

The Ivory Trade and Elephant Poaching

This fact sheet aims to brief policy-makers on the links between elephant poaching and the ivory trade. Proposals to relax the African elephant's internationally protected status and to increase one-off sales of stockpiled ivory pose a serious threat to the continuing survival of Africa's elephants.

Background

1. In 1979 there were an estimated 1.3 million African elephants. By 1989 only 600,000 remained. In 2010, the total had dropped to an estimated 470,000 according to IUCN's African Elephant Specialist Group. Today, fewer than 400,000 remain; some authorities estimate the number to be considerably lower.
2. The loss of nearly a million elephants in a decade was due primarily to illegal killing for ivory in the context of an international trade. Habitat loss is a second important factor: since 1970 human population has nearly tripled in elephant range states.
3. Major public awareness campaigns were launched worldwide to save the elephant and halt illegal ivory trade.
4. In October 1989, at the seventh meeting of the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Convention of the Parties (CoP7), governments banned international trade in ivory, with effect from January 1990.
5. Demand for ivory abated; the price of ivory dropped significantly and rapidly from ca. \$300 per kilogramme to ca. \$3 per kg.
6. Elephants in many parts of Africa were left in peace, and populations began to recover. For example, Kenya had lost 90% of its elephants (167,000 to 16-20,000) in the 16-year period from 1973 to 1989. The total had grown back to an estimated 35,000 in 2009, but has certainly decreased since then with increasing poaching.
7. In 1997 at CoP10, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe succeeded in having their elephant populations downlisted by CITES to a less endangered status (see KEF Fact Sheet 03 on *CITES and the Ivory Trade*).
8. Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe were allowed to sell stockpiled ivory to CITES-designated buyers. The first sale was in 1999; 50 tonnes were exported to Japan.
9. In 2000 at CoP11, South Africa's elephant population was downlisted.
10. In June, 2002, the largest shipment of illegal ivory since the 1989 ban was seized by Singapore authorities. DNA analysis showed the ivory had originated in Zambia. The shipment, via Malawi and Zimbabwe, was destined for Japan. It comprised 532 elephant tusks and more than 40,000 cut pieces of ivory, 6.5 tonnes in total.
11. In November 2002 at CoP12, it was agreed that Botswana, Namibia and South Africa could export 60 tonnes of ivory, subject to conditions.
12. The CITES Standing Committee approved Japan as a trading partner in 2007; in 2008 it approved China.
13. This second CITES-negotiated sale occurred in 2008. Zimbabwe was also allowed to sell ivory. 108 tonnes went to Japan and China (46t and 62t, respectively).
14. The increase of very large seizures suggests increasing involvement of organised crime in consolidation of ivory into large consignments. The incident in Para 10 is one example; another is the July 2009 arraignment of two men in Dar es Salaam for smuggling 11 tonnes of ivory to Viet Nam and the Philippines via Malaysia between October 2008 and March 2009. Since then, Thailand authorities have made six of the largest seizures on record totalling 8.3 tonnes.
15. Also in 2008 CITES Standing Committee approved a 9-year moratorium on further ivory sales by Range States with populations currently on Appendix II.
16. The CITES Secretariat passed resolution 14.77 in 2011: "The Standing Committee, assisted by the Secretariat, shall propose for approval at the latest at [COP16] a decision-making mechanism for a process of trade in ivory under the auspices of the Conference of the Parties". The resolution has been interpreted as a desire to formulate a mechanism for ivory trade.

Trends and Numbers

17. The downturn in illegal killing following the 1989 ban has reversed. Significant population size decreases have been recorded, for example, in Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve (from ca. 110,000 in 1976 to 55,000 in 1986 to 31,000 in 1989 to a speculated low of 10,000 in 2011) and Kenya's Laikipia-Samburu region (from 7,400 in 2008 to 6,400 in 2012).
18. All sources of data show clearly that the killing of African elephants has accelerated to reach a level in 2011 nearly triple that of the preceding decade. Sources include: the CITES MIKE (Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants) programme, including its PIKE (Proportion of Illegally Killed Elephants) metric; the CITES ETIS (Elephant Trade Information System), which is managed for CITES by the WWF/IUCN wildlife trade monitoring network's, 'Traffic'; and on-the-ground observations by numerous elephant research and conservation NGOs.

19. Whether the numbers are presented as PIKE data, ETIS corrected numbers or weights of ivory seizures (graph, solid bars), or mortality curves from specific populations, the picture is essentially the same – an apparent but statistically insignificant increase after 1999, and a rapid highly-significant acceleration after 2008.

20. 2011 ETIS recorded the most seizures in 23 years of data collection: 13 large seizures, more than 23 tonnes.

21. Estimation of actual numbers of elephants killed is fraught with statistical uncertainties due to biases in national reporting and law enforcement seizure rates. It is possible, however,

to attempt order of magnitude estimates from ETIS data. After interpolating missing data from 18,300 seizures from 1996 to 2011, the total weight came to 297,187 kg. The average tusk weight of seized ivory is 5 kg and the average elephant is estimated to have 1.88 tusks (ETIS). Thus, the total weight of seized ivory should equate to an absolute minimum of 32,000 elephants killed during the period.

