

# CEI ON POINT

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### **Culling To Be Kind: Why This Year's Ivory Sales Will Help Elephant Conservation**

By Roger Bate<sup>1</sup>

This month, nearly 34 tons of elephant ivory from Namibia and Zimbabwe will be shipped to Japan. The sale, agreed to in principle 19 months ago and worth \$5 million, is the result of the 1997 decision to overturn the international ivory trade ban. The ban was a disaster for elephant conservation. Nonetheless, animal rights activists seek to discredit the sale, and halt future trade in ivory.

The trade ban was enacted in 1989 by the U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, fought to lift the ban against opposition from international interest groups concerned that the ivory trade would encourage uncontrolled elephant slaughter. Wildlife experts such as George Hughes, head of the Natal Parks Board in South Africa, successfully convinced most trade skeptics that the ban did more harm than good. Thus, at the July 1997 CITES meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, a majority of CITES member countries – over U.S. and U.K. opposition – voted in favor of a limited resumption in ivory trading. Although the proposal passed with a two-thirds majority, the pro-trade position is still precarious.

Militant animal rights groups such as the U.S.-based International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) seek to sabotage the trade by using alarmist propaganda. IFAW cannot stop the ivory sale, but it is releasing evidence purporting to show, in almost pornographic detail, fresh evidence of poaching. By creating a scandal, they aim to make the sale to Japan a one-time event, an aberration in an otherwise decade-long ban.

**Animal rights infiltration.** In February, Peter Mokaba, the South African Deputy Environment Minister, called for an investigation into the actions of the South African Endangered Species Protection Unit (ESPU) – a police unit specially designed to fight poaching. Last year the cash-strapped ESPU secretly accepted \$460,000 from IFAW. The money was supposed to be used for staff training, but it was actually spent on gathering the data on ivory poaching across Africa on which IFAW is basing the latest campaign.

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No one is opposed to gathering data on poaching incidents, but, according to Mokaba, the ESPU did not disclose their whole intention to South Africa or other African countries. Ministers were unaware that a militant animal rights group provided the funding, and it has become an embarrassment to them. Chris Styles, deputy director of the South African Rhino and Elephant Foundation, resigned as an advisor to IFAW protesting the political ramifications of IFAW's funding tactics. He was particularly concerned that ESPU could be "contracted" to do an investigation for the foreign pressure group.

ESPU gathered data on poaching incidents across Africa that involved 242 man-days of field research. The draft report, not publicly released, has strong animal rights overtones, claiming poaching to be "deviant behavior," even equating it to rape. Despite the strong rhetoric, the report is rather thin on detail considering the time spent gathering evidence. The most obvious conclusion of this report is that poaching is reasonably well under control. Nonetheless, animal rights activists seek to blow isolated poaching incidents out of proportion to support their claim that re-opening trade encourages poaching.

**The gains from trade.** International trade issues attract media coverage and appeal to fund-raisers in animal rights organizations, but trade and poaching are not the elephant's main problem. Population growth and expanding agriculture threaten elephant habitat. Where elephants are not a source of value, farmers kill elephants whenever possible since they trample crops and destroy villages. This is the key reason why elephant numbers have declined in places such as Kenya and Tanzania.

Perversely, the 1989 trade ban led to increased poaching in some Southern African countries because funds previously received from ivory sales were no longer available to pay for anti-poaching units. Making elephants valuable to Africans by allowing them to own the animals and trade in their products is the best way to ensure the species' sustainable existence. Zimbabwe has done this most effectively, and now villagers love their elephants because looking after them brings good returns alongside farming and other rural employment possibilities. Zimbabwean farmers, unlike their northern counterparts, do not turn a blind eye to poaching. It is this success that led to the end of the ban.

**Surest way to protect species.** Animal rights activists maintain that any legal trade will be used to provide cover for massive illegal trade because ivory in transit will not automatically be seen as illegally shipped, and hence will not be confiscated. There is no doubt that re-opening trade makes monitoring of illegal trades slightly more difficult. However, the necessary security measures can be well executed with funds released from trade. Elephants are a precious resource in African countries, and they will protect them if funds are available.

Poaching will continue across Africa, as poor Africans look for ways to make ends meet. But this poaching will not predominate in Southern African countries, because hunting rights (and soon ivory sales) deliver funds to protect animals. It will be a tragedy that if after ten years' effort to lift a counterproductive ban, ivory trade is threatened because of western governmental pressure on CITES, caused by an animal rights propaganda campaign. Although legal ivory trade involves the death of particular elephants, it may be the surest way to protect the species.