

The Convoluted Nature of the African Ivory Trade
*Possible Solutions for Curbing the Destructive Nature of Poaching and Promoting
Elephant Conservation*

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Abstract

The current nature of ivory and elephant conservation within Africa is extremely ambiguous and filled with much uncertainty. The purpose of this work is to investigate objectively the sources for this convoluted complexion, which stem from a wide variety of issues including (but not limited to) geopolitics, imperialism, governmental legitimacy, foreign policies, and present-day western influences. In addition, this work also considers certain ecological ramifications of the current illicit African ivory trade and sheds light on not only the problems relating to direct poaching, but also extraneous pressures, both internal and external, which are causing a high demand for ivory. Through such analyses, this paper investigates possible solutions to lower poaching and stimulates conservation on the African elephant, promotes community-based conservation, and relieves African nations of post-imperialistic stress, granting them increased autonomy on the matter.

Keywords: African elephant, conservation biology, ivory trade, post-imperialism, westernized conservation, Community Based Natural Resource Management

Author's Note

As a student and scholar, I am personally very interested in ecological and geographical issues revolving around the conservation of diverse flora and fauna. In our day and age, many scholars have labeled the twenty-first century as the beginning of the “Sixth Age of Extinction,” which is undeniably being caused by humanity’s interaction with the environment. It is imperative that as a society we understand that our actions are causing an extreme loss of biodiversity and that we come together to try and understand the complexity of ecosystem destruction, educate others, and help preserve species that are on the brink of extinction.

I became interested in environmental conservation at a young age through the numerous amounts of hours I would spend outside and various camping/hiking trips that my family would take. Upon entering college, I built upon this passion by immersing myself in courses such as “Conservation,” taught by Dr. Richard Schroeder (who specializes in geopolitics and African Studies). Through this class, I was introduced to the topic of elephant conservation, as well as the troubling issue of poaching and the destructive nature of the illegal demand for ivory. I hope this work will allow you to gain a better understanding of the “convoluted” nature of this issue, and why it is important for policy-makers, researchers, and conservationists to consider all parts of the picture before going forward with decision-making. Going forward, I hope to continue researching this very interesting issue, and at the least, that my piece will be able to inspire you to get involved in the worldwide conservation movement.

The illegal wildlife trade is currently one of the largest "black-market" industries in today's world, falling fourth behind drug, gun, and human trafficking trades. An 8 billion dollar industry, illicit wildlife trading is currently devastating the world's biodiversity and ecosystems, shifting the natural balance, and forcing animals toward extinction. One of the most popular commodities within the illegal wildlife trade is ivory, which comes mainly from illegally poached African elephants. Years of unregulated poaching and culling in the 1970s into the 1980s decimated the African elephant populations until they were on the brink of extinction. A ban on the legal sale of ivory in 1989 was put into effect by worldwide conservation organizations, such as The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the African Wildlife Fund (AWF), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to try to save the elephant populations which had dropped extensively in numbers. This ban was very effective overall, and population rebound was extremely high in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania (Duffy, 2010).

The international conservation organizations, however, failed to recognize the voice of the Sub-Saharan African nations who, for the most part, argued for legal ivory trade as a mechanism to generate revenue for conservation efforts which would support parks and their anti-poaching campaigns. This has caused a stark division within the global conservation community, with the western world arguing for total protection of elephants and the Sub-Saharan African nations pressing for regulated small legal sales, or at most, the ability to sell ivory from animals that have died of natural causes. With the transition from an era filled with plumage and imperialism to the Ivory Wars, it is only ethical that the rest of the world now let Africa begin to make some of their own decisions on the matter of ivory trade, while still adhering to the precedents set forward by CITES and other regulatory groups. In such a system, community-based conservation is highly supported, and autonomy is granted to Sub-Saharan African nations giving them the power to sell stockpiles of naturally harvested ivory so that revenue can be generated for the conservation effort, park management, and new scientific and technological tools, hopefully reducing the tendency to poach overall.

