

ASIA PACIFIC

China Bans Its Ivory Trade, Moving Against Elephant Poaching

By EDWARD WONG and JEFFREY GETTLEMAN DEC. 30, 2016

China announced on Friday that it was banning all commerce in ivory by the end of 2017, a move that would shut down the world's largest ivory market and could deal a critical blow to the practice of elephant poaching in Africa.

The decision by China follows years of growing international and domestic pressure and gives wildlife protection advocates hope that the threatened extinction of certain elephant populations in Africa can be averted.

“China’s announcement is a game changer for elephant conservation,” Carter Roberts, the president and chief executive of the World Wildlife Fund, said in a written statement. “With the United States also ending its domestic ivory trade earlier this year, two of the largest ivory markets have taken action that will reverberate around the world.”

According to some estimates, more than 100,000 elephants have been wiped out in Africa over the past 10 years in a ruthless scramble for ivory driven by Chinese demand. Some Chinese investors call ivory “white gold,” while carvers and collectors call it the “organic gemstone.”

Elly Pepper, a wildlife advocate with the Natural Resources Defense Council, which is based in New York, wrote that China's announcement "may be the biggest sign of hope for elephants since the current poaching crisis began."

Wildlife advocates have said for years that the most important step in putting poachers out of business would be shutting down the ivory industry in China.

The advocates have promoted long-running public campaigns to shame China and raise questions about its global responsibilities, at a time when China has been assuming a higher profile on the world stage. But the success of the new policy depends on how strictly it is enforced.

Wildlife researchers estimate that 50 percent to 70 percent of all smuggled elephant ivory — maybe even more — ends up in China, where there are countless ivory workshops and showrooms.

In the announcement, the State Council, China's cabinet, said the shutdown of the market, which includes all processing and sales, would occur in phases throughout 2017.

In the first step, a designated group of legal ivory processing factories and businesses will be forced to close by March 31. The Ministry of Culture will assist in the transition of legal ivory into use in museums and other cultural sites, as well as help workers in the industry, including master carvers, find related jobs.

Under the new rules, people who already own ivory products can keep them or give them as gifts, and owners can sell them at supervised auctions after getting official approval. But conservationists believe that the Chinese government is sincere in not allowing any significant domestic ivory market.

"Ivory traffickers have just lost one of their biggest markets," said Aili Kang, the Asia executive director of the Wildlife Conservation Society.

China's move is at least partly a result of negotiations at senior levels between Washington and Beijing. In 2015, when President Xi Jinping of China made a state visit to Washington, he and President Obama agreed that the two nations would impose "nearly complete bans on ivory import and export" and "take significant and timely steps to halt the domestic commercial trade of ivory."

Those goals were reiterated this past June in Beijing during a summit meeting between the United States and China that addressed economic and strategic issues.

A statement from that meeting noted that China enacted a ban on ivory imports and related products in March 2016 and that it would publish by the end of 2016 a timetable for ending its domestic commercial trade. Even with the import ban, smuggling continues as long as a domestic market exists.

"Demand for elephant ivory has skyrocketed in recent years, spurring poaching levels that are driving elephants towards extinction," Ms. Pepper wrote Friday. "And ending the legal ivory trade in China — the world's largest consumer of elephant ivory — is critical to saving the species."

Illegal ivory ends up on the legal market after being smuggled into the country, chiefly by criminal syndicates. Hong Kong has been a main transit point.

Corruption and chaos in many parts of Central Africa, where the last great elephant herds roam, are fueling the trafficking. Poachers and rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad and South Sudan have exploited conflicts and a breakdown in order to massacre thousands of elephants, often using the proceeds from ivory to buy more weapons. Like blood diamonds in West Africa in the late 1990s, ivory has become Africa's new conflict resource.

Scientists say that for the first time in years, more elephants are being killed than born, with the population steadily decreasing.

Tusks are often sold to African middlemen who pay off corrupt government officials either to look the other way or to take part in the smuggling themselves. Mombasa, Kenya, is one of the most notorious ivory ports.

Iain Douglas-Hamilton, the founder of Save the Elephants, a wildlife advocacy group in Africa, has been working for years to turn China against the ivory trade. “China is moving from being the main problem to the main solution,” he said, calling Friday’s announcement “the most astonishing and wonderful piece of news.”

Ms. Pepper of the Natural Resources Defense Council urged other nations, including Britain, to follow China’s lead, and said the United States, which has made significant progress on the issue, could do more to bolster enforcement.

The question of enforcement is one that will apply to China, too, as it enacts the ban, and government actions will be closely watched by conservationists and advocates. Chinese officials often announce ambitious policies but sometimes fall short on carrying them out. This is true of many environmental protection and conservation policies.

Pressure on the Chinese government over the ivory trade has come not just from international organizations. One of the most recognizable Chinese public figures, Yao Ming, the 7-foot-6 former Houston Rockets center, has taken up wildlife conservation as his main cause and has denounced the domestic trade in elephant ivory, rhino horns and shark fins. Years ago, he lent his name to billboards in Chinese cities that showed horrific piles of tusks. He has visited Kenya and helped publish a book on the issue and appeared in a 2014 documentary, “The End of the Wild,” made with the group WildAid.

Grace Ge Gabriel, the Asia director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, wrote on Friday that she was “overwhelmed with joy” at China’s announcement. She said the legal market in China had long provided cover for the illegal market, and it had also sent “a confusing message to consumers that it is O.K. to buy ivory.”

But the new policy, she said, “demonstrates the Chinese government’s determination to save elephants.”

Once the Chinese market shuts down, the main international market for ivory may shift to Southeast Asia, but the demand in that region is not expected to be nearly as large as in China, which, with 1.4 billion people, is the world's most populous nation.

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A version of this article appears in print on December 31, 2016, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: China Banning Ivory, Thrilling Nature Groups.

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