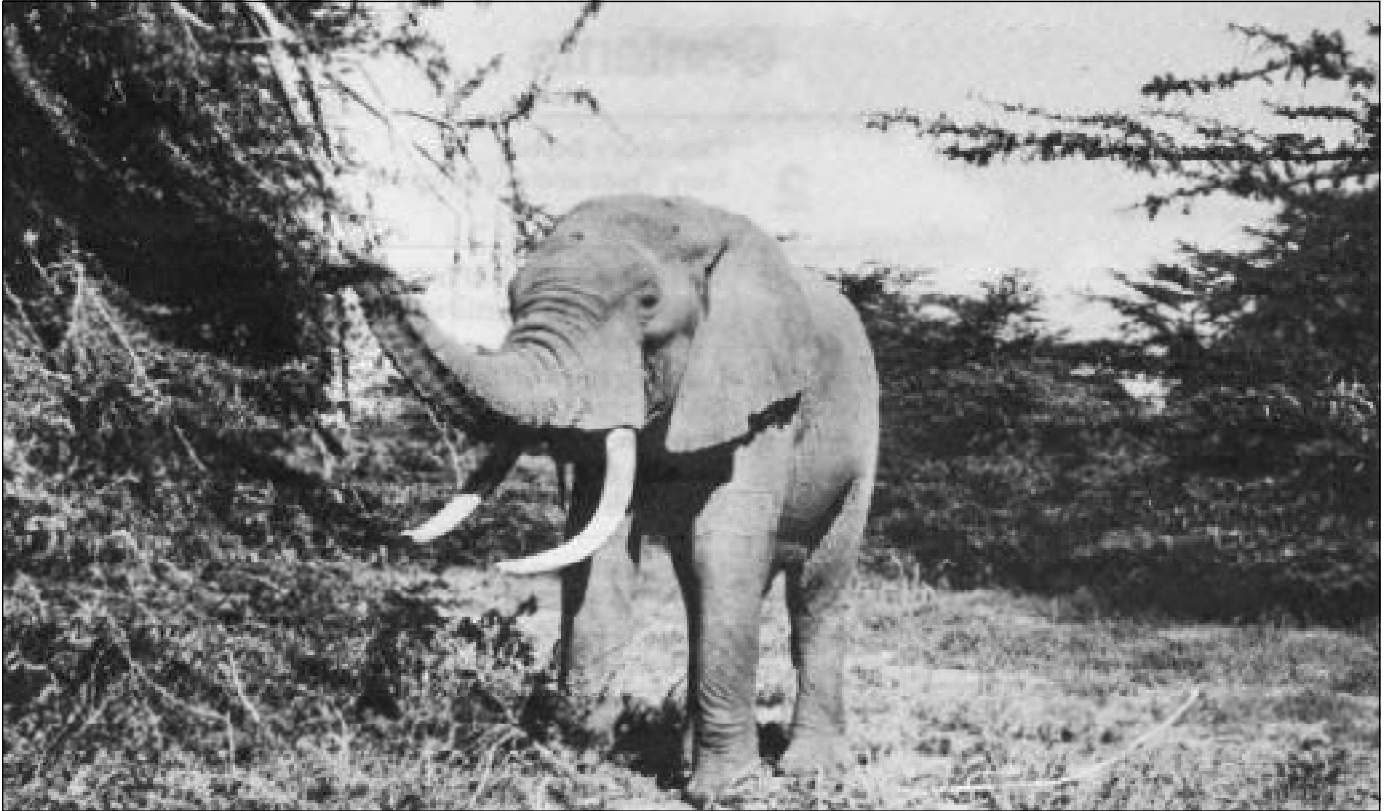


---

# Chairman's Report Ivory Trade under Scrutiny

David Western

Copyright C. A. w. Guggisberg/A. W.F.



*Bull Elephant in Amboseli*

The breakneck speeds with which ivory bans were imposed by the United States, Europe, Hong Kong and Japan at the beginning of June has left traders and producers baffled and angry. Speed and decisiveness are, after all, hardly qualities to describe the ponderous progress by which conservationists have reached a consensus on the status of the African elephant. What led to such prompt action by the main ivory consumer countries during two weeks in June? An appeal by several African governments, press coverage of ivory poaching and a non-governmental media campaign all contributed, but perhaps no factor catalyzed the chain reaction so rapidly as the study released by the Ivory Trade Review Group (ITRG) on 1 June. A summary of the study and its recommendations is given in this issue of *Pachyderm*.

An independent study of the global ivory trade and its impact on the African elephant, outlined in *Pachyderm* No.11, was initiated by Wildlife Conservation International (WCI) early last year. In July 1988, AERSG, TRAFFIC, the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit (WTMU) and CITES Secretariat supported the ITRG, which was formally convened in Nairobi later that month. During a ten-month period, the study, funded by WCI and WWF

with subsidiary projects covered by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, EEC and AWF, brought together more than 35 specialists who were to produce an independent review of the trade; the collaborating agencies were not bound by the results. The African Elephant Working Group (AEWG) of CITES later asked ITRG to submit its findings to its July 1989 meeting in Botswana. The CITES Secretariat also commissioned reports by Ian Parker, Rowan Martin and Graeme Caughley on various aspects of the ivory trade.