Although widely unknown, the African ivory trade has existed for centuries; since the early days of civilization, the ivory trade routes that ran through Africa and into the Middle East helped bring wealth and prosperity and built empires all across its trail. Labeled the "Land of Punt" by the Ancient Egyptians, the Horn of Africa has long remained the basin for the fruitful ivory trade that helped build modern trade routes that were used in the late 15th and

16th centuries, all the way up to the 19th and 20th centuries as well (Duffy, 2010).

As time passed, the uses of ivory seldom changed. In fact, ivory is still mainly used in ornamental practice around the world, generally stemming from cultural and religious influences. In the Philippines, a largely catholic nation, many people believe that getting ivory trinkets of Saints or of Jesus Christ will help them obtain salvation, and the finer the material one uses, the greater his or her chance of achieving salvation (of course ivory being the finest material available) (Christy, 2012). Additionally in Asia, rapid economic growth has increased the amount of disposable income within the lower classes, allowing them to splurge on certain exotic items. Although rhino horn, bear bile, and shark-fin soup are choice favorites, ivory ornaments and carvings are also a popular item bought by many Buddhists living in Asia. Purchasing a statue of Buddha or Christ is relatively easy, and priests will further bless them for you and instruct you on how to discreetly ship them back home (Christy, 2012). As Bryan Christy from National Geographic explains, "Because this is about faith, and because faith requires suspension of disbelief, ivory traded for religious purposes doesn't garner the aggressive scrutiny it might if it were carved into, say, chess pieces. God's ivory has its own loophole." (Christy, 2012) The fact of the matter is ivory is purely used for ornamental purposes - it doesn't feed people, help them live, or affect their lives for the better.

This extraneous nature has warranted ivory as a commodity that humanity could easily do without, and thus it could theoretically be removed from the wildlife trade. Despite the strong stance in defense of the sale of ivory for religious uses, its role in cultural or religious ceremonies is not pivotal at their core. As Beth Allgood, Campaigns Director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, states, "Ivory isn't used for anything but art and ornaments...in fact there's no good reason why anyone needs ivory...except elephants." (Russo, 2014) Yet, such a statement is easier said than done; the power to change an entire culture's beliefs and use of a product, regardless of whether or not that product is used to sustain life, is near impossible. Thus, there will likely always be a black market to support those who choose to purchase ivory for religious, ceremonial, and cultural reasons, regardless of the status of the international regulations and restrictions on ivory itself.

The complicated past of illegal ivory trade and the ban of legal sales in 1989 has left a true scar on the conservation world; in fact, the nature of the ban is partly responsible for why the current degraded conservation conditions exist today. The slaughter of elephants during the ruthless ivory wars warranted international action against the previously unregulated trade. Organizations like

WWF, AWF, and CITES gathered to discuss the nature of the industry, and finally, in 1989, a ban was placed on the international trade of ivory. Additionally, international conservation organizations and large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) conducted massive merchandise campaigns and used “slogan-engineering” as advertisements to raise awareness and money for the butchering of the elephant (Duffy, 2010). Although this measure was extremely effective in reducing poaching and elevating elephant population numbers, the resolve failed to consider the opinions and beliefs of the African nations on the matter, many of which were in support of a legal ivory trade. The “crass” decision-making of groups like CITES and AWF was perceived as ignorant and “narrow-minded,” heightening tensions between conservationists and creating a very clear-cut divide in the movement – those who supported the western authority versus those who vouched for the autonomy of African nations to deal with matters themselves. More generally speaking, this was a battle between strict protectionism and sustainable use, with geopolitics mixed in between (Duffy, 2010).

