



In July 2008 the final decision was made by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), through its Standing Committee, to allow the sale of 108 tonnes of elephant tusks held in national stockpiles from Botswana (43.7 tonnes), Namibia (9.2 tonnes), South Africa (51.1 tonnes) and Zimbabwe (3.8 tonnes). In July, CITES also authorized China to bid on the ivory in auction. Japan had earlier been approved as a buyer of the ivory.

The ivory was auctioned in late October-early November and brought in a total of USD 15.4 million to be used in wildlife conservation and rural development. Twelve Chinese and 22 Japanese ivory traders bid on the ivory. The Chinese bought 62.3 tonnes at an average price of USD144/kg and the Japanese bought 39.4 tonnes at an average price of USD166/kg. In total, 101.8 tonnes were sold at an average price of USD152/kg, less than 20 % of the current price in those countries for 10 kg tusks, which was the average weight. About six tonnes, surprisingly, were not sold, suggesting that demand is not as strong as some thought.

Animal welfare groups and some conservationists raised howls of protest over the approval of China to bid on the southern African ivory. Newspapers and websites from India to the USA – including many in East Africa – asserted that allowing the sales, especially to China, would result in a new wave of elephant killing. Some were even predicting that many elephant populations could be extinct by 2020 as a result of the sales.

Were people right to be critical of CITES for allowing China to bid on the ivory?

Maybe. CITES-approved buyers are supposed to satisfy two main criteria. First, the country must

NO PROOF CITES-BACKED IVORY SALES KILLS MORE ELEPHANTS

Ivory sellers had to demonstrate to CITES that they practised sound wildlife conservation policies and actions, that their elephant populations were well protected, that the ivory in the stockpile came from natural mortality and problem elephant control.

demonstrate that their internal ivory market is under control and that methods are in place to prevent illegal ivory from entering the market. Second, the country must guarantee that none of the African ivory would be re-exported. In spite of the fact that China has improved regulation of its ivory market, I doubt that the country can, or will, satisfy either criterion, but one never knows.

My doubt is based on the fact that I carried out ivory trade investigations of China in 2002-2003 (*Swara* 26:3&4). I obtained a letter from the Chinese CITES Management Authority dated June 24, 2003 addressed to CITES. The letter stated in part that between 1991 and 2002 the national stockpile had lost 110 tonnes of ivory and that it had probably been illegally sold. The letter also admitted that various outlets, including luxury hotels and government owned Friendship Stores, had for years been dealing in illicit ivory. (I counted over 9,000 ivory items in 117 such outlets in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.) The letter went on to disclose that they had been trying since 1997 to prevent ivory smuggling and illicit trade, but that the problem 'remains unsolved'.

In other ivory investigations I carried out between 1999 and 2008, most of them in collaboration with Esmond Martin, Chinese recently manufactured ivory items – and thus illegal to export – turned up almost everywhere in large numbers. Many websites on the internet sell worked

ivory from China that is smuggled by post all over the world on a daily basis. Factories in China still churn out thousands of ivory items a year that are sold in Chinese shops and illegally exported. China continues to be the most important country globally as a destination for illicit ivory, according to the 2007 Elephant Trade Information System report. The decision by CITES to approve China as a buyer was, basically, a reward to ivory dealers for cooperating with new ivory regulation procedures. If all dealers operate legally, it could have a profoundly positive effect on reducing elephant poaching. The catch is that cooperation is predicated on continuing supplies of legal raw ivory, and the 2007 CITES conference decided not to allow that until, at the earliest, 2017.

The decision to allow Zimbabwe to sell its ivory is also in question. Ivory sellers had to demonstrate to CITES that they practised sound wildlife conservation policies and actions, that their elephant populations were well protected, that the ivory in the stockpile came from natural mortality and problem elephant control, and ensure that the auction proceeds would go towards elephant conservation and rural development activities. However, the media have been flooded with reports of elephant slaughter in recent years in Zimbabwe, much of it by government personnel. There are several tourist eye-witness reports of it. One newspaper article in Zimbabwe decried that

poaching for game meat was out of hand, due to food shortages. Elephant and buffalo were the most affected, it said. Johnny Rodrigues, chairperson of the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force, has recorded the deaths of thousands of elephants in recent years, killed for meat and ivory.

If the poaching wasn't bad enough, in April 2008 a Zimbabwean newspaper claimed that 8 tonnes of ivory were bartered by Mugabe's government as part payment for ammunition, grenades and mortars from China. The Australian government knew that airspace it controlled was being used by Air Zimbabwe to fly illegal ivory and gold to China, but international law prevented them from diverting the flights. These illegal ivory shipments might explain why Zimbabwe had only 3.8 tonnes to sell legally in the CITES-approved auction. *The Herald* newspaper in Zimbabwe reported in March 2007 that the Zimbabwe National Parks stated they were holding 12 tonnes of ivory. You do the maths. Both Zimbabwe and China were in contravention of CITES if this reported ivory deal is true. (I have heard that TRAFFIC, the international wildlife trade monitoring organisation, does not believe the report is true.)

Regardless of who is selling and buying, why would these ivory sales provoke a new elephant holocaust? The ivory trade opponents claim that CITES-approved sales send the

wrong signal to consumers that it is now all right to buy ivory, which then raises ivory demand. The new demand results in increased elephant poaching to find adequate supply. The critics also maintain that when legal international sales are allowed, dealers can claim that illicit ivory is the legal ivory, thus 'laundering' it.

I do not agree with either argument. In fact, I think that the furore over the international sales has diverted attention from the real issue – how do we bring to an end the killing of elephants for ivory? Stopping international sales is obviously not the answer. With the two exceptions in 1999 and 2008, sales have been illegal since 1990 and we appear to have increasing levels of elephant poaching in recent years, if press reports can be believed. Unfortunately, hard data are lacking.

