



Most African countries fear renewed ivory trade

afrol News, 4 June - Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa have been given permission for a "one-off ivory sale" to Japan, representing an exception to the 1989 world-wide ban on ivory trade. Other African countries, where poaching still is a major problem, however have serious concerns that the decision could fuel the illegal trade in tusks.

A limited sale of ivory has been approved by a committee ahead of this week's UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which opened officially Sunday. The so-called "one-off ivory sale" was provisionally approved for Botswana, Namibia and South Africa at a previous CITES meeting in 2002 - but could not go forward until certain decisions and criteria were met.

The "Standing Committee" of the CITES Convention concluded Saturday that Japan meets the necessary requirements to be an importing party. The committee also agreed that a scientific system to monitor elephant poaching had provided sufficient data.

China also put in a bid to be allowed to import ivory, which went to a vote. CITES Committee members voted six for, six against. The dramatic tied vote was rejected and China may ask again in a future meeting.

In 1989, CITES listed all African elephant populations as threatened and imposed a global ban on international commercial trade in elephant products. Subsequently the populations of Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa were redefined as less threatened, which allowed for regulated trade. Since that, CITES twice has approved limited one-off sales of ivory from Southern African countries.

As in the previous one-off sale decisions, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa have committed to, and are required by CITES to use the revenue derived from the sale exclusively for elephant conservation and community development programs.

Despite all these provisions and limits in the Southern African ivory sale, environmentalists and other African governments have reacted negatively to the CITES decision. Conservationists have stated their fear for "renewed slaughter" of elephants.

At the CITES meeting, serious concerns were presented by several African nations including Kenya, Mali and Ghana. A number of African elephant range states representatives expressed their belief that the decision would be seen by poachers and international organised criminal syndicates as "a green light" to increase their illegal activities in countries where elephant populations still are threatened.

Environmental organisations agree with these concerns. According to statements by WWF and TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network of WWF and IUCN, "recent problems in illegal ivory trade in Africa stem largely from ivory originating in West and Central Africa."

Will Travers of the Species Survival Network goes further in his criticism, expressing outrage over the "dramatic" CITES decision. "Today's decision belies the reality of what is happening on the ground with respect to elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade. Tens of thousands of Africa's elephants are being poached each year, thousands of kilos of illegal ivory are being regularly intercepted, and sales of unregulated ivory traded over the internet are disturbingly high," Mr Travers commented.

"This sets a bad precedent," said Mary Rice, Senior Elephant Campaigner with the Environmental Investigation Agency. "It is déjà vu... it could be the bloody ivory trade of the 1980s all over again," she warns.

While the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) also is sceptical about the CITES decision, WWF Director Susan Lieberman nevertheless agrees that "Japan has met the necessary requirements" to be able to import Southern African ivory.

A limited and well monitored trade in Southern African tusks with Japan is not the real problem when it comes to the survival of elephants on African soil, the origination concludes. According to WWF and TRAFFIC, "the real driver of poaching and illegal ivory trade is unregulated domestic ivory markets" in Africa.

By staff writer

© afrol News