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## When You Ban The Sale Of Ivory, You Ban Elephants

By: Doug Bandow – January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013

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**E**lephant poaching is rampant throughout Africa. Unfortunately, Western nations have exacerbated the problem by banning the sale of ivory. Elephants are dying as a result. The West should reopen the ivory trade.

Artists and artisans have used ivory for thousands of years. Unfortunately, there's no easy way to get tusks off a live elephant. So in 1989 the international sale of new ivory products was prohibited. Concluded analyst Peter Fitzmaurice, "with most nations adhering closely to the ban, the legal ivory trade has been decimated and value of this natural resource for range countries has been vastly diminished."

Nevertheless, the illegal trade continues. Asia is the prime destination, but last year two New York City jewelers pled guilty to trafficking in illegal ivory. An estimated 38,000 African elephants are being killed annually, "more than at any time in decades," reported the *New York Times*. The elephant population dropped from some 1.3 million in 1979 to 470,000 or even fewer today.

Failure is not for want of conservation efforts. Reported the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES): "record levels of ivory were seized and sustained throughout the period 2009 to 2011." But that was not nearly enough.

Earlier this month the *New York Times* reported: "As ivory poaching becomes more militarized, with rebel groups and even government armies slaughtering thousands of elephants across Africa to cash in on record-high ivory prices, a horrible mismatch is shaping up." The *Christian Science Monitor* cited "the growing professionalism of poachers bankrolled by international criminals," which had resulted in a sevenfold increase in the number of elephants killed in Kenya.

CITES warned that the killings threatened even "previously secure large populations." Added the Monitor: "The increase has led many wildlife experts to declare the current situation a crisis worse even than the mass slaughter of Africa's elephants in the 1970s and '80s, which led to the global ivory trade ban in 1989."

In short, ivory prohibition has failed. It has been about as easy to stop elephant killing as to stop drug use. "As long as there is strong demand in the consumer countries, we

probably will see people willing to risk going for ivory in the source countries,” warned Norwegian Oystein Storkersen, who chairs a CITES committee.

This demand makes ivory valuable. Explained Fitzmaurice: “The 1970s saw the price of ivory skyrocket. Suddenly, to a herder or subsistence farmer, this was no longer an animal but a walking fortune, worth more than a dozen years of honest toil. To currency-strapped governments and revolutionaries alike, ivory was a way to pay for more firearms and supplies.”

Countries with impoverished populations, incapable governments, corrupt officials, and limited resources were almost helpless. Political instability and armed conflict multiplied the problems. The World Conservation Union reviewed national efforts and pointed to “inadequate law enforcement,” “lack of resources and weak institutional capacity,” “human-elephant conflict,” “ongoing instability,” and “expansion of agriculture onto elephant migration routes.”

Occasional successes mattered little. CITES explained: “very few large-scale ivory seizures actually result in successful follow-up law enforcement actions, including investigations, arrests, convictions and the imposition of penalties that serve as deterrents.” The ivory seized sometimes disappears from government warehouses. CITES concluded: “The costs of protecting species with high-valued products may be beyond the means of many developing countries.”

At least as long as there no local support for elephant preservation. Observed elephant researcher Iain Douglas-Hamilton, “It’s pretty hopeless to stop elephant poaching in Africa unless you get local buy-in.”

Westerners see elephants as “charismatic mega-fauna,” majestic creatures to be preserved irrespective of cost. African farmers see giant rats and worse. When I visited Africa I observed how elephants stripped trees of bark as well as of foliage. Economists Erwin H. Bulte and G. Cornelis van Kooten estimated that “one elephant annually consumes as much forage as required to bring 4.7 cows to full maturity.” Farmer regularly die defending their crops from elephants.

When he was director of Kenya’s Wildlife Service David Western explained: “Elephants are the darlings of the Western world, but they are enemy number one in Kenya.” Indeed, he emphasized, “The African farmer’s enmity toward elephants is as visceral as Western mawkishness is passionate.”

This antipathy can be overcome, but only when elephants provide surrounding peoples with a monetary benefit. In most African countries elephants are the equivalent of the American buffalo. No one owns them and the people living closest to them make money by killing them. Reported the New York Times: “10,000 elephants in Gabon have been wiped out, some picked off by impoverished hunters, creeping around the jungle with rusty shotguns and willing to be paid in sacks of salt, others mowed down en masse by criminal gangs that slice off the dead elephants’ faces with chain saws.”

These incentives can be reversed. Explained CITES: “provided that their full value (i.e. both intrinsic and extrinsic) is fully realized by the landholders involved, not only will elephants be conserved but so will the accompanying range of biodiversity existing on such land.” Indeed, Fitzmaurice reported that in some parts of southern Africa today “Damaged land and crop losses are not only being tolerated, but villages are doing their

best to guard against poachers. This surprising change in behavior is due to the proliferation of government programs that dispense licenses to villages, enabling locals, or paying hunters, to cull an allotted number of elephants each year.” In these areas poaching is down and some farmers have turned their marginal farms into game reserves.

Unfortunately, the money from hunting and photo safaris rarely is enough. Legalizing the trade in ivory and other elephant products would provide additional resources. In essence, elephants need to be treated like cattle. Their owners—or the equivalent, such as villagers living near elephants—need to benefit from the animals’ preservation. Noted Bulte and van Kooten: “When trade is allowed, the characteristics of elephant stocks as an asset are obviously different, because living elephants represent a growing and valuable source of future ivory. Hence, in the long run, trade in ivory may well promote elephant conservation.”

