Every 15 minutes: The poaching of elephants and the illegal ivory trade

“We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man.” ~ Henry Beston, “The Outermost House,” 1928

Elephants can be found in some 37 countries, or “range states,” in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1979, more than 1.3 million elephants roamed wild in Africa. By 1989, poaching had killed more than half that number.

So in 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned the international trade of ivory. CITES has three Appendices on which wildlife may be listed. Appendix I is for species faced with extinction, and trade is therefore banned outright. Appendix II is for species that are threatened, and trade in them is tightly regulated. On 17 October 1989, the African elephant was moved from Appendix II to Appendix I.

CITES’ power lay in its ability to impose severe sanctions on non-compliant countries, sanctions that can seriously curtail those countries’ ability to participate in legal, regulated wildlife trade. Yet, from the start, not all African countries supported the CITES listing. They argued that they already had strong elephant conservation programs and that the ban would constrain funds available for those programs. So in 1997, at the CITES Convention of the Parties, CITES granted Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe permission to transfer their elephant populations from Appendix I to Appendix II.

Nonetheless, CITES has found 22 countries worldwide that are most heavily implicated by a continuing trade in illegal ivory. They fall within three categories: countries of “primary concern,” countries of “secondary concern,” and countries of “importance to watch.”

[MAP OF AFRICA WITH THESE COUNTRIES HIGHLIGHTED]

Since the 1989 ban, CITES has allowed two large sales of stockpiled ivory, one in 1999 and the other in 2008. The 1999 sale allowed Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia to sell some of their stockpiles to Japan. At the time, however, there were no reliable ways to survey poaching and ivory smuggling, so the effects of the sale could not be determined.

The 2008 sale allowed Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa to sell more than 100 tons of stockpiled ivory to Japan and China. By then, CITES had established its program for Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE). Begun in 2002, MIKE consists of 79 monitoring sites in Asia and Africa.

The 2008 sale, however, was rigged. Japanese and Chinese buyers colluded to keep the auction prices low, with each only bidding on certain types of ivory, e.g., full tusks vs. pieces, so there was little competition. The ivory sold fetch an average of just $67 per pound. But then the Chinese government turned around and charged its buyers upwards of $500 per pound for the raw ivory.

According to a report by the National Geographic Society(http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/10/ivory/christy-text), “the future of the African elephant may forever be clouded by the moment when CITES, lacking the data to evaluate the impact of its first ivory sale, endorsed a second.” Indeed, since 2007, the illegal trade in ivory has more than doubled, with estimates of illegal killing at about 33,000.

In other words, for nearly a decade, an African elephant has died at the hands of poachers every 15 minutes.

The CITES ban only pertains to *international* trade. It does not specifically prohibit domestic trade within a country’s borders. Some countries, therefore, engage in “regulated” and “unregulated” markets that primarily offer trinkets to tourists. But many argue that unregulated domestic markets provide a loophole for poachers to launder their illegal ivory.

[MAP OF AFRICA WITH REGULATED AND UNREGULATED MARKETS SHOWN]

Yet elephants do not know from international borders. And they often cross them in search of food and water as seasons change, which, depending on whether the country they enter has an unregulated market, may open them up to being killed.

Studies have shown that, though countries with regulated markets saw population increases, countries with unregulated markets (http://bjc.oxfordjournals.org/content/49/4/451.full.pdf) are more likely to see declines in their populations. And in fact, the elephant population just in Central African countries has declined by 62% in just the last decade. What’s more, the five countries that border three or more unregulated markets were responsible for 75% of the losses.

THE PROBLEM OF POACHING

More than 100,000 elephants were illegally killed between 2010 and 2012.

Poachers in Kenya and Tanzania have turned to poisoned watermelons to kill elephants. Poachers in some regions have used belt-fed automatic weapons to mow them down.

In January 2012, 100 marauders on horseback crossed the border from Chad into Cameroon’s Bouba Ndjidah National Park and slaughtered hundreds of elephants. Using AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, they decimated entire families of elephants for their ivory.

The impact of poaching extends beyond the deaths of the elephants that are killed. Says Phillip Mansbridge, UK Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), “Anyone who has witnessed the aftermath of elephant poaching, seeing the pain of traumatized orphans left behind, will realize the huge impact on elephant survivors.”

