

## Elephants Revisited (Part 2) Africa Geographic, October 2007



### TO TRADE OR NOT TO TRADE?

International trade in ivory has been banned since 1990, but the question of whether or not to permit controlled sales of 'white gold' remains hotly debated. Countries with well-managed elephant populations, usually the southern African states, argue that they can and should be allowed to make money from their ivory stockpiles. Countries that struggle with poaching – East and Central Africa predominantly – counter that any resumption of the legal trade will open the floodgates to the kind of elephant slaughter seen in the 1970s and '80s. The issue came to a head again in June 2007 at the meeting of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), but this time, they seem to have struck a deal. Academic super-sleuth and ivory researcher Esmond Bradley Martin examines the current situation.

### IVORY SALES, PAST AND FUTURE – THE FACTS

One of the most contentious issues of wildlife conservation is whether some sort of legal international ivory trade should be allowed in those African countries that manage their elephants well. Millions of dollars have been spent on conferences and workshops debating the issue, but there is still no consensus amongst conservationists. The discussions have become highly emotional and, at times, vitriolic.

Anger surfaced at the 1989 CITES conference when all commercial trade in ivory was banned, starting in January 1990. In 1997, the Parties to CITES gave Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe permission to sell a total of 50 tonnes of government-owned elephant tusks to Japan. This sale took place in Harare in 1999, earning the four governments about US\$5-million.

In 2002, the CITES conference voted that, if two main conditions could be met, a second one-off sale of 60 tonnes of tusks from government stocks in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa would be allowed. First, the Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (a programme abbreviated to MIKE) had to be in place, providing baseline data on elephant poaching in Africa and Asia. Second, potential buying nations had to demonstrate proper controls and prove that no ivory (neither raw nor worked) would be re-exported. These conditions were not fully complied with until 2 June 2007, when CITES approved Japan as the buyer for those 60 tonnes. At the CITES conference, which started a day later, the question of ivory once again took longer to resolve than any other wildlife trade issue. Kenya and Mali presented a proposal to prohibit all trade in raw and worked ivory for 20 years. Botswana and Namibia proposed that an annual export quota for international trade for raw ivory be established for Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In order to succeed, two-thirds of the Parties had to approve either proposal. As this was unlikely, voting did not take place.

Instead, the African nations concerned were pressured to develop a single proposal, a compromise that would be acceptable to all. During a lengthy and acrimonious dialogue, such a compromise was reached and approved by consensus. It was agreed that, in addition to the sale of the 60 tonnes, another sale would be allowed. Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe were granted permission to auction all the tusks accumulated and registered by their respective governments up

to 31 January 2007. After this, the four countries would not submit any new proposals to sell tusks for nine years. Both sides of the debate were generally happy with the compromise, although the US government, among others, was disappointed that Zimbabwe was given permission to export its tusks. If the southern African governments that sell their ivory wish to maximise their income, these auctions should be conducted in Japanese and should take place in Tokyo or Osaka, where the majority of Japan's ivory dealers are located.

### ONE-OFF SALES – DO THEY FUEL ELEPHANT POACHING?

There has been only one CITES ivory auction since the ban, so we must investigate the effects of this on the illegal trade if we wish to consider the impact of future sales. An organisation called the Species Survival Network (SSN), consisting of many US and British NGOs, asserts that any legal sales of raw ivory will send the wrong signals. Buyers may think that legal trade in ivory has, or is about to be, re-opened and this will lead to an increase in the illicit trade in ivory and in elephant poaching.

One member of the SSN, the Born Free Foundation, believes that one-off sales should not be allowed because since 2005 there have been, 'large seizures, escalating prices, recent reports of poaching ... as well as inadequacy of ivory controls in potential trading partners'. On the opposite side of the debate is TRAFFIC, an NGO that monitors wildlife trade. Scientists have been collecting data on customs seizures of illegal ivory for CITES – a programme called the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS). In its analysis of more than 12,000 elephant product seizures from 1989 to early 2007, TRAFFIC concludes that 'the hypothesis that CITES elephant discussions and decisions produce "signals" which lead to increasing illicit trade in ivory cannot be validated using the ETIS data'.

