Ending Ivory Trade to Save Elephants:
The Importance of Closing Domestic Ivory Markets

Behind the elephant slaughter is the demand for ivory trinkets, which is justified worldwide by countries' legal domestic markets for elephant ivory products. Legal domestic ivory markets provide major cover for selling illegal elephant ivory and undercut effective enforcement. Strong leadership globally will be instrumental in closing down these problematic legal ivory markets and removing regulatory loopholes that support the illicit ivory trade. All nations, particularly those with large ivory markets, should implement permanent and comprehensive bans on commercial ivory trade with immediate effect.

Poaching Crisis

More than 30,000 African elephants are being slaughtered each year for their ivory. Between 2010 and 2012, an estimated 100,000 elephants were killed to fuel the demand for their ivory. Central Africa's endangered forest elephant population was reduced by 65 percent between 2002 and 2013. Urgent action is needed to end the devastating ivory trade now, before some elephant populations become extinct. Poaching also has a human impact – rangers are losing their lives to protect wildlife from poachers and rural families and communities are facing the repercussions.

Background

In response to an out-of-control poaching crisis, the 1989 ban on international ivory trade via the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) eliminated the international ivory market and the price of ivory plummeted. Because demand and the price of ivory dropped, the illegal killing of elephants declined, allowing many devastated elephant populations to stabilize and rebound. However, the once weakened incentive to poach elephant ivory was reignited by two CITES-approved legal international sales which undermined the international trade ban. The ivory "one-off" sales to Japan in 1999 and then to Japan and China in 2008 stimulated the market demand, confused consumers by sending the message that legal international ivory trade had been permitted by CITES, and provided an ideal environment to launder illicit ivory from Africa through poorly regulated legal ivory carving industries and markets. China's domestic market is a leading threat to African elephants. Legal domestic ivory trade worldwide continues to facilitate and motivate the illicit ivory trade and poaching of elephants.



Problems with Legal Ivory Trade

Ivory trade is incompatible with the conservation of elephants. Legal ivory trade contradicts the conservation of elephants in two major ways: it drives demand for ivory and inhibits enforcement efforts to stop trafficking.

Demand: It is recognized that demand for ivory is driving the poaching crisis. Legal domestic trade in ivory confuses consumers and stimulates demand by promoting the idea of ivory as a valuable commodity. Demand reduction efforts are essential to stop the poaching of elephants, but these efforts are largely futile alongside legal domestic markets.

The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime has noted that: “The trade in illicit ivory is only lucrative because there is a parallel licit supply, and ivory can be sold and used openly. Ivory would lose much of its marketability if buying it were unequivocally an illegal act, or if ownership of these status goods had to be concealed.”[1] In comparison, government imposed bans on ivory attach a social stigma to ivory consumption and support demand reduction efforts. Elephant poaching will continue as long as ivory is a legal commodity, driving demand.

Enforcement: Evidence indicates that both domestic and international trade in elephant ivory provide an avenue to launder poached ivory, letting illegal ivory slip into the legal market via regulatory loopholes. These parallel trades undermine enforcements efforts to crack down on illegal ivory trade. Organized criminal syndicates abuse legal loopholes and take advantage of pervasive corruption. Rigorous enforcement is needed to crack down on ivory trafficking, and effective enforcement is enabled by clear and comprehensive policies whereby ivory visible on the market is illegal. The elimination of grey areas is critical.

Action & Hope

Fortunately for elephants, key governments are acting to close down their ivory markets. The United States in particular has demonstrated real leadership in its progress to restrict domestic commercial ivory sales, and some states have implemented bans on the trade. U.S. high-level attention to this issue was illustrated by the joint commitment of President Obama and China’s President Xi Jinping to “take significant and timely steps to halt the domestic commercial trade of ivory.”[2] Another major market, Hong Kong, is considering action to close down its own problematic ivory trade. However, major ivory markets in Japan and Thailand, as well as other consumer markets, remain open and legal. Hopefully these nations will respond and change their policies and legislation in support of elephants over ivory trade.

Indeed, African elephant range states are also calling for markets to be shut down: in 2015, under the Cotonou declaration, 22 African nations agreed to “enact, implement and enforce legislation prohibiting domestic ivory trade and support all proposals and actions at international and national levels to close domestic ivory markets worldwide.”[3] While there is hope and movement, elephants need action now.

Conclusion

Closing the world’s domestic ivory markets is essential to protect elephants from the trade in their ivory. The Environmental Investigation Agency urges all nations, particularly those with large ivory markets, to expeditiously shut down the commercial trade in ivory within their borders. To enable future generations to witness elephants in the wild, the world must value elephants more than their ivory.



References: 1) http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/tocta-2010.html. 2) https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/fact-sheet-president-xi-jinpings-state-visit-united-states. 3) http://www.stopivory.org/wp-content/uploads/20151105_African-Elephant-Coalition-Cotonou-Declaration.pdf.

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