

Africa: The Ivory Trade Need Not Endanger the Elephant

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OPINION

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The "to be or not to be" question of selling ivory has been the subject of a heated debate for 20 years now. Kenya has been leading the charge in the debate with its resounding "Not to be" answer.

Kenya banned the domestic use and sale of ivory and other wildlife products in 1978, and it was instrumental in promoting the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) ban on international ivory sales voted in 1989.

Everyone remembers the huge bonfire of elephant tusks in the Nairobi National Park, drawing international attention to the issue.

More recently, Kenya, along with Mali, sponsored the resolution at the last Cites conference in 2007 that resulted in a 9-year moratorium on international ivory sales, which will follow after the ivory auctions that will take place soon in four southern African countries.

No consensus has been reached on the wisdom or otherwise of banning international ivory trade. The pro-ban and anti-ban supporters continue to bicker, with a lot of misinformation put out to the public in newspaper articles and editorials. I would like to present what I think is a reasonable answer to the question. Finding the right answer is crucial for elephant survival.

CITES HAS APPROVED TWO "ONE-off" sales since the international ban came into effect in 1990. The first took place in 1999 when Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe sold about 50 tonnes of national stocks to dealers from Japan.

The pro-ban side had argued vigorously that the sale would stimulate ivory demand and result in a new wave of elephant poaching. With the second sale of 108 tonnes of ivory to Japan and China by the same three countries as in 1999, plus South Africa, the pro-banners are making similar warnings. I was asked in 1999 by Esmond Martin, a wildlife trade expert living in Kenya, to join him in trying to find out which side was right.

Since 1999 Martin and I, with support from Save the Elephants, Care for the Wild and other organisations, have carried out ivory market investigations, mostly undercover, in more than 30 key ivory countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the US.

Using a set of quantitative indicators to measure the present ivory markets and comparing what we found with what existed in the past, we assessed country-by-country what the trends were.

We found that in every instance, except perhaps one (Nigeria), ivory-related activity and local markets were smaller than in 1990. The Cites ban seemed to have worked in reducing ivory use. This was the good news. The bad news was that several countries were showing signs of increasing ivory use since about 1995. Was this due to the 1999 sales?

OUR DATA SHOWED THAT increased ivory activity was limited to only certain countries in Asia and Africa. Western Europe, the US and Japan, the three strongest economic blocs in the world, had static or declining ivory use.

After interviewing dozens of ivory craftsmen, dealers and retail vendors around the world, we concluded that the 1999 sales were irrelevant to the increase. The increase was due more to stronger economies and more money in Asia, coupled with increasing poverty and corruption in many elephant range states. Ivory demand was growing, particularly in China and among Chinese living in other countries.

This trend has been continuing into the new millennium. Making and selling ivory is legal in China and some other Asian countries, as it is in the European Union, the US, Japan, most parts of Africa and elsewhere.

BECAUSE OF ASIA, OVERALL Ivory demand is rising. With legal ivory stocks cut off from international supply to legal domestic markets by Cites, where is new ivory supposed to come from? Under current circumstances, Cites forces elephant poaching.

The upcoming sale of 108 tonnes will probably not change the situation much, though if China manages to out-bid Japan for much of the ivory there might be a slight, temporary decrease in ivory smuggling from Africa to China.

The real cause of increased elephant poaching, which does seem to be a reality, is being obscured by the debate over international ivory sales authorised by Cites. The real cause is legal domestic ivory markets existing while legal raw ivory sales to supply those markets are prohibited.

This situation results in poaching to find supplies to satisfy demand. Accepting this conclusion reveals three possible solutions to the problem of poaching for ivory: legalise international supply, ban domestic ivory markets, or greatly reduce ivory demand.

The first solution has been tried. In the 1980s, Cites allowed ivory export quotas from Africa, but these were ineffective and massive abuses occurred as an elephant holocaust raged. I believe it is time to try the second solution, at least temporarily.

THERE IS ENOUGH IVORY originating from natural deaths and the elimination of rogue elephants to supply current global demand. However, there is too much corruption built into the supply system by the 18-year Cites ban for legal trading to recommence on a regular basis.

The only way I see of rooting out the corruption is to shut down the entire system for a specified period. Shut down all domestic use and selling of ivory. In the interim, governments and conservationists should launch a dedicated campaign to reduce consumers' desire to buy ivory, aimed primarily at Asia.

THIS SOUNDS LIKE AN unrealistic goal that could lead to more corruption as the whole ivory industry goes underground, but the industry has a weak link, in terms of control: the ivory carvers. Experience has shown me that with time and resources, the workshops can always be tracked down.

The owners are not hardened criminals like drug dealers. They have alternative raw materials to carve. The authorities can concentrate on them. A raw tusk is worth little without a craftsman to create something from it.

Eventually I think it would be beneficial for both human society and elephant conservation to have a well-regulated, legal ivory trade that provided no economic incentive for elephant poaching. But as Saint Augustine said in reference to the desirability of chastity, not just yet.