I know of only one article that examines in detail the effect of the one-off sale in 1999. Written by Erwin Bulte and others for the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, the paper concluded: 'At the local level there was some evidence that the one-off sale resulted in extra elephant killing, but this effect was relatively small (and probably short-lived).' The authors also stated that 'further experimenting with one-off sales may be beneficial from a conservation and development perspective,' and that 'such sales may be the future for the ivory trade in the medium term, with modest economic gains for trading partners and small ecological losses for all range states'.

My colleague Dan Stiles and I have been monitoring the main retail ivory markets and interviewing ivory traders, craftsmen, vendors and customers in Africa, Asia and Europe for their opinions on the one-off sale. In West and Central African countries, surveyed in 1999, some traders and vendors were convinced that the one-off sale was the beginning of the lifting of the CITES ban. A number stayed in business a little longer, hoping the trade would indeed re-open. Some of their customers (mainly foreign tourists, businessmen and diplomats) thought the one-off sale meant that the ivory ban had been lifted and bought items to take back home.

In southern Africa in 1999, ivory dealers were generally very pessimistic about the trade and the one-off sale, although business picked up a little (presumably because some buyers thought that the ivory ban was being lifted).

In 2001, nobody in South or South-East Asia had any feelings about the one-off sale as it did not affect them. In 2002, traders in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan were more aware of the sale, but did not feel affected by it. Two years later, Europeans did not know much about the one-off sale, except for some craftsmen in France and Germany who said it had no effect on their business.

It seems that the 1999 raw ivory auction did not play a part in increased elephant poaching and the illegal trade in ivory. Instead, there are other more relevant factors involved. Law enforcement is

lacking in many countries in Africa and Asia owing to poor governance, mismanagement and corruption. This has allowed poachers, middlemen and vendors to thrive. Both elephants and people are killed in the lawlessness that prevails in some wildlife areas, especially in Central Africa. As long as unregulated retail ivory markets exist, customers will continue to buy ivory items crafted from the tusks of poached elephants.

A large amount of tusks are smuggled from West and Central Africa to other parts of the continent and to China. Whether or not CITES auctions for tusks take place, it seems that illegal and unregulated domestic ivory markets will persist, depleting elephant populations in parts of Africa and Asia, unless the action plan for the control of domestic ivory markets, one that was approved by CITES in June, is implemented.

#### VIRTUAL TRADING GETS REAL

In June 2007, online auction house eBay Inc. announced that it would ban the cross-border trade of ivory products, following a study by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). In a randomly chosen week in February, IFAW found 2 275 ivory pieces offered for sale on the Internet, 94 per cent of which lacked any mention of certification and were probably illegal. Claudia McMurray, US assistant secretary of state for environmental issues, applauded the decision and reiterated the US's commitment to prosecuting illegal traders, but added that, 'The Internet is a huge challenge ... You still have to identify the buyer and the seller, and ascertain whether it's elephant ivory and legal ... in cyberspace you don't know who you are dealing with.'

#### FOREST SPIRITS

It is a sad irony that at a time of greater stability for savanna elephants, their forest cousins are facing a future that could be both bleak and brief. Political turmoil in their range states, coupled with intensifying logging activities, have rendered the elephants of Africa's rainforests especially vulnerable to poachers. Wildlife biologist Stephen Blake assesses their conservation status.

Forest elephants are smaller than their savanna counterparts, with straight, downward-pointing tusks and backs that are higher than their heads – all adaptations to life in dense forest. They may even be a distinct species and, indeed, the extant genus of African elephant *Loxodonta* is thought to have evolved in Africa's equatorial forest. Today, the forest covers some 1.8 million square kilometres, most of which is potentially suitable forest elephant habitat. Unfortunately, there has been no systematic and periodic assessment of forest elephant distribution, range and poaching levels. However, there are several sources of information that suggest that these elephants have experienced heavy losses in both numbers and range since 1989.