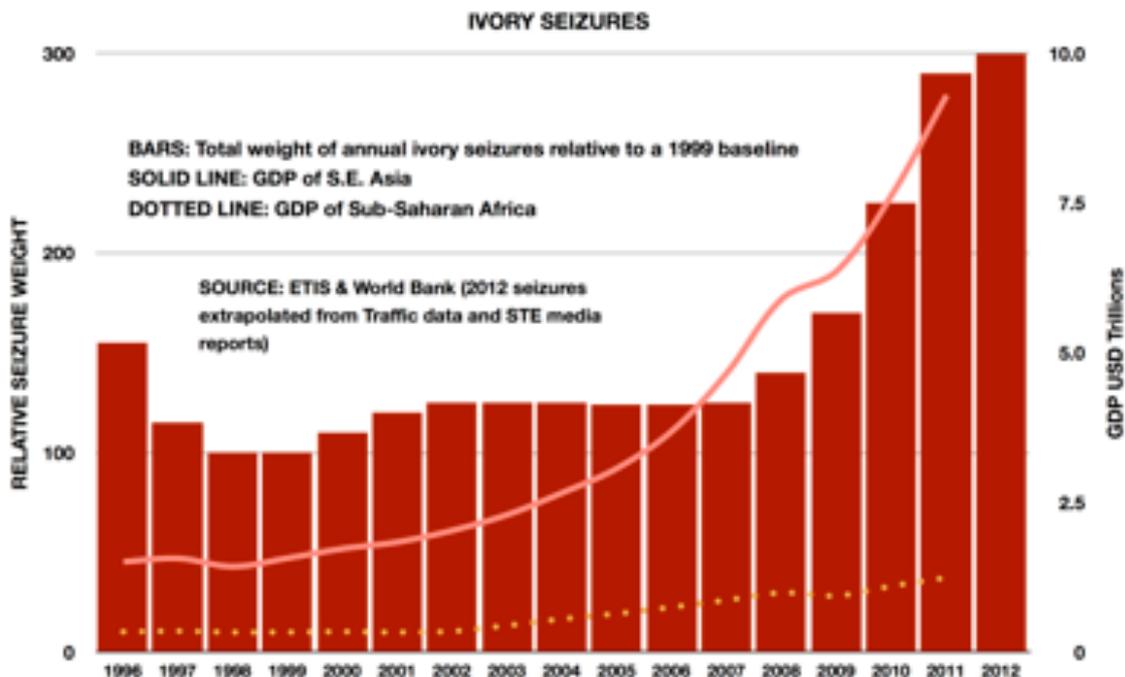
22. There is a large bias in the number of seizures recorded. The USA General Accounting Office estimated in 1991 that Customs detected only 16% of illegally imported merchandise, and US Fish and Wildlife officers estimated less than 10%. It is unlikely that worldwide seizure rates have bettered those figures over the past decade. If seizure rates were as high as 50%, the numbers of elephants represented by the 1996-2011 seizure weights would be 63,000; if 20%, the total would come to 159,000, an average of 10,000 killed per year.

23. A less conservative estimate in 2009 derived from a similar analysis of seizures put the number of elephants killed annually to supply the ivory trade at 38,000. If such a rate were to continue, elephants could be gone from most of their former range in a decade.

24. The real and present threat of the increased illegal killing of elephant throughout their range must not be diminished by the perception of numerical increase locally from range shift or population growth in a handful of well-protected populations.

25. The potential impact of one-off sales is not diminished by the possibility that the 9-year moratorium on sales might lead to increased stockpiling by traders and industry insiders as a hedge against a near-term supply shortage and an uncertain future market. The fact remains that both potential drivers are trade-related, and elephants are being killed in increasing numbers.

26. The curves on the graph above show change in GDP over time: the upper solid curve for S.E. Asia, and the lower dotted line for Sub-Saharan Africa. The former is related to increased capacity in Asian nations, China in particular, to purchase luxury goods. The latter underscores the lingering poverty that motivates some Range State citizens to engage in illegal killing of elephants and other wildlife.



Present Situation

27. There is no current compilation of elephant population counts and estimates. The IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group has not produced a status report from the African Elephant Database since 2007. It is reviewing 144 post-2007 surveys. Assuming natural mortality had offset natural rates of increase, and applying estimates of mortalities from seizures (as in paras 21-22), since 2007 the continental total today could range from a conservative minimum of 440,000 to 280,000 (at the worse-case rate, para 23).

28. Given the documented rate of illegal killing of elephants, the total number elephants remaining in sub-Saharan Africa is believed to be less than 400,000.

29. A kilogramme of ivory retails for as much as US\$ 7,000 in the Far East. On the ground in Kenya it fetches ca. 12-18,000 Kenya shillings (approx. US\$ 140-210). Even a small pair of 10-kg tusks could bring a poacher the equivalent of \$2,000, what an unskilled worker might earn in a 2-3 year's hard work. A big bull carrying 100 kg of ivory would bring in the equivalent of 1.5 years' salary of a wildlife ranger or 15 years' salary for the worker. The incentive to poach is enormous.

What Can be Done to Save Elephants

30. The KEF believes the ivory trade should be halted completely. At the same time, there should be a proactive, two track programme towards a long-term solution. One thrust should be aimed at reducing demand by educating today's consumers of ivory on the negative ethical, social and economic aspects of killing elephants. The other thrust should concentrate on elevating the governance, economic and social security, and law-enforcement at the supply side (see KEF Fact Sheet 06-2013 *Action to Stop the Illegal Killing of Elephants*).