Prior to 1989 Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe allowed legal sales. These nations typically enjoyed expanding elephant herds while the number of elephants in other African countries, such as Kenya and Tanzania, was shrinking. More recently, noted the World Conservation Union: “As elephant populations in South Africa continue to grow, arguments between those in favor of the resumption of culling and those against it have become increasingly heated.”

The southern African states won CITES approval for two “one-off” sales, in 1999 and 2008, of stockpiled ivory—seized from poachers or collected from elephants which had died or been culled. CITES explained: “The revenues are expected to boost the countries’ capacity to conserve biodiversity, strengthen enforcement controls and contribute to the livelihoods of the rural people in southern Africa.”

The measures generated unusually bitter debate, as some environmentalists curiously claimed that legal sales would encourage poaching. Mary Rice of the Environmental Investigation Agency even denounced the “discussion of ‘legal’ sales” as likely to increase “demand for illegal ivory.” In fact, the desire for ivory, legal or illegal, is a preexisting reality, else elephants would not be dying in catastrophic numbers.

Moreover, CITES concluded “that evidence has yet to be presented that demonstrates a clear link between the one-off sales of ivory and increasing levels of illegal trade.” Nor was there any “evidence to suggest that the 2008 legal sales of ivory had any discernible impact on the increasing trend in levels of illegal killing of elephants, which had started in 2006.” Anthropologist Daniel Stiles of Kenya also found that limited ivory sales had not “stimulated ivory demand or elephant poaching.”

Unfortunately, episodic sales have only limited benefits, generating modest revenues while failing to satisfy ongoing demand. Observed CITES, the practice “provides no incentives to ivory traders to confine their trade to legally available ivory.” This unpredictability, added John Frederick Walker, author of *Ivory’s Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants*, “keeps the black market and its elephant poaching gangs flourishing. You don’t need a degree in economics to grasp that annual or biennial sales of certified stocks could serve to undercut the illegal trade.”

The southern African governments would like to hold more sales. Reported CITES: “Stocks of ivory held by governments have continued to increase and there are pressures from range states with expanding elephant populations to trade in ivory.” A proposal for another sale will come before CITES at its March meeting in Bangkok. But

opposition from other African states and Western environmentalists is strong. Unfortunately, their position could doom many elephants.

Elephants need a genuine market in ivory to survive. In fact, CITES published a blueprint last July for legalizing the ivory trade. Explained the report: “A legal trade in ivory, elephant hide and meat could change current disincentives to elephant conservation into incentives to landholders and countries to conserve them.” Equally important, regular legal sales would lower prices, reducing the incentive for poaching. CITES did not take a formal position on the issue but explained that it offered the proposal “as a basis for negotiation towards a workable solution to a trade in ivory.”

CITES suggested creating a highly centralized and regulated system, though a legal ivory market could take many forms. CITES emphasized conservation and estimated that a population of 500,000 elephants could naturally generate \$6.7 billion worth of ivory annually.

Much opposition to the ivory trade is grounded in a moral sense that it is wrong to trade in elephants even though doing so is the best means of preserving the species. Economists Jyoti Khanna and Jon Harford wrote that during the 1980s “it was increasingly felt that no state had the right to allow destruction of a species even if its habitat was restricted to that country’s own territory.”

What’s the alternative? Some hope to convince Asian consumers, in particular, to stop buying ivory products. Good luck. Walker explained that his “research on the history of ivory has convinced me that it’s a fantasy to think that the age-old desire for this seductive carving material, valued globally since pre-history, will ever disappear.” Nor are governments likely to stamp out the illegal trade. Khanna and Harford found “little incentive on part of the consumer states to commit resources for the purpose of restricting trade, even if these countries attach an existence value to elephants.”

Environmentalists also seek to pressure corrupt, incompetent, and underfunded African governments to stop poaching. This is equally unrealistic. Khanna and Harford pointed out: “In Zimbabwe, for example, loss of ivory revenues led to a scaling back of anti-poaching operations which resulted in 100 illegally killed elephants in 1990 as opposed to only ten illegal deaths a year earlier.” Anthropologist Richard Leakey, Kenya’s director of wildlife management, warned: “Unless we can make wildlife conservation profitable for all peoples, we cannot save our elephants for the future.”

Elephants are not the only animals endangered by poaching. So are rhinos. For instance, the *New York Times* recently reported that South Africa “is throwing just about everything it has to stop the slaughter—thousands of rangers, the national army, a new spy plane, even drones—but it is losing.” Indeed, added the *Times*, “Gangs are so desperate for new sources of horn that criminals have even smashed into dozens of glass museum cases all across Europe to snatch them from exhibits.”

Many other wild animals face varying threats to their existence. However, the news is not always bad. In some cases markets have been the key to conservation. For instance, vicunas once were considered endangered but now, reported CITES, “are managed through captive breeding and non-lethal harvests from wild populations.” Wild animals “are taken, shorn and released.” The population increased 40-fold between 1965 and 2010. Similarly, “The legal trade in crocodiles is one of the success stories in CITES

history which shows species recovery as a result of trade.” In China “tigers are being farmed with the intention of supplying tiger parts in the future.”

But today elephants are dying, many because of ivory prohibition. Economist Rasmus Heltberg observed: “One may find such black markets and the poaching that supplies them immoral, but ignoring their role by assuming them away may lead to misguided conservation policies.”

CITES acknowledged the failure: “given the present rise in illegal killing of elephants in West, Central, and East Africa it is clear that current measures are not containing the present surge in the illegal trade in ivory.” Western governments should stop insisting on doing more of the same, which guarantees failure. The only realistic alternative is to create a legal market for ivory and other elephant products.

In March CITES must decide whether it is better for elephants to be sacred and dead or commercial and alive. If elephants could talk, they almost certainly would prefer the second. So should the rest of us.