



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Opinion: Blood Ivory and More Dead Elephants

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Nothing embodies the power and majesty of wild Africa like the iconic elephant. Tragically, across the continent you can see the devastating impact poaching has had on this keystone species. “Blood ivory” poachers ply their trade from the killing fields of the African savanna to the major markets in Asia. Decades of poor policy have resulted in dead elephants littering the African landscape.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration is making policy even worse. It is calling for more “ivory crush,” the destruction of existing ivory stores, and a ban on the legal trade of ivory within the United States. These proposals reflect a desperate misunderstanding of the illegal market and will only accelerate the slaughter of African elephants.

For instance, in early April Belgium joined the U.S., China, and host of other nations in the growing Ivory crush movement—supposedly to “send a warning” to ivory poachers. Alas, decreasing the world’s stockpile of ivory actually drives prices for blood ivory upward, thereby increasing profits for sophisticated poaching syndicates.

In early February, the Obama administration introduced the National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking. Two weeks later, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) announced it would effectively ban all domestic ivory sales, even of antique objects. This step would punish the law-abiding while encouraging them to look for illegal outlets for their collections and inventories.

Unfortunately, the administration is playing the politics of deception, or at least deliberate misinformation. There is no doubt that poaching poses a threat to thousands of African elephants. But exaggerating claims for political advantage interferes with developing an effective conservation strategy.

FWS Director Dan Ashe and others have been circulating misleading information on elephant deaths, poaching, and the illegal ivory trade to advance an ideological agenda rather than to

protect elephants. Among the more serious errors: “More than 35,000 elephants were killed in 2013 for the illegal ivory trade.” According to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) program of Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE), 25,000 elephants were illegally killed in Africa in 2011 and 22,000 were killed in 2012. While still unacceptably high, it is far less than the 35,000 (with some claims hitting 50,000) that has become the rallying cry for those campaigning to ban even old, legal ivory sales.

Moreover, not all of these elephants were killed by poachers. Many were killed by farmers and villagers, for whom elephants are dangerous pests. The World Wildlife Fund estimates elephants killed for their tusks at approximately 20,000 per year. The figures for 2013 have not yet been released, but probably are of the same magnitude as before. In fact, John Scanlon, CITES Secretary-General, recently stated that he saw “encouraging signs” that poaching may be stabilizing.

“The United States is the second-largest market for ivory in the world.” This statement, although true, is misleading. According to a study of domestic ivory trade by two wildlife specialists entitled *The USA’s Ivory Markets—How Much a Threat to Elephants?*: “The USA has the second-largest ivory market in the world, after China-Hong Kong. The illegal proportion of it, however, is much smaller than any country in Asia and most countries in Africa. The USA ivory market poses a minimal threat to elephants.” FWS spokeswoman Sandra Cleva said: “The vast majority of U.S. seizures involve small non-commercial quantities, a fact that refutes the claim that large-scale illegal ivory trade exists in the United States.” According to the monitoring network TRAFFIC, Thailand is actually the second-largest market for illegal ivory in the world.

The fact that supposedly responsible government officials knowingly mislead the public demonstrates how the ivory debate has become politicized, with an emphasis on symbolism rather than solutions. Fighting poaching and stemming the flow of “blood ivory” is difficult. It is far easier to feign empathy by punishing the innocent owners of ivory objects, even if decades or centuries old.

The Ivory crush is merely foolish, inflating illegal ivory prices and denying revenues to the developing states that contain most elephants. Worse is the plan to render legally valueless virtually every piece of ivory in America, even though accumulated over many years in compliance with the law.

The administration already has barred the import of ivory, even if centuries old with peerless provenance, punishing American collectors and dealers. Craftsmen repairing or working with old and legal raw ivory could lose their livelihoods. Owners of vintage musical instruments and guns are prohibited from leaving and returning to the U.S. with them.

Any item containing a tiny fleck of ivory in it could trigger federal legal action. The administration said it will not target “knick-knacks,” but people with hundreds, thousands, or millions of dollars worth of ivories will find no legal buyers, since the administration plans to require documentation that does not exist. And the easiest way for FWS employees to boost their enforcement statistics would be to target confused collectors and dealers rather than accomplished criminals who operate in the shadows.

Obvious alternatives exist. Any plan should target poachers and their U.S. contacts. FWS should enlist legitimate collectors and dealers in helping to uncover the illegal trade, rather than treat the law-abiding as enemies. FWS could issue a “passport” for musicians and gun owners to carry their possessions back and forth. If the agency—with the consent of Congress, rather than in a secretive rule-making process—is determined to more clearly delineate old legal ivory, it could phase in a registration system for legal ivory objects.

Those who own and work in ivory are as appalled as everyone else about the slaughter of elephants for their tusks. But the policy adopted should actually achieve its end, rather than encourage the trade in “blood ivory.” Moreover, the government should not punish law abiding, tax paying citizens who followed long-standing law in accumulating ivory. Federal policy should be both effective and fair.

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