A certain proportion of consumers around the world want to buy ivory. That proportion is arguably higher amongst eastern Asians, where ivory is a prestigious and auspicious material and where ivory carving skill has expressed itself for centuries at the highest level. There is also an engrained cultural practice of utilizing wild animal and plant products in the East. Demand has been rising in eastern Asia in general, mainly amongst Chinese, as economic prosperity has been increasing, permitting more consumers to buy ivory.

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It is legal, with some restrictions, to buy ivory in most countries. The ivory studies by Martin and I found that demand was well below pre-1990 levels in the USA, Europe and Japan, and the trend was pretty static. Before about 1985 these three economic blocks imported and manufactured the majority of the world's ivory.

Most of the growth since the mid-1990s has been in parts of Asia and Africa. With rising demand in parts of the East and modest but steady demand in the West and elsewhere, where was the new ivory going to come from? With CITES cutting off legal supply, the only recourse was poaching and smuggling.

It is highly counter-productive to have legal domestic markets for a commodity with legal supply banned. It forces illegal supply, which in the case of ivory has tragic consequences in the form of elephant killing and the toll it takes on game rangers trying to protect elephants. Thousands of elephants are poached annually while tusks from natural mortality and problem elephant control pile up in government storerooms.

I would be delighted to see all consumers stop buying ivory tomorrow. But it won't happen, any more than people will stop smoking, drinking alcohol or taking illegal drugs. When demand exists, the market will find a way to supply, if there is money to be made. The USA found this out in the case of alcohol during Prohibition in the 1920s. Organised crime was strengthened, people continued drinking and the US government lost millions of dollars in tax revenue.

In ivory market investigations that Esmond Martin and I carried out between 1999 and 2008 we asked hundreds of ivory industry workers about the impact of the 1999 ivory sales from southern Africa. None reported that they had any effect on ivory demand or sales. For those who had scant knowledge of the details, they were hoping that the sales indicated a relaxing of the CITES ivory trade ban, but this belief did not cause them to run out and poach an elephant.

The Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), managed by TRAFFIC, conducted a detailed analysis of ivory seizure data between 1989 and 2007 and concluded that ETIS data did not support the hypothesis that CITES discussions and decisions concerning ivory produced 'signals' which lead to increased illicit ivory trade.



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In 2004 I published a detailed analysis of ivory trade and elephant poaching data. The poaching data were quite poor, but I could find no good evidence that the 1999 ivory sales increased demand or poaching. A paper in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* in 2007 by Erwin Bulte and others looking at elephant poaching data supported what I found. They even concluded that one-off sales of the CITES type might be beneficial to elephant conservation.

The 50 tonnes of ivory sold in 1999 went to one country, Japan. Japan has a strict system of ivory registration that is monitored by the government, which makes laundering very difficult. Illicit ivory smuggled anywhere else could not be laundered by the 1999 sales because no legal ivory was allowed to be sent anywhere but Japan. Depending on the procedures that are put in place in China, it might be possible for dealers to mix illegal ivory with legal ivory they bought in the 2008 sales, but the impact on elephant poaching would be nil as the illegal ivory will be sold even in the absence of the legal sales.

The fact is, there is no solid evidence to support claims that the CITES-approved sales have caused or will cause a new elephant holocaust. If anything, the 102 tonnes of ivory going to Japan and China should lower pressure for elephant poaching temporarily by providing legal supply. The real cause of increasing elephant poaching is the steady rise in ivory demand

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since the mid 1990s, coupled with the ban on international ivory supply. This has caused the price of raw ivory to skyrocket in Asia, further motivating poachers and dealers.

It is possible that the CITES-approved sales could raise demand for ivory somewhat by removing the stigma associated with the ban. To prevent this from happening, and to lower demand from current levels, I would strongly recommend that animal welfare and conservation organisations mount PR campaigns in Asia and elsewhere that publicize the fact that buying new ivory contributes to elephant killing. Create stigma, and a lot of it. I think a luxury tax should be put on ivory as well to discourage buyers. Governments also must do more to control their internal ivory markets.

The most recent IUCN African Elephant Status Report (2007) indicates that there are between 472,269 and 689,671 elephants left in Africa. Let's round it off conservatively to 500,000. With a 4% average annual mortality rate, including problem elephant control, that means that about 20,000 elephants die a year (not counting poached ones). If we assume that the average weight of the tusks recovered from each elephant is 7 kg, quite a conservative estimate, 140,000 kg (140 tonnes) of legal ivory is available each year. Let's say that 15% of this ivory cannot be recovered for one reason or another. That leaves almost 120 tonnes every year of legal ivory to

supply global demand. I would say that this amount exceeds what is processed annually in the world's ivory workshops and it vastly exceeds what is sold in new worked form every year.

There is no reason for elephants to be poached for ivory to supply international trade! The reason poaching occurs is because there is a ban on legal sales. Much of the illegal elephant killing for ivory could be shut down in quick order if Africa reliably supplied the world's ivory factories with reasonably priced ivory. Perhaps an annual auction supervised by CITES could take place, with marking of the tusks to lower the chances of laundering with illicit tusks, or even taking DNA samples for future verification in buying countries.

A problem would remain where elephants are poached for meat and the illegal tusks enter the local market, which occurs mainly in Central Africa, but a different approach to that proposed here would have to be devised to control it.

Ivory trade opponents have put too much emphasis on stopping international ivory trade and have perhaps lost sight of the real objective, that of stopping the killing of elephants for ivory. The best way of achieving that is to allow well regulated domestic ivory markets while lowering demand by consumers, and legally supplying the workshops. African countries would benefit economically and elephant conservation would be served. ●

— Daniel Stiles