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The free market: Can we save elephants by selling ivory?

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For many people, free markets seem cold and calculating. Maybe it's the best way to sell, say, automobiles and soap. But we shouldn't like the process. And we certainly shouldn't base our behavior on markets when basic concepts of right and wrong are at stake.

Of course, markets are no substitute for understanding what the good life is all about. However, markets offer a powerful tool to reinforce moral values.

One of the great tragedies of the modern age is the slaughter of elephants. Ivory long has been a widely desired decorative material; finely carved items are among the most valuable antiques.

Demand for ivory objects remains strong today, especially in East Asia.

Unfortunately, these days most new ivory comes from poachers. The killing of elephants has sparked a new form of prohibition, with steadily tighter controls over ivory sales. Only antique ivory objects may be shipped across international boundaries, while even legal accumulations of ivory may be sold only with special sanction of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

As a result, elephants have turned into modern day bison—simultaneously owned by no one and more valuable dead than alive. The result has been devastating for elephant populations in many African states, with upwards of 40,000 elephants being killed annually.

In fact, about the only advocates of the giant creatures are Westerners who see the animals in zoos or on carefully controlled safaris. With great moral fervency they insist that others sacrifice to protect elephants.

In contrast, struggling developing nations are stuck with the duty of managing wildlife reserves and deterring poachers. The latter outgun not only park rangers but often national militaries. Moreover, governments of only limited resources and competence face what they see as many far more pressing human needs.

Worse is the situation facing villagers and farmers. Residents of the industrialized West wax eloquent when talking of faraway elephants, but to locals the creatures are giant rats, threatening

and destructive. Every year desperate farmers die defending their lands and crops—and thus their livelihoods and families—from voracious elephants.

Nor do many consumers half a world away see any reason not to buy ivory trinkets commonly on sale. No one says don't buy chicken meat lest the birds vanish from the earth. Why should elephants be different?

Thus, despite much effort, activists and governments have not been able to stop the massacre of elephants. Yet faced with the failure of prohibition, the usual suspects only propose more of the same. They are pushing countries to destroy existing ivory stockpiles, acquired from elephants which died naturally or were culled, as well as seized from poachers.

The Obama administration is preparing to ban even the sale of *antique* ivory, as if outlawing sale of an 18th century ivory chess set or cross could bring back the long-dead elephant which provided the original ivory.

Even more extreme and improbable have even been proposals that Western nations deploy military forces to stop poaching. The war for democracy turned into the war for endangered species.

Without a change of tactics, elephants could disappear from some African countries.

Warned CITES: “The costs of protecting species with high-valued products may be beyond the means of many developing countries.”

Yet some in the West favor morality lectures rather than practical innovations.

African farmers should love elephants. African governments should spend more to save elephants. Chinese consumers should stop buying ivory objects.

Everyone should be guided by the consciences of wealthy Westerners and do the right thing.

Moral suasion always is worth a try.

But the question is: what happens after preaching fails?