

Burning ivory stockpiles

What message does this send?

BY DAN STILES

On July 20, 2011, the Lusaka Agreement Task Force (LATF) burned a purported 335 tusks and 41,553 signature seal blanks, weighing 4,967 kg. The total was said to be worth over \$16 million. The Kenya Wildlife Service had been storing the ivory on behalf of the LATF since March 2004 after it had been sent to Kenya from Singapore. The ivory was part of a stated 6.5-tonne seizure made in Singapore in 2002. DNA analysis indicated that the ivory originated from elephants that had roamed mainly in Zambia, but also in Malawi and Tanzania, which was consistent with the export origin of Lilongwe, Malawi.

The 335 tusks and about 2.5 tonnes of seal blanks (assuming a conservative average weight of 60g per seal) represent the deaths of over 300 elephants. The remaining stated 2.1 tonnes of ivory are being repatriated to Zambia and Malawi, supposedly for prosecutions and 'scientific and educational' purposes¹.

As I stared at the pile of burning ivory, all I could think of was the fact that poachers had already had to kill an additional 300-plus elephants to replace the ivory going up in flames. The unnecessary slaughter made me

feel sick: the burning of the ivory had achieved precisely what it was aimed to prevent – the killing of elephants for ivory. I have looked at web sites, blogs, letters to editors and Facebook pages, and most commentators strongly believe that burning large quantities of ivory serves to deter elephant poaching by 'sending a message'. **But what, exactly, is this message?**

I have been investigating the ivory business since 1999 and since early 2010 I have been working in Central Africa studying the many causes behind elephant poaching. In the 1970s and 1980s, I studied hunter-gatherers, some of whom were famous elephant hunting peoples. I've seen, upfront and personal, everything to do with ivory on four continents – the elephant killers, the traders, the ivory craftsmen, the retail sellers and the ivory buyers. So when I see a big pile of burning ivory, I wonder what it might mean to each of these categories of people. Will it make them feel guilty? Will they quit their evil ways? Will it help save the lives of elephants?

Most of the people who hunt elephants will not have heard about the ivory burn. They are out in the bush and in the rainforests of Africa trying

to survive. Even if they did hear of it, they would just scratch their heads in puzzlement and set off on the next hunt. What about the trader? He is already alarmed at all the media attention the ivory business has been receiving and at the very costly ivory seizures that have been made over the past few years. He has had to jack up his prices as a consequence, which has attracted a lot of new dealers into the business, because if a shipment gets through, you're rich. It's like gambling. Ivory traders are, at heart, gamblers. Seeing a pile of burning tusks just stimulates them to find more ivory before it's all gone. That is the message: kill more elephants and stockpile, as the price will only keep climbing.

Some ivory craftsmen, especially in Asia, are more sympathetic towards elephants. Even if they do get the intended message of an ivory pyre, they feel they have little option but to keep on working. What else can they do? Carving wood or bone earns much less and they have families to feed.

The consumer can get the message. They should be targeted by all who are serious about stopping elephant poaching. If consumers did not buy worked ivory, workshops would not

¹There are problems with numbers and weights given by LATF, which are too numerous to discuss here.



PHOTO BY: PAOLO TORCHIO

have anyone to sell to, traders could not sell to workshops and hunters could not sell their tusks to traders. The industry would grind to a halt. I hope the ivory burn influenced some potential consumers not to buy ivory.

But buying worked ivory is legal in most countries. So consumers who are not aware of what the cost is to elephants, or who do not care, will happily buy ivory. That is the real problem. There are many people, particularly in the Far East where ivory is a culturally revered commodity, who buy ivory legally. And as more people advance economically, more are buying ivory every day.

Ivory traders and factory owners are making good money. They have to find supply to meet demand. A pile of burning ivory? A waste, they think, what silly people. If they sold it to me, I wouldn't have to buy illegal ivory. They won't sell it to me, so I'll buy from the poachers. I won't stop buying because business is too good.

The point I am trying to make is that as long as domestic ivory markets are legal, it is irresponsible

and harmful to elephants to cut off legal supply. It causes elephant poaching to provide that supply. Both supply and demand must be legal or illegal; the two should not be split. Doing so has been disastrous for elephants, and burning more seized ivory while domestic markets are legal is condemning more elephants to poachers' bullets. Economics is a bit like Mother Nature - cruel and subject to immutable laws.

Which brings me to my last point. The valuations of ivory reported by anti-trade proponents and in the media are exaggerated and only serve to distort the real situation and possibly attract more unscrupulous people to the ivory business. The Chinese smuggler in Lilongwe who sold the ivory to Japanese traders probably made about \$2.5 million, not \$16 million. The value of the raw ivory at the local level in Africa would be a little over \$300,000 (including carving waste in making the seals).

The article by Esmond Martin, Lucy Vigne and me in this issue of SWARA goes into more detail on the important

issue of ivory prices. I know those who support destroying ivory want to show their disgust at the harm caused to elephants by this trade, but we have to use our heads as well as our hearts. Former Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi said it best at the first ivory burning on July 18, 1989:

“To stop the poacher, the trader must be also be stopped and to stop the trader, the final buyer must be convinced not to buy ivory ... I appeal to people all over the world to stop buying ivory.”●

DAN STILES first came to Kenya in 1971 to assist on the Koobi Fora paleoanthropology project at Lake Turkana. He taught at the University of Nairobi from 1977-1981 then worked for UNEP and other UN agencies for several years. He has researched extensively in Africa and Asia on forest and drylands natural resource utilisation. Since 1999, he has been carrying out ivory trade studies and currently is co-ordinating an IUCN elephant meat and ivory study in Central Africa.