Although it is important to acknowledge the ban and its immediate benefit on elephant populations, the resolves failed to address issues such as uncontrolled elephant population growth, African governmental authority, and certain cultural aspects of the situation, namely, the fact that westerners came to a conclusion on a matter that truly does not concern them. Currently, African nations dealing with elephants are struggling with growing numbers within natural reserves, problem animals, and how to raise political legitimacy and increase economic revenue for conservation. Many African nations have approached CITES with the resolve that a regulated ivory trade, or at least, the permission to carefully sell the ivory from confiscated stock piles, problem animals, and natural elephant deaths, could be beneficial (Duffy, 2010). Nations such as Tanzania and Kenya have enormous ivory stockpiles, with Tanzania’s most recent pile of 101,005 kg being worth about 60 million dollars on the international market (Mande et al., 2012). In the past, ivory stockpiles were typically burned to send a message to poachers and the international community. This was championed by the past president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi in the early 1990’s, and is still used to a certain extent in some parts of Africa. However, instead of burning the ivory, which is a waste of a valuable commodity, certain groups of Africans are now advocating for the right to sell their stockpiles or have the right to a small, legalized, and regulated trade (Perlez, 1989).

David Stiles, an economist and conservationist who studies the ivory trade, explained that a successful raw ivory trade is possible - it encompasses tusks from monitored stockpiles, which

come from elephants that died naturally or were identified as “problem animals” as well as a closely monitored system as they ship to Asia (Russo, 2014). He stated, “if 50 tons of legal ivory could be supplied to China annually, the poaching rates would crash” (Russo, 2014). Additionally, this trade could generate an enormous amount of revenue that could be put toward elephant conservation, creating more jobs at national parks, increasing ecotourism, and actually spurring increased concern for elephants’ wellbeing within these nations. If revenue is generated via these stockpile sales, people will most likely not take kindly to poaching, which would severely hurt people’s jobs, and therefore their livelihoods, creating a social pressure among Africans to avoid poaching themselves.

One of the most important benefits of this modified ivory trade is that it has the potential to ameliorate conditions on both the donor and recipient sides of the trade. In the case of the African nations, direct revenue associated with isolated sales could have the potential to bring in money for conservation that would be handled directly by the economies of the respective nations, not NGOs or “umbrella” organizations. Earnings will be able to go to park management, animal care, grounds-keeping jobs, and most importantly, education efforts regarding sustainable use. A significant effort is placed on external conservation efforts in Africa, which does not allow ordinary Africans to get involved and excited about conserving their ecosystem’s animals. As Bhaskar Nath (2008) posed regarding funding for conservation efforts in Africa, “Should it be to maintain and reinforce the status quo, or should it be to incorporate and create [a] more effective management paradigm that seek the consent of the affected local stakeholders?” Changing the paradigm of what many call “western conservation” is no easy task, yet a modified legal trade could have the potential to do just that, putting the conservation of the African elephant back in the hands and hearts of Africans who live together side-by-side.

Additionally, the creation of a sustainable use trade also has the potential to benefit the receivers of the legal ivory, mainly in Asia. China is one of the world’s hubs for the illegal wildlife trade, with ivory being a highly valued commodity among the Chinese. The uses of these ivory products are strongly tied to Chinese culture, and there exists a long valued tradition of ivory carving rooted in the Far East. As John Frederick Walker (2014) explains, “It’s highly unlikely the second biggest economy in the world will undergo a sudden mass conversion to the view that it should immediately ban all ivory trade... it places great value on the cultural significance of its traditional ivory carving industry.” Poaching in Africa is directly related to the demand of illegal trade in the east, and thus a small, steady flow of regulated ivory to Asia could conceivably lead to a

drastic decline in poaching rates. This could be due to the fact that Chinese people who go out of their way to purchase illegal ivory undertake a huge opportunity cost of being involved in illicit activities and must also pay for costs associated with those activities. As stated earlier by Russo (2014), flooding the Asian markets with controlled legal ivory will likely encourage people to consider the legal option when purchasing this rare commodity. This gives China the opportunity to launch a massive crackdown on its illegal ivory trade, something that it has not really pushed in the past. Thus, “with no way to sell contraband tusks to the Chinese, there’d be diminishing payoffs for African poachers, smugglers, and corrupt officials” (Walker, 2014).

