

Tough choice for elephant lovers

The ban on trading ivory was supposed to stop elephant poaching, but it hasn't worked. **Daniel Stiles** has another way

IS IT possible to save the elephant and still have an active trade in ivory? This question has troubled scientists and conservationists for decades, and the debate is as hot as ever. Five years ago southern African countries were allowed to sell 50 tonnes of stockpiled ivory to Japan to fund conservation efforts, and in October they may get the green light for another controlled sale – unless their opponents get their way.

But the conservationists are asking the wrong question. The real issue is whether conservation is possible without trade, and I am convinced the answer is no.

If that seems perverse, consider the past 14 years. Since 1990, it has been illegal under the CITES agreement (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) to trade African ivory internationally. The ban was imposed after two decades during which about half the world's elephants were killed to provide ivory, primarily for tourist trinkets and east Asian name seals. In some places, such as Botswana, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, the ban worked and elephant populations grew. In other countries it failed and poaching persists.

The ban is clearly not working everywhere because, regardless of the law, there will always be a certain level of demand for worked ivory. With a trade ban in place, this demand is met entirely through poaching, smuggling and deception. In short, the current system encourages the killing of elephants for their tusks.

Over the past five years I have been working with my colleague Esmond Martin, a specialist in wildlife trade based in Nairobi, on a survey of the major ivory markets of Africa, Asia and Europe. I have also studied the activities of ivory craftsmen. These show that in some countries the CITES trade ban had little effect on the ivory market, and

that in others, after an initial crash, it began to grow again in the mid-1990s. We also found that, contrary to what opponents of trade have claimed, the one-off sale of ivory by southern African countries to Japan in 1999 – agreed under CITES – appeared neither to stimulate ivory markets nor to lead to an increase in elephant poaching.

By contrast, a regulated trade could offer economic and social benefits to poor Africans who supply the ivory. People who live with elephants need to derive benefits from them to compensate for the destruction the animals can inflict. With a trade ban in place, these people have no incentive to preserve elephant populations, and the illegal killing will continue.

This view is bound to inflame opponents of trade, who fear that any reopening of legal ivory commerce will send the wrong signal to the public, stimulating demand for ivory and leading to another elephant holocaust. But the reason for elephant massacres of the 1970s and 1980s was that both supply and demand were uncontrolled.

The key, then, is to limit global demand for elephant ivory to levels that can be sustained by a legal supply provided by natural elephant deaths and culled rogue animals. If this legal supply can satisfy buyer demand, there will be little incentive for poachers. Why would anyone risk buying illegal ivory if a comparable quality could be bought legally at the same price?

So can demand be limited? Our studies found that the great majority of worked ivory on the market was in the form of tourist curios, jewellery and name seals, usually manufactured en masse with electric tools. For these types of items, the use of ivory should be prohibited, especially since suitable substitutes exist, such as mammoth ivory, jade and bone. If the only elephant ivory products allowed



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to be manufactured and sold were high-quality sculptures made by expert craftsmen, demand for raw ivory would drop substantially.

I found most ivory artisans to be elephant conservationists; this should be no surprise, their future relies on the animals. But we need to persuade the artisans not to make tourist rubbish. With the mechanised manufacture banned, all ivory, legal or illegal, has to pass through a craftsman's hands. With their cooperation, and proper monitoring in their workshops, ivory demand could be maintained at a level that would throttle poaching, yet maintain the trade.

But how can we ensure that all ivory coming to market is legal? One way would be to give the governments of the states where African elephants live the monopoly for auctioning off their raw ivory. With the artisans on board,



the only way for illegal ivory to enter the stream would be through corrupt government officials. To control this, CITES should permit sales only from governments that ensure such corruption does not occur. In addition, all raw ivory should be marked and registered. There are several ways of testing for ivory origins, such as X-ray fluorescence. If raw ivory were inspected at source before auctions, and again in the ivory workshops, there would be little chance of illegal ivory getting through the net.

If these conditions cannot be met, then a trade ban is still preferable to a trade with uncontrolled demand. But we could do a lot better, both for the elephants and for the people who live among them. ●

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"It was during preparations for an inspection that the pipe burst. It had not been inspected in its 28 years of operation"