Brazil wins massive land concession in Mozambique

Brazil's agribusiness may have just won the lottery. The government of Mozambique has offered a 50-year concession for Brazilian farmers to grow soy, maize and cotton in the northern part of the impoverished African nation, according to *Folha de Sao Paulo* (August 14).

"Mozambique is a Mato Grosso in the middle of Africa with free land, without environmental impediments, and with much cheaper freight to China," said Carlos Ernesto Augustin, president of the Mato Grosso Cotton Producers' Association. Brazil's

Mato Grosso is almost as large as Venezuela and is the country's biggest producer of cash crops.

How will this affect the Niassa Game Reserve?

The reserve covers over 42,000 km² and is the largest protected area in the country, twice the size of the united Tsavo National Parks in Kenya. The reserve is part of the Trans-Frontier Conservation Area and links to the Tanzanian Selous Game Reserve, allowing elephants and other wildlife to migrate. The land allocated to Brazil is in the same two provinces as Niassa. ●

Niassa

GAME RESERVE

400

Bird species

12,000

Sable antelope

350

Wild dog

Plus a large elephant population, and large numbers of Cape buffalo, impala, wildebeest, zebra and leopards. The area has three endemic species - the Niassa wildebeest, Boehm's zebra, and Johnston's impala.

Increased climatic variability seen in East Africa's future



A recent study of sediments in Lake Chala, in southern Kenya, warns of increasing climatic problems for East Africa ('Reduced Interannual Rainfall Variability In East Africa During The Last Ice Age', *Science*, August 5). Residents have already noticed that the weather has

been acting crazy over the past few years and it looks like things will get worse. Analysing lake varves laid down over the past 22,000 years and correlating them with past sea temperatures and reconstructed wind speeds and rainfall, the researchers from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA found that interannual rainfall variations in East Africa are tightly linked to the El Niño Southern Oscillation, with more rain and flooding during El Niño years and droughts in La Niña years. Both these trends have severe impacts on human habitation and food security.

Under warmer climates, both mean rainfall and interannual rainfall variability are greater. A future increase in the variability of rainfall in equatorial eastern Africa, which is projected by the model the researchers constructed, will bring further environmental stress to the region. Will East Africa be able to adapt to the mounting adverse effects of global climate change? ●

Ancient DNA reveals secrets of human history

We sometimes forget that *Homo sapiens* is just another species in Mother Nature's great web, hence wildlife lovers should be interested in how we evolved to become the supreme competitor (and predator) on earth. Ancient human genomics is moving at breakneck speed. Barely a year after the publication of the genomes of Neanderthals and of an extinct human population from Siberia named Denisovans (after Denisova, where they were found), scientists are racing to apply this new knowledge in order to answer questions about human evolution and history, questions that would have been impenetrable just a few years ago (story reported by Ewen Callaway in *Nature*, August 9). →

The past months have seen a number of discoveries, from details about when Neanderthals and humans interbred to information about the important disease-fighting genes that humans now have as a result of those encounters. Scientists have fleshed out the details of one of the biggest surprises from the Neanderthal genome: humans living outside Africa owe up to 4% of their DNA to Neanderthals. One explanation might be that humans migrating out of Africa mated with Neanderthals, probably resident in the Middle East, before their offspring fanned out across Europe and Asia. The date of that interbreeding has now been pinned down to 65,000 – 90,000 years ago. The dates mesh with archaeological finds, bookending early human migrations out of Africa to between about 50,000 and 100,000 years ago. One research team is now developing tools to find signs of more recent interbreeding that might have occurred after humans arrived in Asia and Europe.

The denizens of Denisova, dated to 30,000 - 50,000 years ago,



also bred with contemporary humans, but the only traces of their DNA to be found in modern humans are in residents of Melanesia, thousands of miles away, suggesting that the Denisovans had once lived across Asia. In 2008, a team set up a lab in Beijing to screen fossils that might contain Denisovan DNA, in the hope of learning more about them and their interactions with modern humans.

A study presented at a Royal Society symposium in London in June suggests that humans owe important disease-

fighting genes to Neanderthals and Denisovans. Interbreeding endowed humans with a 'hybrid vigour' that helped them colonize the world. A group of diverse immune genes – the human leukocyte antigen (HLA) – is found in Neanderthals, Denisovans and human groups from around the world. They are abundant in modern humans in parts of Europe and Asia, but less common in Africans. Varying degrees of interbreeding could explain the mismatch. Europeans owe 50% of variants of one class of HLA gene to interbreeding, Asians 70 – 80%, and Papua New Guineans up to 95%. Since Neanderthals and Denisovans did not live in Africa, it makes sense that genes inherited from the northerners are not commonly found in Africa.

Researchers also discovered that Neanderthals, like humans, lacked a stretch of DNA that orchestrates the growth of spines on the penises of other primates, which should be of interest to many naturalists. ●

Dan Stiles

Poachers should be treated like drug dealers – CITES official

The Chairman of a key CITES body has called for stiffer penalties for poachers, saying they should be treated in a similar way to drug dealers. Oeystein Stoerkersen, who chairs the Standing Committee at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), told a news conference that ivory was fetching as much as cocaine, which explained a recent surge in poaching. "If you are caught with a kilo of cocaine you will probably be sentenced for

a few years," Stoerkersen said. "But if you are caught with a kilo of rhino horn you are likely to get away with it."

Almost half of the 175 countries that are party to the Convention do not have legislation, or have inadequate legislation to penalise poachers, he said. "In my opinion we need to step up the penal code and the punishment for poaching needs to be much harsher," Stoerkersen said. CITES Secretary-General John Scanlon said a good example of fair

punishment was the recent eight-to 10-year jail sentences handed down to two poachers in South Africa, home to the world's biggest rhino population.

"The South African public was supportive for these penalties," he said. According to CITES, 239 rhinos have been poached in South Africa up to the middle of 2011. ●

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