

Poaching elephants for ivory



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Poaching of elephants has been present from the past 1000 years. However it increased considerably in the 1970's and consequently the elephant population of the world registered a sharp decline with statistics showing that the number of elephants in Africa declined from 1.3 million in 1980 to just 400,000 in 1990 ("Ivory trade threatens future of African Elephants"). Sudan and the Central African Republic have also registered a decrease in their elephant population. The crucial factor which results in the poaching of elephants is ivory trade. Therefore to save the dwindling elephant population of the world, cutting the demand for ivory in the world became necessary.

The first attempt against ivory trading was made in 1975 with the advent of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which placed elephants under the list Appendix II species ("White gold": The ivory trade ban"). These are the species that, though not threatened by extinction, are at risk of being endangered. This did not ban ivory trading and was just a means of regulating it. However it failed to achieve its purpose as the killing of elephants not only continued but increased as the demand for ivory in the international market increased. Thus in 1989 CITES was forced to revise its position in context with elephants. As of 1990 the elephants were removed from Appendix II and rather placed under Appendix I (a species threatened by extinction) by which the killing of elephants was illegalized and a full ban was imposed on ivory trading ("White gold": The ivory trade ban"). After the ban was put under practice ivory trade was nearly eliminated because "publicity surrounding the issue turned public sentiment so far against the ivory trade that it nearly eliminated the demand for ivory worldwide; most poaching stopped abruptly

in response.” After the imposition of the ban the number of poached elephants in Kenya was reduced to 500 in 1993 from a huge 3500 in the 1980’s (“” White gold”: The ivory trade ban”). Also because the demand for ivory had decreased, the price of ivory per pound also decreased from \$125 to \$5 (“” White gold”: The ivory trade ban”). This reduction in price made the poachers lose incentive and poaching of elephants diminished.

Another act, The Botswana Conservation and Management of Elephants Act of 1991 (“ The Conservation and Management of Elephants in Botswana”) also helps protect the elephant population. By the application of strict rules by the government of Botswana, which includes the setting up of anti-poaching units, poaching is prevented on a large scale within the country. As a result the elephant population of Botswana is not only stable but is experiencing an increase.

There are many points in favor of the ban being continued. These arguments are based on the profitability of live elephants to the countries they are in and on animal rights. Elephants provide a lot of benefits both to the country’s economy in which they reside and also to the natural habitat of other wild life. Some countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya thrive on the tourism brought about by the presence of elephants in their lands.

Zimbabwe has earned a net total of \$424 million and Kenya has earned a net of \$100 million on account of the attraction their elephant population created for the tourists (“” White gold”: The ivory trade ban”). Thus, as ivory trade involves the hunting and killing of the elephant population of these countries, it has a detrimental effect on the tourism industries without which these already poor countries will lose significant amounts of money and a

major contributor to their gross domestic product (GDP). The former chief executive of the Zimbabwe Council for Tourism, Paul Matamasia, stated in regards with poaching: “ Without wildlife, we do not have a tourism industry to talk of” (“ Zimbabwe’s Wildlife Threatened by Poachers”). Another benefit of elephants is that they help change woodlands into grasslands, an action which helps provide habitats for the varied wildlife. Thus if the elephant population is reduced due to ivory trade it indirectly has an adverse effect on the habitats of other animals. This was exemplified in the 1970’s in the Tsavo National Park in Kenya when a decrease in elephant population led to a decrease in the population of other animals such as zebras (“ Why Ivory Trade should be banned”).

The other main argument presented in favor of the ban is that of animal rights. The indiscriminate slaughter of the elephants is necessary in order to acquire ivory as it cannot be obtained while the elephant is alive. After it has been killed the process of extracting ivory involves the poacher to cut into the head of the elephant because roughly 25% of the ivory is contained in the head. This brutal killing of elephants just to take their tusks is a violation of animal rights and of the law as elephants are considered to be an endangered species and according to The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 “ ESA prohibits everyone, private person and federal agency alike, from “ taking” endangered wildlife. The regulations extend this to threatened animals. “ Take” includes “ harming” a listed species. Harm: in the definition of “ take” in the Act means an act which actually kills or injures wildlife. Such act may include significant habitat modification or degradation where it actually kills or injures wildlife by significantly impacting essential behavioral

patterns, including breeding, feeding, or sheltering” (“ The Endangered Species Act”).

However some argue that the ban is wrong and should not be imposed. There is a debate regarding the endangerment of the elephants with one side claiming that they are not endangered at all. This side argues that rather than being in danger of extinction, the elephant are experiencing a rise in their population. The advocates of this viewpoint cite the examples of Kruger National Park and Botswana. In Kruger National Park the population of elephants increased from 7000 in 1994 to 12000 in 2005. Also in Botswana the elephant population is not only increasing but the authorities registered a threat of overpopulation. The number of elephants increased from 54700 to 60935 (“” White gold”: The ivory trade ban”). The ban imposed on ivory trade by CITES requires the elephant population to be below 2000 to qualify. Thus these advocates claim that the ban has been wrongly imposed and should be lifted as the population exceeds that stated by law (“” White gold”: The ivory trade ban”).