Perhaps the most telling snapshot of the current conservation status comes from CITES's Monitoring of the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme, which conducted elephant population surveys between 2003 and 2005 in some of the most important conservation areas for forest elephants. During these surveys, researchers, often moving on foot, recorded signs of elephants, including dung, live animals and indications of feeding, as well as evidence of elephant-poaching activity – camps, carcasses, meat-smoking racks and large calibre bullet cases. (Michael D. Kock shared some of his experiences on one of these surveys in the September 2007 issue of *Africa Geographic*.)

Overall, the results were shocking. In the Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a reserve of some 36 000 square kilometres, there were probably only 2,000 elephants left. Large gangs of well-armed poachers were still active. In one instance, survey workers stayed at a camp of 18 hunters, each armed with an AK47. In Salonga at that time, a park guard earned about US\$2 per month – little incentive to protect elephants when each animal carried the equivalent of

decades of salary on its jaws.

In the Bangassou region of south-eastern Central African Republic (CAR), heavily armed Sudanese horsemen continued to plunder forest elephants and other wildlife during the dry season, as they had when the first surveys of the area were conducted in 1987. A three-week study in the Bangassou town meat market in 2004 revealed that the trunks of at least nine elephants had been sold. Confirmation of elephant poaching for ivory was found in all the parks that were surveyed, even the largest and most remote. Two of the national parks still contained significant numbers of elephants – Minkébé in north-east Gabon and Odzala-Kokoua in the Republic of Congo. However, both were experiencing heavy poaching pressure.

The relationship between roads and elephants established during the first survey of forest elephants, conducted by Richard Barnes in the 1980s, still held true – the closer to roads, the fewer the elephants, their abundance increasing with distance from the nearest road.

The big difference between modern-day conditions and Barnes's time is the explosion in the logging industry. Increased road-building to carry logging trucks and equipment has dramatically eaten away the wilderness (with the exception of the DRC, where infra-structure has crumbled). Where roads lead, people follow, and forest elephants inexorably retreat in their wake. Today there are few areas that lie more than 40 kilometres from a major road, which roughly represents the distance that a hunter will walk. (MIKE survey teams found no poached elephant carcasses further than 45 kilometres from the nearest road.)

The elephants in eastern DRC were not included in these MIKE programme surveys. However, a study published in 2005 revealed something of the scale of poaching in the last great elephant refuge of that region – the Ituri forest, famed for its strange giraffe relative, the okapi. The study, conducted by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature and the Wildlife Conservation Society, discovered that some 17,000 kilograms of ivory had been smuggled out of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, a World Heritage Site that covers about a fifth of Ituri, over a six-month period during the civil war in 2004.

This suggests that several thousand elephants had been killed. The Congolese army and militia personnel, as well as government officials and businessmen and -women were the principal organisers of this unprecedented elephant slaughter and rapid trade in ivory. It was the first time that elephants had been used as a resource during a time of conflict in that country. The DRC, which once contained one of the largest and most diverse elephant populations in Africa, now has a few thousand individuals in remnant populations dispersed across the country.

Important information on the trade in ivory from Central Africa also comes from the Elephant Trade Information System of CITES, the latest report of which was presented at the CITES conference in June 2007. For the third consecutive time, the DRC was found to be the African elephant range state with the poorest record of control over the illegal ivory trade. It was closely followed by Cameroon (also a forest elephant range state) and Nigeria. Many Central African capital cities still have unregulated domestic ivory markets, a clear indication of a larger problem concerning protection in the forest, control of trade routes and basic policing. The capacity of law enforcement systems, except in the most heavily subsidised protected areas, remains weak.

In conclusion, forest elephants of the Congo Basin are in serious trouble owing primarily to poaching for ivory (although they are also killed for bushmeat). Their range and numbers have diminished seriously in recent decades, despite considerable growth in wildlife conservation efforts. However, there is still time to reverse the trend. Some areas of Gabon, Congo, CAR and even the DRC still

maintain large elephant populations. But, if successful conservation action is not brought to bear in the very near future, these populations will decline rapidly under relentless poaching pressure.

