

## **How CITES Decisions Affect Elephants and the People who Live with Them**

**Daniel Stiles, Ph.D.**

Humans and elephants co-evolved in the savannahs and forests of Africa for at least 5 million years. The archaeological record tells us from stone tools and cracked bones in ancient butchery sites that our ancestors ate elephant meat not long after evolving to walk upright. Ivory tools and ornaments are found in ancient archaeological sites in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.

The historical record reconstructed from archaeological sites, oral traditions and ancient texts inform us that elephant ivory and other natural products were traded in quantity from Africa for centuries. Empires and civilizations such as ancient Zimbabwe, the Swahili coast, Songhai and others emerged from the wealth provided by trade in ivory and other African natural riches.

Anthropological research and the written accounts of the early European explorers attest to the importance of hunting and natural product trade in African subsistence economies. These economic and cultural activities were critical for creating prosperity. Societies without natural resource trade wither and die. People with little to trade end up in poverty, subsisting only on what they can hunt, collect or grow.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) was established to regulate trade in live specimens and derivative products of species that might be threatened by excessive trade. This is a worthy goal, but only if the long-term goal is sustainable trade. Prosperity requires trade. Wildlife trade sustainability requires species management and cooperation between supply and demand partners.

However, CITES has never performed the role of establishing cooperation between supply and demand partners and achieving sustainable wildlife trade. Why?

Beginning in the 1980s, special interest groups emerged, mainly in the West, made up of those who espouse an animal rights ideology. This ideology believes that non-human animals should not be used by humans because we all share certain characteristics in common. This includes trade in animal products, because they assume that animals suffer and are killed to supply the products. As PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk has said, “.... a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy. Each one values his or her life and fights the knife.”

These anti-use NGOs became observers in increasing numbers at CITES meetings in the 1980s. Through sophisticated marketing campaigns they gained significant income from public donations that were supposed to “save” various species from “poaching” and “trafficking”, with African elephants becoming the keystone species. Rather than being used to help manage elephant populations and create a sustainable ivory trade regime, these donations were used in media campaigns to convince the public, and thus governments, that only an ivory trade ban would save elephants.

In 1989, anti-use NGOs gained their great victory with CITES Resolution Conference 10.10, in which international trade in elephant ivory was prohibited. The proposal (E07 Prop. 26) stated "...it is presumed that greater protection of the species will result in the recovery of many populations...".

Since 1990 there have been significant declines in African elephant populations, skyrocketing ivory prices and massive illegal trade. African economies lost thousands of potential jobs in the legal sector and millions of dollars in income from the trade ban. A regulated legal ivory trade could have generated rural prosperity through community-based natural resource management programmes. Instead, we see rising human–elephant conflict, community support for poaching, corruption and the creation of international criminal networks.

Res. Conf. 10.10 was only the beginning. At every CITES Conference of the Parties now there are more proposals put forth to restrict trade further. The ultimate goal for animal rights groups is to list as many species as possible in Appendix I. Every species listed signals increased hardship for people who depend on wildlife trade for survival. Every species listed sees more money going to criminals.

The millennia old traditions of trade in wildlife products from Africa have been attacked and are being destroyed by the animal rights ideology. Mountains of elephant tusks that could be traded to bring prosperity to rural communities are now burned in grotesque pyres. This waste is not only unnecessary to conserve elephants, it is immoral as it causes human suffering.

A legal, regulated ivory trade regime is the solution to the "poaching crisis". CITES should bring together supply and demand Parties and create partners in this goal: Sustainable trade.