Still, there are those who oppose this notion of a “modified” legal ivory trade and their arguments start from different premises; the majority stem from animal rights while others from a strict protectionist standpoint. Many people believe that any sort of legal trade will not solve the problem of poaching and an illicit trade will always exist, regardless of illegality or legality of sales. Mary Rice (2014) argues, “Just because it is difficult to enforce something does not mean the solution is to legalize it...traders themselves agree that no amount of legal trade can satisfy the current demand for ivory.” This notion is undeniably true – wherever there exists a route for illicit activities, there will surely be an illegal trade regarding that commodity. Thus, in order to prevent poaching outside the system of legal ivory sales, increased attention to elephant protection and conservation efforts, local education, and novel scientific and technological efforts to curb illegal activities must be employed regardless.

This idea of strict protectionism, however, does not consider the multitude of geopolitical issues that riddle African nations struggling with elephant conservation. Strict protectionism is sometimes labeled as “western conservation” due to the fact that decisions regarding the fate of the elephant are entirely decided upon by western entities and NGOs. This “classical approach” to conservation, championed by groups such as CITES, “traditionally emphasizes the formation of ‘off-limits’ protected areas, nationalization of ownership of wildlife, and institution of bans on the hunting or utilization of the protected species” (Carpenter, 2011). There exists a certain degree of exclusion in the enactment of these policies, which can and has either explicitly or implicitly removed not only African governments, but also local communities from the conservation effort. The cooperative-use solution offers an alternative that is rooted in the principles of protectionism as well—the goal of such a modified ivory trade is not to dismiss the ideas and demands of protectionism, but rather to merge them with the ideas of sustainable, cooperative use as well.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Sub-Saharan African region has been riddled with political corruption for many years, with politicians taking bribes from poachers and gangs and personally involving themselves in the illegal trade. Political instability and a certain degree of stagnancy in areas of Africa have shaped the world's skepticism about a legal ivory trade, especially in Tanzania (Duffy, 2010; Burnett, 2012b). Additionally, many believe that the creation of a legalized or modified trade will result in a greater rate of poaching as people turn to the black market for even lower prices, or may coerce those who may not have thought about buying before into purchasing. Allgood explained that when it comes to the black market and corruption, "[illegal] trafficking cannot be stopped in a corrupt world, and buying cannot be stopped in a corrupt world" (Russo, 2014). Poaching, as is, is a ruthless and destructive industry, as illustrated by John Burnett in his piece, "In a Tanzanian Village, Elephant Poachers Thrive." In an interview between Burnett and a local poacher, the poacher explained, "Sometimes when [elephants] have a funeral, it's like a party for me...I kill another one, and kill another...the game reserve is my shop...let me go to the shop and kill." (Burnett, 2012b) The extremely methodological killing that accompanies poaching, through the use of advanced weaponry, organized crime, and bribery, is something that plagues the world, but becomes even more detrimental when mixed with the current state of the geopolitical nature of governments along the Horn of Africa.

NGO involvement in the conservation of the African elephant has also been widely disputed as to whether or not the current "status quo" is both the correct and most effective way of promoting the sustenance of these animals. CITES and other large umbrella groups predominantly use "strict legislation and the designation of protected areas for conservation" (Carpenter, 2011). This method, however, is rather inefficient in developing nations, such as certain Sub-Saharan African countries, as they often lack the resources and capabilities to adhere to these strict guidelines. They also may not be able to devote the necessary funds to promoting park protection and the very nature of this legislative approach is that it, according to Stefan Carpenter (2011), "remove(s) the ability of local communities to benefit from the utilization of species...which can actually have the perverse effect of incentivizing local communities to over-exploit protected species." If conservation were instead focused on a community- and nation-based paradigm, it would provide groups with a sense of ownership over elephants, and in turn a responsibility to conserve the species as well. This community-based conservation approach has already proved to be very effective in post-colonial Namibia, and it has potential to revolutionize efforts elsewhere in Africa. Through a modified ivory trade, African

nations will be able to better equip and educate their communities to conserve at the local level through revenue generated by selling small stockpiles of ivory from natural deaths or problem animals, promoting self-sufficient sustainability and enabling the proper development of modern-day Africa.

