

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Conserving Africa's remaining elephants and ending the threat of ivory trade: the 'Big Five' proposals for CITES

Dear Editor,

The most acute threat facing the African elephant is illegal killing for the international ivory trade. Over the past decade, countries in West, Central and Eastern Africa have been under the most intense pressure since the rampant poaching of the 1970s and 1980s, with elephants in Southern Africa also now facing depredation by criminal syndicates.

Abundant evidence from different sources points to poaching for ivory as the primary reason for the ongoing crisis. These include monitoring programmes under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), the IUCN-SSC African Elephant Specialist Group's African Elephant Database (AED), the Great Elephant Census (a Paul G Allen programme of continent-wide aerial surveys conducted during 2014-15, led by Elephants Without Borders in collaboration with numerous national governments and NGOs), and independent analyses by researchers. At the height of the killing from 2010 to 2012, at least 100,000 elephants were killed in Africa for their ivory. Illegal hunters slaughtered an estimated 40,000 elephants in 2011 alone. In the AED's 'definite' and 'probable' categories, the continental population dropped by 15%, to some 470,000 during 2006-2013.

According to the CITES Secretariat (March 2016), the threat to elephant populations persists: "*Despite the slight decline and stabilisation recorded since 2011, estimated poaching rates overall remain higher than the normal growth rate of elephant populations, or above the sustainability threshold, meaning the elephant population overall is likely to have continued to decline in 2015.*"

The current controls under CITES contain contradictions which confuse the international picture on elephant conservation status and policy actions to address the threat of ivory trade:

- African elephants are 'split-listed' between Appendix I and Appendix II. The majority of national populations are listed in Appendix I, banning international commercial trade in elephants and their parts (including ivory), while four populations (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe) are listed in Appendix II, allowing international trade subject to conditions.
- International ivory trade is currently restricted with a moratorium in effect until 2017, but CITES allows regulated domestic markets to continue.
- Clear measures are lacking to encourage the destruction of stockpiles. Ivory from management and confiscations accumulates, leaks into trade and fuels speculation about future sales.
- Throughout the moratorium, CITES has been negotiating a Decision-Making Mechanism for a trade in ivory (DMM), which would potentially allow international trade in ivory to resume.
- Exports of live elephants from Africa to captive collections continue.

CITES therefore gives the strong impression that trade in elephants and their ivory is potentially acceptable on economic and conservation grounds; that it is only partially and temporarily risky for Africa's elephants; and that it should continue or resume in the not-too-distant future. By doing so, it sustains the market of potential consumers, as well as middlemen, traders, and poachers, that continue to drive the decline.

A suite of five complementary proposals to protect elephants (The "Big Five") that has been submitted to the 17th Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP17 taking place in Johannesburg, 25 September–5 October 2016) by members of the African Elephant Coalition (AEC) deserves serious consideration by the conservation science

and policy communities. The AEC includes 26 African elephant range States (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Togo and Uganda) and three non-range States (Burundi, Comoros and Mauritania), and is supported by Asian elephant range State Sri Lanka.

These proposals form a carefully formulated and measured package that—taken together—could be the game-changer for elephants, ending the current confusion of conflicting signals and half measures under CITES and enabling more effective enforcement on the ground to combat poaching and trafficking networks.

1. Listing all elephants in Appendix I

The listing of all African elephants in Appendix I in 1989 was a strong signal to the world that all trade in ivory was illegal, shifting the risk-to-reward ratio in favour of elephants. Ivory markets collapsed and the ivory price crashed, immediately ending the prevailing poaching crisis and allowing elephant populations to recover. The down-listing of the four southern African national populations to Appendix II and subsequent intermittent sales of ivory stockpiles have not slowed poaching. To the contrary, they stimulated a renewed illegal trade in response to increasing demand, particularly in the context of the second sale in 2008, once again threatening the species with extinction. As US Secretary of State John Kerry described in a US Senate Committee Hearing in May 2012, the stockpile sales are likely to have “*whetted the appetite*” for ivory in consumer countries, and the risk-to-reward ratio has now shifted in favour of wildlife criminals.

This proposal seeks to unify African elephants and their range States in one listing by including all populations of African elephant in Appendix I through the transfer from Appendix II of the populations of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. A universal listing in Appendix I will outlaw the ivory trade, simplify enforcement and send a clear message to the world of a global determination to halt the extinction of African elephants.

