

Cracking down on the illegal ivory market is key to saving elephants

By Daniel Stiles, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.29.16

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A herd of adult and baby elephants walks in the dawn light as the highest mountain in Africa, Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, is seen in the background, in Amboseli National Park, Kenya. Photo: AP Photo/Ben Curtis

It appears certain that almost all legal domestic ivory markets will be closed in an effort to protect elephants.

This is plan A for a large group of animal rights and welfare organizations. The goal is to stop elephant poaching, or illegal hunting. Animal rights leaders share the belief that legal trade provides cover for illegal trade. They also believe legal sales increase demand.

Get rid of legal trade, say supporters, and fewer people will buy ivory products. Ivory is made from elephant tusks. Any elephant ivory seen for sale will be illegal. This clarity will make it easy for law enforcement to take action and for consumers to avoid buying an illegal product.

Sale Of Ivory Around The World Will End

Increasingly this is a majority position. In September, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature recommended closing the sale of ivory around the world. In October, a similar proposal was adopted at the 17th Conference of the Parties of Cities. It is the international convention that regulates wildlife trade.

Animal welfare proponents believe that selling ivory legally creates a cover for laundering. Laundering the ivory means hiding where it came from.

"It's a pity that countries with existing legal domestic ivory markets ignored the risks legal markets may bring to elephant populations," said Grace Ge Gabriel. She works for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). The illegal laundering is made to look like legal selling, she said.

Most Countries Are On Board

President Xi Jinping of China and U.S. President Barack Obama announced last year that they would stop ivory sales, as far as national laws in each country would allow. They apparently agree with the argument of the Wildlife Conservation Society and IFAW that legal trade promotes illegal trade. Most European Union countries are also further restricting sales of ivory. In Africa, all but a few countries have banned ivory trade, as have most countries in Asia.

In the near future, there is a good chance that almost all major ivory-buying countries will have domestic ivory bans in place. So, will these bans solve the elephant poaching problem? Probably not.

Tom Milliken is an ivory expert from the wildlife trade monitoring group Traffic. He said all the protection in the world is not going to make up for poor law enforcement, widespread dishonesty and weak management.

Demand For Ivory In China Is High

I led a study of the drivers of ivory demand in eastern Asia in 2015. We found that roughly 200 metric tons (440,925 pounds) of illegal ivory were smuggled annually into China-Hong Kong from 2009 to 2014. This time is considered the peak of the elephant poaching crisis. We estimated that only about 10 metric tons (22,046 pounds) of it was processed a year to meet consumer demand. The balance of 190 metric tons (418,878 pounds) a year was most likely stockpiled by speculators. These were people apparently betting that ivory prices would remain high.

The study estimated that about 3.5 metric tons (7,716 pounds) of ivory was consumed in China legally each year. It came from ivory purchased in 2008 in Africa in a Cities-approved sale. That makes total consumer consumption about 13.5 metric tons (29,762 pounds) a year in China. Doing the math, three-quarters by weight of all ivory sold in China was illegal from 2009 to 2014.

If you count by pieces rather than weight, more than 90 percent of ivory sold in China was illegal. That's because legal outlets produce and sell much larger pieces than illegal ones. Illegal markets sell more jewelry items and trinkets, which weigh less.

Cracking Down On The Black Market

What is the plan B solution for closing the illegal market in China? The country takes in an estimated 70 percent of all poached elephant tusks from Africa. Closing the legal market will account for only 10 percent of the ivory consumed in China. The illegal ivory that consumers buy will increase from 90 to 100 percent of the market. Have the groups that want close legal ivory markets made plans for stopping the much larger black market?

I posed this question to Alexander Rhodes, head of Stop Ivory, at the 105-metric ton (231,485-pound) ivory-burning event in Kenya last April. Stop Ivory is a close partner with WCS and IFAW. He said, "Yes, that is something to think about."

Studies have found that the majority of illegal ivory is sold online in secret chat rooms and through social media sites. It is difficult to monitor those sites.

Elephants Will Still Be Illegally Killed

The goal of a total ban on legal international and domestic ivory markets is in sight. However, waving the victory flags is perhaps hasty. Elephants still have to worry that their tusks will continue supplying the huge black market. The difference is that they will come exclusively from illegal killing.

If speculation and stockpiling of tusks, rather than high demand, is driving poaching, plan B must take this fact into consideration. Plan B had better be good.

Daniel Stiles has been investigating ivory markets around the world for more than 15 years.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the second paragraph of the article.

Animal rights leaders share the belief that legal trade provides cover for illegal trade.

Which sentence from the article explains what is meant by the phrase "provides cover"?

- (A) Get rid of legal trade, say supporters, and fewer people will buy ivory products.
- (B) The illegal laundering is made to look like legal selling, she said.
- (C) In the near future, there is a good chance that almost all major ivory-buying countries will have domestic ivory bans in place.
- (D) That's because legal outlets produce and sell much larger pieces than illegal ones.

- 2 Read the sentences from the section "Demand For Ivory In China Is High."

We estimated that only about 10 metric tons (22,046 pounds) of it was processed a year to meet consumer demand. The balance of 190 metric tons (418,878 pounds) a year was most likely stockpiled by speculators. These were people apparently betting that ivory prices would remain high.

Based on the information in the text, what is the BEST definition of the word "stockpiled" in the sentence above?

- (A) thrown away
- (B) sold earlier
- (C) stored for later
- (D) given to authorities

- 3 Read the following paragraph.

In the near future, there is a good chance that almost all major ivory-buying countries will have domestic ivory bans in place. So, will these bans solve the elephant poaching problem? Probably not.

How does this paragraph contribute to the article?

- (A) It reinforces the initial argument made in the article's introduction.
 - (B) It suggests that there is no good plan for saving elephants from poaching.
 - (C) It demonstrates that there is little being done to save elephants from poaching.
 - (D) It indicates a shift in the development of the author's argument.
- 4 Why does the author include the section "Elephants Will Still Be Illegally Killed"?
- (A) to give an additional reason why animal rights groups need to worry about elephant poaching
 - (B) to reinforce that the solution of ending the legal ivory trade will stop elephant poaching
 - (C) to provide a call to action for a better plan to protect elephants from poaching
 - (D) to suggest that any additional plans to end elephant poaching will be ineffective