

THE IVORY TRADE: THE SINGLE GREATEST THREAT TO WILD ELEPHANTS

Elephants have survived in the wild for 15 million years, but today this iconic species is threatened with extinction due to ongoing poaching for ivory. As long as there is demand for ivory, elephants will continue to be killed for their tusks. According to best estimates, as many as 26,000 elephants are killed every year simply to extract their tusks.

A Brief History of the Ivory Trade

Demand for ivory first skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s. The trade in ivory was legal then -- although for the most part it was taken illegally. During those decades, approximately 100,000 elephants per year were being killed. The toll on African elephant populations was shocking: over the course of a single decade, their numbers dropped by half.

In October of 1989 the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) voted to move African elephants from Appendix II to Appendix I, affording the now highly endangered animal the maximum level of protection, effectively ending trade in all elephant parts, including ivory.

With the new Appendix 1 listing, the poaching of elephants literally stopped overnight. The ban brought massive awareness of the plight of elephants, the bottom dropped out of the market, and prices plummeted. Ivory was practically unsellable.

For 10 years, the global ban stood strong and it seemed the crisis had ended. Elephant numbers began to recover. Unfortunately, the resurgence in elephant populations, while nowhere near the numbers prior to the spike in trade, was nevertheless a catalyst for some African countries to consider reopening the trade. They successfully lobbied CITES to consider a one-off trade of natural stockpiles (accumulated through natural mortalities and game management). In 1999, CITES sanctioned a "one-time experimental sale" (50 tonnes to Japan from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe) and in 2008, CITES granted a second sale (102 tonnes to Japan and China, the latter a new buyer in the ivory market at the time).

The 2008 sale to newly wealthy China created a devastating poaching crisis. Perhaps unintentionally, the legal trade drove an illegal trade and the resumption of massive poaching. Investigators from the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) found that as much as 90% of ivory for sale in China came from the black market. It is nearly impossible to discern the difference.

A report by the African Wildlife Foundation and WildAid on the trade of ivory in Hong Kong came to the same conclusion: ivory traders were using the legal trade as cover for illegal smuggling.

In hindsight it appears that the provision of legal or "good" ivory to the Chinese markets was responsible for the most extreme and devastating war on elephants.

Canada

Canada was one of only four countries at the most recent conference of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to object to closing its domestic ivory trade. Japan, Namibia and South Africa also objected. Canada has justified its objection by expressing concern for the Inuit trade in legal narwhal and walrus ivory.

Canada has never banned elephant trophy imports. CITES tracks imports and exports of animals and animal parts. Their records show that between 2007 and 2016, Canada allowed the legal importation of 83 elephants trophies, as well as 434 elephant skulls and 260 elephant feet.

In Canada, African elephant ivory is being sold:

- In antique shops
- In Chinatown
- Through auction houses
- On the Internet – Facebook, Kijiji, Craigslist

Online auctions of ivory items as well as ivory sales through Kijiji, Craigslist and Yahoo continue to provide an opportunity to launder illegal ivory.

As a signatory to CITES, Canada abides by its rules through the implementation of a law known as the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act, which came into force in 1996. Essentially, the law details a list of species that are regulated, including those species where trade prohibited.

Generally, it is illegal to trade Appendix I species such as elephants. There are exceptions. If a product is derived from captive animals or the product pre-dates when the CITES Convention came into effect (1975) or that animal was not classified at the time the animal was taken from the wild, then trade may be considered legal contingent upon the correct documentation and proof of age of the specimen. Both of these latter proofs enable a fair amount of gray area that may be exploited by those seeking to launder illegal ivory as legal.

Death toll in rangers

There are 355 national parks in Africa, which together employ approximately 22,000 rangers and volunteers. In 2015 alone, 27 rangers were killed, according to the [International Game Rangers Federation](#), which has monitored ranger mortality since the year 2000. In March of 2016, two rangers were killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park, pushing the death toll of rangers killed in this park to [more than 150 in the last 10 years](#). In 2018, at least 63 African game rangers died in the line of duty.

World Elephant Day

In 2012, World Elephant Day was created as a rallying point for elephant conservation organizations and individuals worldwide to raise awareness about the plight of elephants and the dominant, often cruel, threats to their survival.

Ivory Burns and Crushes since 2012

Thailand, August 26, 2015 2,100 kg of ivory destroyed
Sri Lanka, January 26, 2016 1,500 kg of ivory destroyed
Malawi, March 14, 2016 2,600 kg of ivory destroyed
Italy, March 31, 2016 400 kg of ivory destroyed
Malaysia, April 14, 2016 9,550 kg of ivory destroyed

Cameroon, April 19, 2016 2,000 kg of ivory destroyed
Kenya, April 30, 2016 105,000 kg of ivory destroyed