

The 'Inconvenient Truth' about the ivory trade

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by Daniel Stiles

Earlier this month, The Ecologist published an impassioned opinion piece by Mary Rice, executive director of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), asserting that the fault for the alarming rise in elephant poaching lies with two experimental but legal CITES-approved sales of stockpiled ivory. These sales, she argued, had served only to trigger new levels of demand. Here, Daniel Stiles - who has been researching the ivory trade since 1999 - strongly disagrees, warning that conservationists urgently need to find an effective response to the crisis because for these elephants, time is running out.

Elephant poaching is reaching crisis levels with many elephant sub-populations in Africa and Asia now facing extirpation - primarily as a result of poaching for ivory. The argument of Ms Rice, and other like-minded NGOs such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Born Free and Save the Elephants, is that increased elephant poaching is largely a result of renewed demand caused by two 'one-off' ivory auctions from selected southern African countries to Japan in 1999 and to Japan and China in 2008, authorized by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

They contend these auctions spurred consumers to buy ivory by making them believe it was now legal to do so, triggering more elephant poaching and all the associated corruption. These groups also seem to think that these two experimental sales of relatively small amounts of raw ivory to two countries somehow represent what a regulated, legal raw ivory sales system would constitute over the long term.

Both these beliefs are seriously flawed and have led to a common perception amongst both the media and the public that instigating a legal, regulated regime of selling raw ivory - from vetted seller countries to vetted buyers - would only worsen the current elephant poaching situation. In my opinion, this simply is not true.

We all agree on one thing: demand for worked ivory, mainly in China, is driving the elephant poaching. But we disagree strongly on how best to stop the poaching.

In her Ecologist article, Ms Rice reiterated what all the opponents to international raw ivory trade regulation propose as the only way to stop poaching. CITES parties should be '... investing in intelligence-led enforcement, multi-agency operations, securing convictions and raising penalties – including the seizure of assets and proceeds of wildlife crime – and communicating and cooperating internationally'.

In other words, law enforcement cutting off supply is the answer.

Unfortunately, law enforcement is not the answer, though certain types of law enforcement can help. I believe that law enforcement under current circumstances is actually exacerbating the poaching. Seizing illegal ivory shipments constricts supply and makes elephant poaching even more profitable by raising raw ivory prices. It also forces ivory smugglers to instigate a 'maximum quota' of elephant poaching to make up for lost shipments and future supply uncertainties.

Unless the laws of supply and demand are recognized as the primary problem, and economic and psychological remedies applied, elephants stand no chance of surviving.

I have been investigating wild resources trade since the 1970s, specializing in ivory since 1999. I have spent considerable time with ivory hunters, traders, craftsmen and vendors in the key ivory supply and consuming nations, including the Central and West Africa regions, China, Thailand, Vietnam and the USA. Informants when asked all replied that the CITES-authorized ivory sales had had no impact on demand for ivory. This has been reported in many publications and the conclusions substantiated by TRAFFIC reports and independent resource economists' studies. So why do the ivory trade opponents persist in ignoring this information?

The 1999 and 2008 ivory auctions are irrelevant to rising demand for worked ivory in China and among Chinese people in other countries. If these raw ivory sales stimulated demand, why is the worked ivory demand rise only seen in the richer parts of China and in other countries where Chinese people work on infrastructure projects or have set up businesses?

Recent research carried out by Dr Esmond Martin, a noted wildlife trade expert, and myself in Japan, South East Asia, Europe and the USA has found no rise in worked ivory demand in these markets in recent years. In fact, demand has fallen in many places. Dr Martin even found that ivory demand was moribund in poorer parts of southern China. Why didn't the sales spur demand in those places?

One of the trade aspects that should be understood is that the CITES ban only concerns ivory that is traded internationally between countries party to CITES. It is permitted by national laws to manufacture ivory items and trade legal ivory within most countries, including the biggest ivory consuming countries in the European Union, the USA, Japan, China, Thailand and others.

With the CITES ban in place, we have the economically irrational situation of permitting ivory working and selling in most high-consumption countries, while prohibiting supplies of legal raw ivory to feed that consumption. This situation promotes illegal elephant killing to obtain supply to satisfy demand.

It is widely recognized by everyone, even the anti-ivory trade NGOs and individuals, that rising demand for worked ivory in China is the result of a combination of a deep-rooted cultural veneration for ivory and economic development. Millions more Chinese now have the money to buy ivory. It is legal for them to buy the ivory that they see in shops. Few Chinese consumers, until very recently, were even aware of CITES, an ivory trade ban, or even of where the ivory came from, as NGO studies have attested. Since the mid 1990s, ivory demand in China has steadily been growing in tandem with greater prosperity.

There really is no reason or basis in fact to invoke the two CITES ivory sales as causing the rise in demand and poaching, unless there is another agenda for doing so, such as an entrenched opposition to a stable, legal, regulated trade system of raw ivory. By linking the experimental sales to increased poaching, ivory trade opponents can then state that a regular legal trade system would also increase elephant killing. (They fail to point out that the ban on international trade in worked ivory – which is what consumers buy – would remain in place).

