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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

For all of you who are unaware, this will be my last edition of *Pachyderm* as editor. I will be shortly taking up new challenges in the completely different arena of biodiversity conservation, in Madagascar. For those elephant and rhino people scratching your heads, yes, there is conservation outside large mammals, although it may not be as glamorous.

First of all, I would like **to** say that it has been interesting and enjoyable working with each of you with whom I have had a chance to interact. I have had the pleasant opportunity to read the interesting material that has come through the door of this office over the past two years.

Because elephants are highly charismatic megafauna, every aspect of their conservation is highly charged, both politically and emotionally. More so it seems, than with any other species. People of all walks of life have an opinion on elephants, especially those working in their conservation. It has been interesting listening to the various arguments and points of view on how best to conserve elephants, but also very difficult to remain outside the fray as everyone would like to draw me into the debate. I think I have heard all points of view, varying from each extreme of the conservation spectrum, from use ‘em or lose ‘em to do not touch. These debates become particularly acuminate when discussing trade in elephant ivory or trophy hunting of elephants.

While acting as editor over the past couple of years, I have noticed a disturbing partiality surrounding elephant conservation and the trade in ivory, which I would like **to** take a little editorial prerogative here, particularly since I am leaving, and expound upon. Because the question surrounding trade in ivory has become so highly political and emotional, I feel that many people and organisations concerned with elephants have lost sight of the ultimate goal, which is to do what is best for the elephant.

Since the CITES Convention of Parties 10 decision to downlist the elephant populations for Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe to Appendix II, which allows the one-off trade in ivory to Japan, there has been a huge campaign to reverse this decision based often times on false information. One example comes from a country in Africa where the national authority for wildlife management has deliberately passed along information that the trade in ivory is to re-open in Africa (it is **NOT** — see the AfESG Chair report in *Pachyderm* 24), even when they know that this information is

incorrect. The hope seems to be that it will stimulate a huge public outcry and justify their position against the trade. While they may gain public support for their position, what also may occur is that poachers are given the green light and will recommence killing elephants for ivory, thinking that trade is legal once again. Is this their goal, to increase poaching levels, perhaps even to previously unmanageable levels just to say “I told you so”?

Another example is the maelstrom which currently surrounds the CITES monitoring system **to** Monitor the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE). Many are trying to sabotage the development and implementation of the system because it is perceived to be linked with the eventual one-off trade by the three southern African nations in ivory. An Africa-wide monitoring system for elephants is needed, regardless of whether trade occurs or not. Why destroy something that will ultimately benefit elephant conservation just because it is attached to the CITES decision? Regardless of the decision to trade or not to trade, a monitoring system must be put in place for future management decisions. Sure there are problems with the system, but what continent-wide system will not have problems? It is a start in the right direction, and the system can evolve to better fit the needs of CITES and the countries involved. Should something beneficial for elephant conservation be destroyed on the hope that it **MIGHT** stop the one-off sale of ivory?

The decision on whether trade is resumed or not must be based on scientific evidence that it is either beneficial or harmful for elephant conservation. If it is demonstrated that the resumption of trade in ivory is resulting in increasing poaching levels and that elephant conservation efforts are suffering, than I could not agree more with those opposed — stop the trade. However, if trade is shown to benefit conservation efforts, than I would agree with those supporting trade — reopen the trade. I would like to see the problem examined a little more rationally and in an unbiased nature before a decision is taken. As scientists, everyone needs to maintain objectivity and a certain scientific rigor when analysing any situation, and this pertains to the trade in ivory as well as any other issue. I surely hope that people have not lost site of the “forest for the trees”, and that elephant conservation is still the number one priority out there — not personal or political agendas.

Note: the views expressed in this editorial in no way reflect the opinions or policies of IUCN or the African Elephant Specialist Group.