Carl Safina, author of *Beyond Words: What animals think and feel*, puts the issue thusly: “When a poacher kills an elephant, he doesn’t just kill the elephant who dies. The family may lose the crucial memory of their elder matriarch, who knew where to travel during the very toughest years of drought to reach the food and water that would allow them to continue living. Thus one bullet may, years later, bring more deaths.”

But poaching in many ways remains a low-risk, high-reward endeavor. This is in large part due to official corruption, low levels of seriousness with which it is viewed compared to other crimes, the under-resourcing of enforcement, all of which lead to a minimal deterrent effect. And overreliance on enforcement is seen by many as ineffective, with officials either not caring or turning a blind eye for money and weak sentences for those convicted.

EFFORTS TO STOP THE KILLING

In June of this year, the largest ever ivory burn took place when Kenya torched 105 tons of it along with 1.35 tons of rhino horn. The Kenya burn represented between 6,000 and 7,000 dead elephants and was worth some $300 million on the black market.

According to Azzedine Downes, President and CEO of IFAW, “By destroying the largest ivory stockpile, Kenya has demonstrated that the only valuable ivory and rhino horn is on a live animal.”

Although an additional 100 tons of ivory have been destroyed in 18 countries since 2011, ivory seizures continue to increase. In 2011, 24.3 tons were seized, while in 2013, more than 41 tons were.

[MAP OF EASTERN HEMISPHERE NETWORKS OF SEIZURES/TRADE ROUTES]

Kenya’s president, Uhuru Kenyatta, says, “The future of the African elephant and rhino is far from secure so long as demand for their products continues to exist.” And he called for a total ban on the sale of elephant ivory, charging that any sale, even in legal domestic markets, adds to the risk to elephants.

But Tom Milliken of the wildlife trade monitoring group Traffic denies that ivory destruction events result in decreased poaching and trafficking. He says, “Unless it’s accompanied by a real commitment to beefed up anti-poaching in protected areas, law enforcement, efforts to rout out corruption, also at a political level…it won’t make any dent in the illegal trade of ivory.”

While enforcement surely must be addressed, many argue that alternative solutions, such as prevention, must also be prioritized. Policy makers and the judiciary often place more emphasis on more traditional crimes, such as drugs and violence against persons.

Melanie Wellsmith, a UK professor of criminology, has argued that prevention should be the primary weapon (http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/9522/) against wildlife crime and not merely an alternative to weak enforcement. Prevention efforts must be founded on the premise that elephants are more valuable to the community alive and protected than killed. Ecotourism, so long as it employs and is supported by community members, is one example of such an approach.

TARGETING DEMAND

“To stop the poacher, the trader must also be stopped. And to stop the trader, the final buyer must be convinced not to buy ivory.” ~Daniel arap Moi, President of Kenya (1979–2002)

Many social values are wrapped up in ivory. In addition to perceptions of it as the perfect gift in many Asian societies, ivory is seen as luxurious and noble, and thus an ideal status symbol. As a gift, many believe that it provides a sense of happiness and social status to both the giver and the receiver. There is also an emotional connection with ivory for some people, who believe ownership of it confers confidence, power, pride and respect.

Yet many regard demand reduction as the last, best way to stop the slaughter of elephants in Africa. Reducing demand will require its value being diminished among those who would purchase it. One suspects that as it becomes less acceptable socially, there would be a concurrent reduction in its suitability as a status symbol or gift.

One study cites research (http://www.nber.org/papers/w22314) revealing that many Chinese consumers, who make up the largest market for ivory, believe that ivory is obtained without harming elephants.

Yet, even among those knowledge of the true costs of obtaining ivory, its use as a religious and political symbol persists. Pope Benedict XVI once received an ivory and gold thurible from the president of Lebanon and an ivory Stanto Niño from the president of the Philippines in 2007. And despite being considered by many the father of the ivory ban, president Daniel arap Moi once gave Pope John Paul II an entire elephant tusk.

A former ad executive turned devout Buddhist defended the use of ivory for religious objects, telling National Geographic (http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/10/ivory/christy-text), “Ivory is very precious, so to be respectful of the Buddha one should use precious material. If not ivory, then gold. But ivory is more precious.”