In China, the major consumer country for illegal ivory, prices have tripled in the past two years, from US\$250 to US\$750 per kilogram – thus the incentive to poach elephants and traffic ivory is great. As investment by Chinese and other Asian companies explodes in logging, mining and other resource-extraction industries in the heart of the Congo Basin, the outlook is grim unless concerted efforts to protect national parks and control trade routes are made by governments, the private sector, the international donor community and national and international conservation NGOs. The Central African governments have recently endorsed an action plan for the conservation of their elephants ... but time for its implementation is running out.

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## WILD RIDES

Last year, Africa Geographic and Sharon van Wyk took a long, hard look at southern Africa's controversial elephant-back safari industry. Here, she reports on recent developments.

It has been almost a year since the controversial issues surrounding the elephant-back safari industry came to a head when, last November, internationally renowned Victoria Falls-based tourism operator Shearwater Adventures captured a group of 12 wild juvenile elephants in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park. Taken from their family units, the animals, judged to be around eight or nine years old, were relocated to Shearwater's elephant camp at the Falls to begin training for use in the company's elephant-back safari operation.

One of the animals died during the capture, which sent shockwaves through the conservation world, plunging Shearwater into a bitter battle with the Zimbabwe National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and focusing the global spotlight on the use of elephants in tourism. The dust surrounding the incident may have settled now, but the capture of wild elephants for use in tourism remains the single biggest stumbling block in the elephant-back safari industry. The South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism's (DEAT) much anticipated Draft Norms and Standards (DNS) for elephant management, unveiled earlier this year, stipulates that only elephants already in captivity, captive-bred or genuinely orphaned in the wild will be allowed to be kept in captivity.

If promulgated as it stands, the DNS should put an end to the capture of wild elephants to service the industry in South Africa. Sadly, this important step forward came too late for 30-year old Bizwerk Mojo, a Zimbabwean elephant groomer at the Tzaneen base of Elephants for Africa Forever (EFAF). Mojo was tragically killed last December while assisting in the training of a young elephant, one of a group of wild animals captured by EFAF from the Selati Private Game Reserve in the Limpopo province.

Although the cause of the incident is not known, for many people Mojo's death was seen as an extra-large question mark over the safety of using wild-caught elephants in the tourism industry, and the wisdom of those who capture them. Wild capture aside, the year since the Shearwater incident has, thankfully, borne some positive fruit in that the South African elephant-back safari industry has a new champion – the Elephant Tourism Association (ETA). Formed last October under the umbrella of the Elephant Managers and Owners Association, which had been battling with the issues surrounding captive, 'tame' elephants, the ETA formally represents the 22 elephant tourism operators in South Africa and directly oversees the welfare of the 110 or so animals in their care.

More importantly, the ETA has addressed the contentious issues surrounding elephant training by working with its members to standardise the best of the recognised positive reinforcement techniques that are already in use. Similarly, the training of handlers has been put under the spotlight and the ETA has ratified a formal code of conduct, at last laying down industry-recognised and -approved guidelines and policies.

DEAT and the Department of Agriculture, under whose auspices the elephant tourism industry falls, have tasked the industry with its own policing. Certainly, in terms of the safety and wellbeing of the elephants involved, the people who care for them and the tourists, everything in the South African elephant-back safari industry finally seems to be moving in the right direction.

Sadly, for the industry in Zimbabwe, all of which is based around the Victoria Falls, the past year has not been a good one. Struggling for obvious political reasons, the combination of the events of this time last year and the effects of the Mugabe regime have made it a difficult period for anyone involved with elephants there. Time alone will tell the outcome. One can only hope that the positive actions being taken in South Africa, especially when it comes to the outlawing of wild capture, will be noticed and applied.

*Sharon van Wyk is a freelance journalist and film-maker. Her in-depth investigation of the elephant-back safari industry in southern Africa appeared in the August 2006 edition of Africa Geographic.*