2. Closure of domestic ivory markets

This proposal complements Proposal 1 with a recommendation from the CITES CoP to close all domestic markets for commercial trade in raw and worked ivory. It recognizes that any sales of ivory, including within legal domestic markets, are likely to increase the risk to elephant populations and local communities, since domestic ivory markets create the opportunity to launder illegal ivory under the guise of legality. Many initiatives on several fronts currently aim to reduce the extent of illegal international trade but are undermined by legal markets. At the same time, many range and consumer States have announced action to close their legal domestic ivory markets. Many countries including 11 African range States and one non-range State in the Elephant Protection Initiative (EPI), China and the USA, Hong Kong SAR and EU Member States have recently committed to close down domestic markets; the USA has acted on its commitment with a near-ban on ivory trade in effect as of 6 June. The proposal extends that approach globally.

3. Destruction and management of ivory stockpiles

Seizures of poached ivory have swollen official ivory stockpiles held in range, transit and consumer countries. Many CITES Parties have started to destroy stockpiles publicly, to send a signal about the threat that the ivory trade represents to elephants.

This proposal builds on two earlier papers submitted to CITES Standing Committee meetings in July 2014 and January 2016, which resulted in recognition of ivory destructions since 2011 and a recommendation for the preparation of guidance on management of stockpiles, to be acted upon by the Conference of the Parties (CoP). The proposal endorses stockpile destructions and recommends that the CITES Secretariat provide the best available technical guidance on stockpile inventories, audit, management and disposal, including DNA sampling to determine the origin of items in the stockpile.

Economic arguments for the release and sale of ivory stockpiles suggest that legalizing trade will drive down prices; scarcity is claimed to increase prices, driving poaching. We submit that rather than controlling demand by releasing ivory from stockpiles, opening trade risks triggering runaway demand (as seen in China and other consumer countries over the last decade). An analogous process is the legal trade in vicuña wool, where global availability increased commercial interest and thus demand and poaching.

4. Ending the Decision-Making Mechanism for a process of trade in Ivory (DMM)

One argument for a managed trade in ivory is that a steady supply would meet demand and reduce price, thus decreasing the incentive to kill elephants. CITES has been debating the Decision-Making Mechanism for establishing a process for trade in ivory (DMM) for nearly nine years but has made no progress.

Since the mandate for the DMM was agreed in 2007, poaching and illegal trafficking in ivory have escalated. CITES MIKE and ETIS data demonstrate that poaching and illegal trade are reducing elephant numbers continuously. Moreover, economic analysis demonstrates that re-opening legal trade through a mechanism such as the DMM would risk the runaway expansion of demand noted above. Both the mathematics and assumptions underlying the proposals for a DMM process were flawed; ivory production rates in elephant populations are strongly affected by age structures, so attempts to meet realistic levels of ivory demand will inevitably lead to over-exploitation and declines.

In January 2016, SC66 agreed that the DMM Working Group established in 2013 had been unable to conclude its work and that the CoP should decide whether its mandate should or should not be extended. The AEC contends that the DMM should be abandoned once and for all.

5. Prohibiting the export of live elephants

The capture of African elephants for ex situ purposes (i.e. trade to other countries where they would live outside their natural habitat in captivity) causes physical and psychological trauma, and high rates of mortality, injury and disease. According to CITES trade data, between 2005 and 2014, 70 live wild-caught African elephants were exported from African range States to overseas zoos and circuses. Humane, ethical, cultural and conservation-appropriate considerations all point towards supporting a ban on this trade.

The proposal would end this export of African elephants outside their natural range, and limit any such movements to in situ conservation purposes or to secure areas in the wild within their natural range. It is consistent with AfESG findings that the removal of African elephants from the wild for captive use has no direct benefit for their conservation, and with the views of most range States that their elephants belong at home in Africa.

There is a unique window of opportunity at CITES CoP17 for governments to end the ivory trade and provide a consistent framework to protect African elephants from unsustainable exploitation for non-essential uses. The evidence of the ivory trade's destructive impact is clear, and is likely to be clearer still as findings from the GEC, AfESG and other reports are published before CoP17. The "Big Five" package of measures backed by the majority of African elephant range States converges with policies being implemented by China, the USA, India, the European Union and other Governments. Globally, a great many conservationists, scientists, and tourism and development experts, as well as the general public are clear that elephants are worth more alive than dead. 2016 is a pivotal year for elephants. The AEC has provided the leadership necessary to end the ivory trade and to secure the future of the species. It remains to be seen if CITES Parties have the courage to act and support the Coalition's "Big Five" at this critical point in time.

Note: This Letter is a condensed version of a longer paper, which can be found at:
<http://www.africanelephantcoalition.org/publications/>

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