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Treat elephants like cattle

By: Doug Bandow – March 7, 2013

Even as the latest meeting of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is under way in Bangkok, elephant poaching is rampant throughout Africa. Unfortunately, Western nations have exacerbated the problem by banning the sale of ivory.

An estimated 38,000 African elephants are killed annually. Despite the ban on the sale of new ivory products, 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 CITES: "Record levels of ivory were seized" from 2009 to 2011. But that was not nearly enough. Reported The Christian Science Monitor: "The increase [in killings] 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."

Occasional successes matter little. Ivory seized from poachers 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 is no local support for elephant preservation. African farmers see elephants as giant rats and worse.

When I visited Africa I saw how elephants stripped trees of bark as well as of foliage. Farmers die defending their crops from elephants. When he was director of Kenya's Wildlife Service David Western explained: "The African farmer's enmity toward elephants is as visceral as Western mawkishness is passionate."

This antipathy can be overcome through monetary benefits. In most African countries elephants are the equivalent of the American buffalo. No one owns them and people make money by killing them.

However, 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."

Analyst Peter 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." That's because governments are providing licenses for the culling or hunting of elephants.

Legalizing the trade in ivory and other elephant products would provide additional resources. In essence, elephants need to be treated like cattle, a resource that benefits their owners.

Before 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.

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. Despite the claims of some environmentalists, CITES found no evidence that the trade increased poaching.

Last July CITES said, "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.

Much opposition to the ivory trade is grounded in a moral sense that it is wrong to trade in elephants. But it is specieist to elevate elephants over other animals. Moreover, what's the alternative? Some hope to persuade consumers to stop buying ivory products. Good luck.

Environmentalists also seek to pressure corrupt, incompetent and underfunded African governments to stop poaching. This is equally unrealistic.

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. However, in some cases markets have been the key to survival. For instance, vicunas, which live in the Andes, once were endangered but they now, CITES reports, "are managed through captive breeding and non-lethal harvests from wild populations." 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."

CITES warned: "It is clear that current measures are not containing the present surge in the illegal trade in ivory." The only solution is to create a legal market for ivory and other elephant products.

Governments must decide whether it is better for elephants to be sacred and dead or commercial and alive.