I am greatly concerned, along with others, by the spike in elephant killing in parts of Africa by organized gangs of poachers that has occurred in recent years. Seizures of illegal ivory shipments and reports of elephant massacres have reached unprecedented heights. Ivory trade opponents have blamed these horrifying developments largely on the two CITES ivory sales. As Ms Rice stated in *The Ecologist*, '...CITES's ivory trading system ... is deeply flawed, prone to manipulation and, we contend, has been a significant factor behind the catastrophic rise in elephant poaching during the past decade'.

I contend that this widely held view not only is incorrect, it is significantly harmful to elephants. I agree that the two experimental ivory sales were a bad idea and they should never have been held, but not because they

stimulated ivory demand.

The two sales were approved by CITES parties – including the EU block and USA – in votes at CITES conferences, largely in response to intense and effective lobbying by certain southern African countries that have large and growing elephant populations. The follow-up studies and monitoring that have been implemented to assess the impacts of legal sales have been overshadowed by the confusion and misunderstanding created by the sales themselves and propaganda disseminated by trade opponents.

The two ivory sales inherently did not harm elephants by raising demand, but they seriously impacted the elephant poaching situation by creating first hope, then uncertainty, with ivory traders and manufacturers. The CITES Secretariat and TRAFFIC worked hard to gain the cooperation of those in the ivory industry in China and Japan to cease buying illegal ivory with the possibility that a steady supply of legal ivory would become available if they established ivory control systems to eliminate illegal ivory from trade. Both countries did this and passed CITES inspections.

So what happened? It's a bit complicated, but bear with me, I'll try and simplify it.

Since 1990, it has been illegal to export or import non-antique commercial ivory in CITES parties countries. Prior to 1990, key ivory traders in places such as Hong Kong, China and Japan stockpiled large quantities of raw ivory in anticipation of the CITES ban. Concomitantly, due to negative NGO and media publicity aimed at ivory buying, demand dropped precipitously in the West and Japan, at that time big ivory consumers. Raw ivory prices dropped and elephant poaching in many places decreased. The ban was declared a great success.

When Esmond Martin and I carried out our first ivory market survey in Africa in 1999, aimed at assessing effects of the 1989 ban and 1999 sales, we found that all ivory markets where data were available were smaller than in 1989, except for a slight apparent rise in Nigeria. We also noted, however, that, '... in parts of Central and West Africa there appears to have been a slow revival since the mid-1990s.' In 2001 we surveyed South East Asia and found, in part, 'Unfortunately, it appears that demand for ivory has remained steady or increased in some places in Asia since the mid-1990s, stimulating elephant poaching.'

We attributed this growth in ivory market activity from the mid 1990s to a combination of rising demand in eastern Asia with economic development depleting ivory stockpiles and the organization of illegal raw ivory supply networks in Africa. The large difference in raw ivory prices in eastern Asia,

at least five times that in Africa, further stimulated the poaching of African elephants. This trend has continued over the past decade-plus.

Thus, we now have well-established illegal operators of elephant poaching and ivory smuggling in Africa in reaction to the CITES ivory trade ban. When legal trade opponents criticize the corruption and crime involved in ivory trading today, they should realize that this was all created under a ban regime, not a legal trade system. The two 'one-off' sales can hardly be blamed for the illegal activities - they were already in place by 1999 and are even more pronounced now.

The first action that broke down the budding agreement between CITES and Chinese and Japanese ivory traders was a decision made at the CITES 14th Conference of the Parties (CoP) in 2007. In exchange for withdrawing opposition to authorization for four southern African countries to sell raw ivory to Japan and China in 2008, trade opponents obtained an agreement that no future sales could be made by those countries before 2016. The final nail in the coffin of cooperation was pounded at CoP 15 in 2010 when Tanzania and Zambia submitted proposals to sell their ivory stocks. The proposals were defeated (rightfully so, in my opinion).

Ivory traders now believed that no legal raw ivory would come onto the market until 2017 at the earliest. Trader agreement with CITES to buy only legal ivory was now null and void and they returned to the poachers and smugglers. Orders no doubt went out that any and all ivory would be bought, causing the spike in elephant poaching. I worked for IUCN in Central Africa in 2010-2011 on causes of elephant poaching, and local ivory carvers complained that almost no ivory could be found. It was all being exported to eastern Asia.

The inconvenient truth is that the CITES ivory trade ban and the 2007 and 2010 CITES CoP votes to cut off legal raw ivory supplies are the real causes of the recent elephant holocaust, not the red herring 1999 and 2008 ivory sales authorized by CITES.

The crux of the problem is demand for ivory. Fighting supply through law enforcement is basically futile, though it could slow elephant killing down marginally by arresting a few of those who order the kills and buy the tusks from poachers. Seizing illegal shipments only makes things worse. The only viable *solution* is to try to regain the trust of eastern Asian traders for them to stop buying the poached tusks and buy only legal ivory, authorized by a regular CITES trade system. Please, no more 'one-off' sales!

Even more important, public awareness campaigns should be started in Asia to drive ivory demand down by creating a huge stigma associated

with owning ivory, as was done in the West at the time of the 1989 CITES ivory trade ban. WildAid and others have been doing this, but much more needs to be done to break down a centuries old tradition of venerating carved elephant teeth. It worked in Japan, why not China?

Remember, when the buying stops, the killing stops.

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http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/1690689/the_inconvenient_truth_about_the_ivory_trade.html