The findings of both the Caughley and ITRG reports concluded that the number of elephants was in sharp decline due to the ivory trade. The Caughley report, a simulation model of the ivory trade, predicted East Africa's elephants would be virtually extinct in five to seven years, and Africa's population in 15 to 20 years. Caughley's model assumed elephant numbers would shrink at an accelerating pace as poachers increased their effort to supply the ivory market as herds dwindled. Though completed in December 1988, the Caughley report was not circulated by the CITES Secretariat to AEWG members until June, notwithstanding its gravity.

---

---

The ITRG report took a slightly different tack by considering the age structure of populations in addition to overall numbers. It also made the more conservative assumption that poaching off-take would remain a constant rather than increasing fraction of the remaining population. The ITRG model also recognized regional differences in the status of populations, where the Caughley model made no distinctions. Despite the differing assumptions, both the Caughley and ITRG models draw the same conclusions. At the present levels of poaching, the ivory trade will bring elephants close to extinction.

The ITRG report stressed the highly skewed age and sex structure of Africa's elephant herds, a point borne out by the decline in tusk weights in recent years and by direct observations in the field. The large males, which once produced most ivory for the trade, have been killed off, leaving a preponderance of females and their young. Compared to ten years ago, twice as many elephants are now killed to supply a tonne of ivory. The volume of trade, which increased from around 220 tonnes a year in the 1950s to some 1,000 tonnes a year during the 1980s, is quickly contracting as the herds diminish; increasing wealth in Asian countries is cited as the main reason for the trade's expansion. With over 80% of all raw ivory coming from poached elephants, the present CITES ivory control system is clearly failing to stem the grave threat to the African elephant.

According to the ITRG report's economic analysis the benefit Africa derives from the trade is trivial. Because most of the profit is skimmed off by middlemen and corrupt officials, less than US\$ 5 million of the over US\$ 50 million value of annual ivory exports sees its way back into government coffers. In all but the one country which serves as a conduit for smuggling, ivory shipments provide a minuscule portion of export earnings. More to the point, a preoccupation with the ivory trade masks other, often far greater, benefits due to elephants. The tourist income accruing to elephant viewing in Kenya is, at US\$ 50 million annually, worth more than Africa's total realized ivory export earnings. Sport hunting and the sale of meat and skins are also lucrative, especially in southern Africa. Elephants help to diversify both savannas and forests; the loss of the African elephant would reduce biological diversity and possibly lead to accelerated extinction of other species. No less important, the elephant is a conservation flagship, a species that evokes strong sympathy and can, given public support, help protect the ecological integrity and diversity of Africa ecosystems.

The ITRG report, in looking at policy options, considers sustainable utilization the preferred conservation tool. However, because populations are rapidly collapsing and the sustainable ivory off-take is so reduced by over-hunting, the report supports Appendix 1 in the interests of the African elephant as a whole, despite the health of a few exceptional populations in southern Africa. The weaknesses inherent in a ban are acknowledged, but no other option offers better hope of conserving elephants. The report suggests that the prospect of a ban on the trade will lead to a further price surge and an escalation of poaching, which can be restrained only by immediate import bans in consumer countries; it stresses the need for complementary conservation measures in the field, along the lines of AERSG's Nyeri Action Plan (*Pachyderm* No. 11).

The simultaneous release of the document in Hong Kong, Washington, D.C. and Gland, Switzerland, was widely covered by the press and played a significant part in inducing the bans on ivory imports announced the following week by the United States and the European Community, and by Hong Kong shortly afterwards. Japan, which received the ITRG report within a few days of its release, introduced an import ban on all worked ivory and raw ivory from all non-African states.

The ITRG findings and recommendations were presented at the AEWG meeting in Botswana during the first week in July. The meeting, where central and west African nations were poorly represented (Senegal alone was present from the latter), divided along geographic lines, with the eastern African countries supporting the ITRG findings and the southern African countries claiming that the results were inapplicable to their situation. The states in favour of Appendix 1, including Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia, felt that continued trade in southern Africa would provide a conduit for illegal ivory from the north. The southern states, while accepting the inadequacy of existing ivory controls, argued that culling programmes to contain expanding elephant populations reflected good management, which should be rewarded by ivory revenues.

Although attempts were made to reconcile the two positions, no satisfactory compromise was reached. Part of the reason for the lack of agreement lay in heated discussions as to whether poaching was contained by good management, as Zimbabwe claimed, or if the lack of poaching in southern Africa was serendipitous: the latter view suggested by the case of Botswana, a country where an elephant population is rapidly expanding despite being much less protected than most East African herds. Mediators were appointed to try to reconcile the different positions during the weeks before the full Conference of Parties in Lausanne.

AERSG did not take a formal position at the Botswana meeting since none of the studies were available in time for a full review by the members. In the coming three months the regional chairmen will need to consult their members before we can attempt a consolidated statement. It will not be an easy task given the prior positions adopted by most states and the diversity of opinions AERSG members hold. The ivory trade is a hot political issue in Africa today, involving gross corruption and the loss of dozens of lives each year. Kenya, in a show of determination to prevent the ivory trade, burned its 12 tonnes of stock-piled ivory on 18 July. At the widely publicized event, President Moi called on other African states to ban the trade and destroy their ivory stocks. Clearly, the matter will be decided as much by politics as technical arguments.

One thing is beyond doubt, The elephant has become an international issue. Whatever the outcome of the CITES meeting in October, I suspect that public awareness will ease the pressure on elephants within a year by reducing ivory demand and spurring on conservation efforts.