It must be noted however that this increase in population of the elephants only registered after the ban had been imposed in the first place and can be directly attributed to it because after it was imposed the poaching incidents were reduced to negligible amounts. As far as the problem of overpopulation is concerned it can be justified to still put the elephants under Appendix I of CITES in order to protect the population from falling to such low level that it will become too late to save elephants from extinction; as the old cliché goes: prevention is better than cure.

The primary party opposing the ban is the Southern African Development Community (SADC) which includes 12 countries including Botswana, Tanzania and Namibia. The reason SADC's opposition of the ban is the loss of revenue it had from ivory sales. It argues that due to the ban these countries can't even trade in legitimate ivory which is obtained after the elephant dies a natural death. These countries also claim that the population of elephants in their territories is much greater than the level at which a species is considered endangered. In fact these countries claim that they lack the area and resources to cater for the growing population of the elephants ("White gold": The ivory trade ban"). This, they claim, poses a threat to their human population as elephants come in conflict with the villagers and are responsible for destroying many crops.

Another argument they present is that allocating areas especially for elephants is indirectly very costly as they need that area to grow crops and as agriculture serves as a main form of livelihood it is very difficult. Jon Hutton summates the problem by saying: "Crops give survival. Elephants don't" ("White gold": The ivory trade ban"). SADC further says that the ban should be lifted so that these countries can sell up to a collective stockpile of \$8 million dollars ("White gold": The ivory trade ban") that is collected from elephants that died a natural death. These countries claim that the revenue generated from these trades will be used to conserve the elephant population by building better places for them to live in.

In response to the argument that legal ivory and stockpiles should be allowed to be traded and that elephants should rather be placed under Appendix II by CITES, it can be inferred from a similar situation that this is

not a good solution. In the past, in response to the appeal by Botswana, CITES placed elephants under Appendix II rather than Appendix I in 1997 which allowed a one off trade of ivory with Japan. However this gave way to increased poaching activity in the area as the demand for ivory tusks was restored which acted as a stimulant for the poachers which led to a considerable decrease in elephant population. A complete ban was soon placed afterwards to stop the poaching as illegal advantage had been taken of a lenient decision. This just helps reinforce the idea that a ban is the only solution to protect the elephant population and if lifted gives rise to illegal trade in ivory which is difficult to tell apart from legitimate trade because while DNA testing has been introduced it is very costly and it will be very difficult to test each batch of ivory.

If we consider the argument of the destruction of existing crops and too little space for practicing agriculture we can see that lifting the ban is not the only solution and neither is the killing of elephants a good option as it might aggravate the situation rather than making it better. Much better and effective answers exist in the form of relocation of elephants. The relocation of elephants from overpopulated areas to areas where they exist in very few numbers is a very feasible solution as it answers both the problem of overpopulation in some countries and dearth of elephants in others and will help reach equilibrium between the two. This idea was used in 2001 when some elephants were transferred from Kruger National Park in South Africa to Mozambique. Will Travers, a member of the Born Free Foundation, said: “Translocation as a management option, rather than culling, is going to be increasingly used” (“World’s Biggest Elephant Relocation Begins”)

The argument that the revenue generated will be used to help the elephant population is impractical on two bases. Firstly for most of the countries the amount earned from legal ivory trade is much lower than the amount earned by tourism. Thus harming the elephant population for lesser revenues is not a good option. Secondly most of these countries are developing countries and the amount required to increase the living standards of the elephant population will be too high and cannot be fulfilled alone by revenues generated from trade of ivory tusks which is detrimental to the elephant population in the first place.

By carefully considering the arguments presented by both the advocates in favor of the ban and those who are opposed to it and by considering the statistical evidence presented in this essay, it can be firmly concluded that the ban on ivory should remain and is the only barrier standing between live elephants and the extinction of a species. Any other scenario, whether it was a nonexistent ban or a lenient one, has proved damaging to the population of elephants in the world. When a ban had not yet been imposed the numbers of elephants was dwindling at a worrying rate while when a little leverage was allowed to some countries for legitimate trade the consequent rise in demand of ivory and the increase in poaching pushed the elephants one step closer to being wiped of the globe. Also the killing of elephants for ivory is a very atrocious crime as the life of a living being is much more important than the benefits it can provide in death and the conservation of a species is much more essential than monetary benefits. Thus a full ban is the only answer and the protagonists of the group who think that the ban should be lifted should reconsider their arguments.