Terry Garcia, chief science and exploration officer for the National Geographic Society, posits, “We’ve got to begin addressing the issue of demand and how you suppress it. How do you make it socially unacceptable to purchase illegal ivory?”

In an attempt to figure that out, National Geographic partnered with GlobeScan to conduct a comprehensive study on the demand for ivory in five countries (China, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and the United States). The goal of the August 2015 report, entitled “Reducing demand for ivory: An international study,” (<http://press.nationalgeographic.com/files/2015/09/NGS2015_Final-August-11-RGB.pdf)> was to understand the dynamics of the demand for ivory in terms of consumer attitudes and opinions so as to ascertain how they may be changed.

In spite of many consumers’ interest in buying ivory, the study found strong support across countries for governmental restriction on ivory trading. But there is little evidence that such action would impact the deeply ingrained social values that drive demand. Therefore, top-down strategies to curb the illegal ivory trade will likely be insufficient.

The National Geographic/GlobeScan study identified five consumer segments based on expressed interest in buying ivory and having the financial resources to do so. Of the five, two are of particular importance: “Likely Buyers” and “Firm Rejectors.”

Believing that ivory confers power and status is a major determinant of the market, and this is especially true of “Likely Buyers,” with 69% regarding it as a status symbol, compared to the total average of 49%. This group represents 22% of the study’s participants across all five countries. In China and the Philippines, however, they make up more than one-third. Among these buyers, the decision to purchase ivory stems from a wish to convey social and financial status.

In addition, many in this group hold a utilitarian view of animals as a source of food and materials, and they have a greater than average tendency to describe themselves as fashionable, social and religious. They like to buy things, therefore, that reflect their social and financial status.

Perplexingly, “Likely Buyers” are equally aware as other segments that elephants are endangered. Yet only 31% see elephants as *very* endangered. And only one-third believe that buying small items hurts elephants.

Those most opposed to ivory, “Firm Rejectors,” make up just 16% of survey participants across countries, although they make up nearly one-quarter of study participants in the U.S. This group is important to understand because they offer insight into what drives people to oppose buying ivory. And indeed, the study revealed that this segment has very different beliefs about elephants and ivory from the other four segments.

This group tends to be older and married or in a long-term relationship, have higher incomes and live in major urban areas. Almost half of “Firm Rejectors” disbelieve that ivory confers status, compared with just 19% of the total average. They also believe much more strongly than the rest that elephants are in grave danger. The two reasons that best explain “Firm Rejectors” attitudes toward ivory are disapproval of hunting and concerns about extinction. What’s more, this group believes most strongly in the rights of animals and they react more negatively that others to cruelty to animals.

The study concluded that the scientific/academic and nonprofit environmental communities are the most trusted sources of information about elephants and that they are well-positioned to carry anti-ivory messages.

THE ASIAN MARKET FOR IVORY

China scored highest in the National Geographic/GlobeScan study on several measures related to ivory demand, including the highest percentage of “Likely Buyers,” ownership and recent purchases of ivory and positive beliefs about ivory as desirable.

Ivory in China is also widely advertised as inflation-proof and value appreciative. So for some, it is an investment. It is also seen as culturally historic fine art among carvers and collectors. In China, ivory figurines often depict Fu (the god of luck), Lu (the god of money) and Shou (the god of long life). Some Chinese also believe that ivory exorcises evil spirits and offers medicinal benefits.

The Philippines is another ivory hotspot. More than five tons of illegal ivory were seized in Manila in 2009, and 7.7 tons were seized in 2005. More than six tons bound for the country were seized in Taiwan in 2006. Since the average ivory per elephant weighs about 22 pounds, these seizures represent some 2,000 dead elephants.

The chief of the Philippines customs police told a Manila newspaper, “The Philippines is a favorite destination of these smuggled elephant tusks, maybe because Filipino Catholics are fond of images of saints that are made of ivory.” And indeed, on Cebu, ivory is so closely connected to the Catholic church that “garing,” the word for ivory, also means “religious statue.”

Many Filipinos believe that the value of religious icons is reflected in how much was paid for them. They contend that wooden or fiberglass icons are not valuable enough. For them, only ivory will do.

