephants are herbivores. They feed on grass, fruits, bark and roots. An adult African elephant can consume up to 140 kilograms of food in a single day. They sleep for a very short time, so that they can cover more area in search of food.

Females move around in herds. Each herd consists of around ten members with their young ones and is supervised by the matriarchal head (the oldest and largest female). The male members, on reaching puberty around 13th year, leave their herd and roam by themselves. Normally, they mate during rainy season. The females generally breed by the age of 10 and can give birth to a calf every four years, after a gestation period of 22 months. The newborn weighs around 100 kilograms and usually have a height of around 90 centimeters. An average African elephant can live around 60 years in the wild.

They communicate through moans, rumbles, growls and of course, trumpets. It is said that they also produce a variety of low-frequency sounds, which can travel beyond a distance of one mile. These messages are received by the other members, through the skin on their feet and trunk. The ears of these animals help them in radiating heat to keep them cool. If the heat is unbearable, they tend to suck water through their trunk and shower it all over the body. A coat of mud is sprayed on the body for extra effect.

**Current Status**

African elephants are endangered species, according to the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora has enlisted this animal on Appendix I, except for the populations in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia, which were reclassified to Appendix II.

These animals, once lived throughout Africa, are now in the endangered species list due to profuse hunting by humans for ivory. Deforestation and human encroachment led to the loss of their habitat. Another reason is drought, which resulted in the deaths of young ones. However, the main reason is poaching, which led to the flourishing of ivory trade across the globe. In 1989, an ivory ban was implemented and with strict anti-poaching measures, there was a little improvement in the situation. Some countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia experienced difficulties like agricultural loss, with the rising number of these animals. Hence, these countries were down listed from Appendix I to Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora, which facilitated managed trade of elephant parts.

Despite the strict anti-poaching measures and restrictions on ivory trade, hunting of these animals still continues. They have also lost a major part of their habitat and are now found mostly in protected forest areas. Let us hope for some improvement in the revival of the African elephants.