

Animal conservation

The year of the elephant

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The wrongs and rights of ivory sales

FOR anybody who cares about animals, the biggest fixture on the diplomatic calendar is a bunfight that happens every three years to review the working of a convention on the international trade in endangered species, known as CITES. At the current gathering, now taking place in The Hague, the sale of elephant ivory has been high on the agenda.

On June 2nd, CITES approved international sales of 60 tonnes of ivory from Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. The exports had been agreed on in principle in 2002, as long as these countries gave data on elephant poaching and population levels. The endorsement is good news for the countries that want to sell; they say the sales reward their conservation work and allow money to flow back to people who face the problems of living with elephants.

Other countries, such as Kenya and Mali, and of course many green groups, oppose the sales. They say a legal market facilitates the laundering of illegal ivory. In Thailand, the domestic (legal) market in ivory also handles quite a lot of illegal merchandise, says Mary Rice of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), a British-based campaigning group. Elsewhere, legal shipments of ivory have been used to smuggle illegal ivory.

Another fear is that ivory sales may fuel the demand for ivory products. This is harder to gauge, but it is clear that current exemptions to the ivory-sale ban have caused confusion among consumers and allowed much illegal ivory to be sold.

Tourists can now buy small amounts of ivory in Zimbabwe and Namibia and legally take them home. Yet if they tried this in South Africa, they would be breaking the law. Confusion over what is legal is also exploited by internet sellers who enjoy a thriving trade. This problem prompted eBay to say on June 4th that it would ban cross-border ivory sales by the end of this month.

The heart of the problem, however, is the flourishing illegal market in ivory run by criminal networks of wildlife traders. Recent work suggests that the illegal trade saw its largest increase ever this year, and other evidence from seizures confirms that the illegal trade is booming. These criminal groups are feeding growing demand for ivory in Asia, particularly China—as documented in a report^{*} issued this week.

One expert who works with Interpol says the trade is being boosted by a rise in the wholesale price of high-quality ivory, from \$100 per kg in the late 1990s to \$750 per kg this year. (It may now come down as a result of the newly authorised sale.)

Most illegal ivory heads for China, where legal loopholes allow imported illegal ivory to be “legalised”; traders can claim they happened to find a few forgotten tusks in their

storerooms. To give an idea of the scale of the problem, EIA figures say China imported 32 tonnes of ivory in 1989 (the year of the ban) and had stocks of 50 tonnes. In 1990 there were said to be over 200 tonnes in the country.

China needs to close this legal loophole, as well as the vast illegal trade documented in the country by the new report. If it doesn't, many of the 500,000 visitors expected to attend China's "green Olympics" next year will end up unwittingly taking home poached elephant ivory.

*"Made in China: How China's Illegal Ivory Trade is Causing a 21st Century African Elephant Disaster", [Environmental Investigation Agency](#), June 4th 2007