While Filipinos’ religious icons symbolize their Catholic faith, Thais use ivory to make Buddhist objects, often bought by orange-robed monks. The elephant is worshipped in Thailand and Buddhism, as legend holds that the night Queen Maya became pregnant with Siddhartha Gautama, a six-tusked white elephant entered her right side. But this worshipping of the animal does not extend to rejecting the ivory for which those animals are killed.

The U.S. market, in contrast to the Asian market, is comprised of Americans who have the lowest likelihood to believe in positive benefits from ivory ownership. They also, however, have the least awareness of elephant- and ivory-related concerns. Fewer than half have heard a great deal about poaching or the potential extinction of elephants.

What’s more, it remains remarkably easy to smuggle ivory into this country. An Asian religious leader told a National Geographic reporter that to smuggle an ivory object home, he should “wrap it in old, stinky underwear and pour ketchup on it so it looks shitty with blood.” This leader promised to bless whatever the reporter bought, “unlike those animal-nut priests who will not bless ivory.”

On the one hand, concerns over the plight of elephants among Americans and Filipinos are offset by a belief that governments won’t allow elephants to become extinct. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, believe that the precipitous decline in elephant populations means that they should buy as much as they can now, before it disappears.

THE CALL FOR LEGALIZATION

In advance of this year’s CITES Convention of the Parties, both Zimbabwe and Namibia submitted proposals to allow the legal sale of ivory from their stockpiles. Calling the international ban a costly and unsuccessful “experiment,” the governments have petitioned CITES to remove their elephants from the ban’s protection and allow them to release their stockpiles into the global market. They contend that poaching has *increased* because ivory has not been available through legal open auctions.

The debate of legalization has been an ongoing one. Some suggest that legal sales place competitive market pressures that displace black market ivory sales, thus disincentivizing poaching. This argument in favor of legal ivory sales also maintains that funds from such sales can be used to support conservationists, who now have to rely on overly stretched governmental budgets and grants from donor organizations.

The main argument against such sales holds that it would be detrimental to elephants owing to current legal domestic markets being undermined by corruption. Such corruption facilitates the laundering of illegally obtained ivory and is not likely to be eliminated any time soon.

The belief that legalization won’t hurt elephant populations, but will instead help them, is fully refuted by a study from Solomon Hsiang, of UC Berkeley, and Nitin Sekar, of Princeton University (http://africanliongroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/nber\_w22314.pdf). The authors contend that the presence of legal ivory makes the concealment of illegally produced ivory easier and may even attract more consumers because it destigmatizes the purchase of ivory.

Their study concluded that the subsequent rise in poaching activity in Africa likely originated with the 2008 CITES auction. What’s more, they found that the international announcement of the 2008 sale corresponds with a sudden 66% increase in the production of illegal ivory products across two continents and a possible ten-fold increase in the trend.

The study reveals that legalization has had, and likely will continue to have, if allowed, a detrimental effect on elephant populations. The authors contend that the 2008 ivory auction led to “an abrupt, significant, permanent, robust and geographically widespread increase in the production of illegal ivory through elephant poaching.”

CONCLUSION

The plight of the African elephant has led China and the U.S., two of the largest markets for smuggled ivory, to start taking steps that could curb trade in illegal ivory and reduce the slaughter.

Although China had already instituted an ID-card system for all carvings larger than a trinket, a report from IFAW found that dealers were selling the objects and keeping the cards to use for similar looking items. The government also shut down the legal ivory auction market in 2011, though this didn’t appear to have an impact on levels of poaching.

In May 2015, though, China announced that it would shut down its domestic ivory market and the carving industry. This announcement was followed in June of this year by President Obama issuing a near-total ban on the sale of African ivory products within the U.S.

While both measures will surely help, most agree that the destruction of elephants must be stopped at its source, in Africa. Besides the sale of ivory, elephants have substantial value from tourism, which can provide a sustained income flow.

However, local people often are not the immediate beneficiaries of ecotourism. Local people frequently lack the language and other skills that tour operators require, so their employees generally come in from elsewhere. One could argue, then, that ecotourism mainly benefits a few wealthy people from developed countries.

Poor people in destination countries have their livelihoods curbed by regulations on farming, grazing, and the use of elephants as bush meat. And, even then, their crops are sometimes destroyed by elephants, setting up a tension between the animals and local communities. So while ecotourism is a laudable practice, more must be done to make sure it benefits the local population.