

Aunt Mildred's teeth, CITES and the Ivory trade

BY DAN STILES

A moratorium would give the Africans “a big chance to find a joint solution to elephant management and to improve enforcement”, said ... the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Reopening trade “will be a disaster for the elephants”.’¹

A moratorium was imposed in 2007 and is still in force. There is even more of a disaster now for elephants than at the time CITES voted it. What happened?

Much has been reported recently in the news media about the appalling state of elephant poaching, which has reached the high levels seen before the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) ivory trade ban was voted in 1989. Illegal trade in ivory to satisfy high demand in China and current high prices for tusks have correctly been singled out as the main – though not only – causes of the jumbo killing. Most commentators and the general public believe that the current CITES ban on international trade in ivory must be maintained. They believe, incorrectly, that lifting the ban would stimulate ivory demand even more, leading to increased poaching.

These questionable beliefs are due to a lack of understanding about ivory trade dynamics and what kind of ivory is

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being considered for trade under CITES. There is *raw* ivory, which consists of tusks and cut up pieces of tusks. Traders and ivory factories deal in this type of ivory. Then there is *worked* ivory, which consists of everything from earrings to huge figurines. Consumers buy this type of ivory.

The characteristics of demand by traders are different than those by consumers. The former plans ahead to ensure supply of *raw* ivory, given their assessment of the future conditions of availability. Consumers buy *worked* ivory that is on hand at the moment in retail outlets. It is my belief that the recent surge in elephant poaching has been caused by increased trader demand for *raw* ivory, not primarily by an increase in consumer demand for *worked* ivory.

This increase in trader demand is a result of two main factors: (1) the decision by CITES in 2007 to block additional raw ivory sales from previously approved southern African countries until at least 2017 and (2) the decision by CITES to not allow sales from Zambia and Tanzania, proposed at the last CITES conference in 2010.

Ivory traders believed, no doubt correctly, that no new legal raw ivory

would come on the market until 2018 at the earliest. They therefore had no alternative but to purchase illegal ivory if they were to stay in business. They are now amassing as much ivory as they can for the future. It is this that has spurred the current elephant holocaust.

Those who are primarily zoologists and supporters of the animal welfare philosophy of wildlife non-utilisation have misrepresented to the public the real cause of increased poaching. Most of the ivory trade opponents have experience studying elephants, or at least of being associated with elephants, over long periods of time. They see many as individuals with distinct personalities and accord them names. They follow and know the personal histories of each and in some sense elephants become part of the extended family. Familiarity with one sub-population extends this feeling to all elephants. Psychologically and emotionally, discussing ivory trade is a bit like discussing whether to sell Aunt Mildred's teeth after she passes away. It is immoral to envisage it.

The anti-trade lobby is well established now, due in great part to having organized opposition to the two ill-conceived 'one-off' ivory auctions

¹ Quoted from an article in South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* newspaper entitled 'Conference deadlocked on ivory trade', 13 June 2007, in reference to CITES negotiations at the 14th Conference of the Parties of whether to create a moratorium on 'one-off' international ivory sales. A nine-year moratorium was imposed.

from southern Africa authorized by CITES that took place in 1999 and 2008, and the continued lobbying against any future sales. Positions have been staked out, arguments expounded, and the reputations of many elephant specialists and wildlife NGOs have been irrevocably tied to the anti-trade position. Considerable sums of money have been raised by them from the public and spent on P.R. advocating continuation of the international ivory trade ban. Their strongest argument has been the assertion that the two sales stimulated ivory demand, resulting in the current high level of elephant poaching. The logical conclusion, if this were true, would be that opening up legal raw ivory trading would increase demand and poaching even more.

Trade opponents have been very effective in rallying the uninformed public – and many journalists – to their cause. As a consequence, the general public equates a legal, regulated trade as the gateway to an elephant holocaust. It would be problematic to implement any system of regulated trade without public consensus on the need and their general support. But with the dearth of objective, factual information available to the public, a change in attitude will be impossible.

According to the anti-trade lobby's logic, the maintenance of the ban by CITES since 2008 should have lowered consumer demand and poaching, but it did not. In fact, elephant killing has skyrocketed since then. Why? The only rational explanation is a free-for-all for illegal raw ivory in the absence of any hope for legal ivory. The 'tragedy of the commons' in action.

Most ivory consumers in eastern Asia, where publicity associated with the sales is much less than in the West, were unaware of the two CITES sales and, therefore, were not stimulated by them to buy ivory. Consumers do not buy raw ivory.

Ivory in eastern Asia is a culturally revered material with a long history of use. Economic development has put ivory within the purchasing power of millions of new consumers. That alone explains rising ivory demand mainly of Chinese over the past few years; the CITES sales are irrelevant to rising demand.



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

'Wouldn't it be preferable that this carving be crafted from an elephant that died a natural death than from one that was poached?'

Many people seem unaware of the fact that it is lawful to sell legal ivory domestically in North America, the European Union, Japan, China and most other countries. CITES does not control this domestic trade. Regulating international raw ivory trade will only change supplies to craftsmen from illegal to legal ivory. It changes nothing regarding newly crafted ivory sold to consumers, which will still be illegal to export or import under CITES regulations.

The solution to elephant poaching involves three components: (1)

supplying humane legal raw ivory to traders obtained from natural mortality and problem elephant control to replace poached ivory, (2) mounting sustained campaigns in Asia to drive down consumer demand for worked ivory by attaching social stigma to owning it, and (3) imposing a 'conservation tax' on worked ivory to drive down demand through high prices.

I would rather sell Aunt Mildred's teeth after she had passed peacefully from old age than to have someone murder her for them before her time. ●

The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author and do not reflect the policy or advocacy of the East African Wild Life Society