

Urgent anti-poaching deal may save elephants

By Sophie Barclay, Fiona Gordon 4:16 PM Wednesday Dec 4, 2013



The African Elephant could disappear in ten years if current poaching levels continue. Photo / Getty Images

Conservation: African states located along the illegal ivory chain have this week agreed to implement immediate measures to stem the illegal trade and poaching of elephants throughout Africa.

The deal, struck at the African Elephant Summit and convened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the government of Botswana, is the first ever to highlight the whole ivory value chain from elephant range states, to ivory transit states including the Phillipines and Malaysia and states where ivory is eventually sold on the black market such as Thailand and China.

H.E. Lieutenant General Seretse Khama Ian Khama, President of the Republic of Botswana, said it was time for African and Asian states to work together to stamp out the ivory trade. "Our window of opportunity to tackle the growing illegal ivory trade is closing and if we do not stem the tide, future generations will condemn our unwillingness to act."

Delegates agreed to a series of measures **including:**

- A zero tolerance approach to wildlife trafficking and treating it as a 'serious crime' allowing tools such as asset seizure, extradition arrest and prosecution;
- The involvement of communities that live near elephants in their protection and conservation; Increasing the capacity of wildlife protection units so they can take on poaching units which are generally well armed and highly organized;
- Stepping up monitoring efforts in order to assess the amount of illegal killing, population data and levels of illegal trade;
- The strengthening of national laws to address poaching and wildlife crime issues; and influencing consumer behavior in order to reduce the demand for ivory.

According to current data, 2013 is on track to have the highest level of poaching and illegal ivory trade in at least the last 16 years. Recent IUCN figures showed that if poaching were to continue at current rates, Africa would lose one fifth of its elephants over the next decade.

The movements of ivory

The background report to three-day summit notes that about three-quarters of the large -scale ivory seizures (by weight) are via shipping containers at seaports, which offers a major challenge to effective law enforcement.

The Report goes on to state that although large-scale ivory seizures are the most important ivory trade crimes to tackle, "It is disappointing that, until very recently, almost none of the large-scale ivory seizures resulted in successful investigations of the criminals behind these transactions. A number of recent high-profile cases in China, Tanzania and Uganda, however, have resulted in the arrests of suspects."

The ivory confiscated in these large-scale seizures ends up stored by governments. In highly symbolic acts, Kenya (1989), Gabon (2012), the Philippines (June 2013) and the U.S. (November 2013) have publicly destroyed large quantities of such stockpiled ivory. In November, the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) called on other governments to destroy their ivory stockpiles.

With Hong Kong functioning as a key transit point for illegal ivory, largely headed for China, the country has discovered more hidden ivory than the U.S. has in the past twenty-five years. With an estimated ivory stockpile of 30 tonnes, the decision of Hong Kong's Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department to incinerate the stockpile was a significant one. But its own Endangered Species Advisory Committee reversed that decision last year.

Tanzania, identified in the background report as still "heavily involved in trade", is reported to have a current application with the Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species to reduce international protection for its elephant populations and auction off its 101 tonnes of stockpiled ivory. The country seeks to trade in elephant feet, ears and tails, as well as trading in live elephants and raw ivory.

Ivory fact-box:

- **Already there have been eighteen ivory seizures of more than 40 tonnes this year, the largest seizure of ivory in the last 25 years. The amount of illegal ivory in trade is expected to remain high;**
- **The increase in large-scale ivory seizures may reflect an enhancement of law enforcement efforts, or could signify an increase in illegal trade;**
- **22,000 African Elephants were killed illegally in 2012 and 25,000 in 2011;**
- **The African Elephant population is estimated to be around 500,000;**
- **The three key factors most strongly associated with poaching trends are poverty, weak governance in elephant range states, and demand for illegal ivory;**
- **Kenya's port of Mombasa has become the leading conduit for major flows of ivory out of Africa;**
- **Malaysia continues to be the major transit country in Asia, with illegal ivory going either directly, or indirectly via Vietnam, to China;**
- **Indonesia and Sri Lanka have emerged as new transit players;**
- **Hong Kong functions as an important transit point for ivory to reach China, which is indisputably the major end-use destination.**