The current political conditions within these nations are strengthening as more legitimate and focused governments take charge of their nations and recognize the problems they face. Specifically, within Tanzania, the new Minister of the Wildlife Department, Khamis Kagasheki, has a strict agenda concerning the regulation of parks (such as Selous National Park, which houses over 80,000 elephants – 25% of all of Africa’s elephants), fighting corruption, and collaborating with border nations to ensure that the latest technologies and measures are utilized against poachers (Burnett, 2012a). In an excerpt from an interview between John Burnett and Kagasheki on the nature of poaching, he replied, “What I’m saying is we have to be stringent. We have absolutely no choice. These people are killing innocent animals with impunity. And when you look at these elephants, beautiful beasts. Harmless.” (Burnett, 2012a)

Even in an ideal system, poaching will still exist, and thus the utilization of new technological and scientific methods for tracing poachers, in combination with harsher punishment for poaching, could effectively result in a drop of poaching rates should a modified legal ivory trade be opened. Techniques such as DNA sequencing, gene mapping, and fluorescent proteins to make ivory glow under airport screening devices could allow prosecutors to efficiently track and locate poaching operations and individuals (Wasser et al., 2008). Mary Rice (2014), an advocate of strict protectionism in elephant conservation, stated, “How [would] enforcement authorities distinguish between legal and illegal ivory?” Bioinformatics databases, fluorescent labeling, and new biotechnological assays could easily be employed to label both illegal and legal ivory stocks so that authorities may easily distinguish between the two. Utilizing these methods on legally sold ivory could also allow the tracking and monitoring of where the legal ivory goes and could potentially lead investigators to stolen stockpiles. Additionally, advancements in unmanned drone technology could allow African parks to readily track and survey vast tracks of land to combat poachers and monitor elephant herds. With a close-eye from CITES and other international groups monitoring Sub-Saharan African governmental actions, this hybrid, legalized trade system could prove to be very effective.

The possibility of an ethical sustainable-use ivory trade is very plausible if all parties in the trade work together well and back a zero-tolerance policy for violation of any agreements. The overall

policy which maps these changes stems from Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), a theory applied to a novel conservation approach which aims to empower local African communities and governments to get more involved in and excited about sustaining *their* elephants (Carpenter, 2011). At its base, this modified legal ivory trade incorporates principles of both strict protectionism and sustainable use, enabling this hybrid model to be highly desirable. A general layout of the necessary steps to implement such a modified trade is as follows. Firstly, the CITES regulated sales regarding problem animals and natural deaths should be made out in the “open,” and the group will serve as a mediator in discussions between African nations and Asia. Secondly, the implementation of harsher punishments for poachers, smugglers, and sellers of illegal ivory both in Africa and Asia is necessary to provide a strong foundation for a “zero” tolerance toward these crimes. Additionally, sales made from legal ivory stockpiles will go directly to funding CBNRM as well as elephant conservatories across Africa, giving them access to novel scientific technologies, such as drones, tusk protein labeling, and genetic classification of elephants. Finally, reports should frequently be filed from both Africa and Asia regarding progress, poaching prevention, and the relative successes and failures of various methods for future optimization of the program.

If strictly adhered to, these principles can lay the solid foundation for such a trade, which could extremely benefit the Sub-Saharan African nations socially, politically, and economically. It could also drastically reduce poaching and the motivation to poach, thereby liberating Southern Africa from some of its post-imperialistic oppression, returning conservation to the hands of the people, and sustaining the African elephant for millennia to come.

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