



IWMC World Conservation Trust



IVORY CARVINGS AND ELEPHANT CONSERVATION

INTRODUCTION

From his workshop in China, the ivory master focuses on the intricacies of his art. He painstakingly transforms the piece of ivory in his hands into a Buddha or balls carved one inside another, taking months to complete his task.

He uses carving skills that have been passed down through generations over thousands of years. He has invested decades of his own labor to build his knowledge and technique. And the finished product, once again, is spectacular.

Thousands of miles away in the African bush, the master's great dedication to his craft has served another purpose. By adding substantial value to the raw ivory, he has helped to support the conservation of African elephants.



SUSTAINABILITY

The interaction between ivory craftsmen in Asia and wildlife managers in Africa provides a powerful example of the benefits that managed trade can bring to conservation.

It draws on the culture and traditions of people in China, who attach great value to spiritual and other artifacts that are hand-carved from ivory.

It draws on the need for economic development, where African nations carefully regulate the production of ivory as a resource that brings benefits to local communities.

And it draws on our obligation to conserve wildlife resources for the future by providing incentives that make conservation a matter of self-interest – the ultimate wildlife protection mechanism.

These three factors provide a sustainability triangle based on respect for culture and traditions, access to economic development and wildlife conservation.

Together they provide the basis for incentives that help to nurture wildlife and ensure that it is utilized in a carefully managed manner.

The challenge for CITES member states is to maintain the viability of all three interdependent elements in the sustainability triangle by facilitating the managed trade in ivory.

DEMAND FOR IVORY

Of all the natural resources that mankind has utilized over time, ivory can be singled out for its remarkable endurance. Ancient carvings attest to a longstanding demand for ivory over thousands of years – far lengthier than that of many natural resources in use today.

Demand for ivory has ebbed and flowed since the Stone Age, with carvings being popular in predynastic Egypt, ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire. Chinese ivory carving dates back to the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1644 / 1644-1912). In Japan, ivory products became popular in the early part of Edo Period (1603-1868).

This endurance helps to explain why attempts by some animal rights groups to stamp out demand for ivory will never work. The desire to own ivory is embedded in lasting traditions that are far stronger than the talking points of a misdirected public relations campaign aimed at stigmatizing ivory ownership.



VALUE

Today, the demand for ivory is relatively low and centered around the Far East. Some African artisans make jewelry from ivory, often adding precious stones to their carvings. These ekipas raise important revenue for poor communities. But it is traded ivory which is the largest part of the market.

Raw ivory acquired from natural mortality and managed hunting programs has been traded with the approval of CITES. Using this supply, craftsmen in the Far East can continue their carving traditions and create their elaborate works of art.

The industry of these artists substantially increases the value of the ivory, reinforcing incentives in Africa to conserve elephant populations. And since the trade is carried out under the auspices of CITES, and with the close supervision of range states, the entire process is carefully managed.

Despite the availability of ivory from sustainable sources, there are concerns in Asia about the long-term reliability of supplies. In turn, this has a negative impact on the recruitment of new carvers and undermines the ability of ivory masters to pass on to future generations their traditions and knowledge. An important cultural legacy is therefore placed at risk.

Japan and China, as ivory importing states, have adopted strict domestic measures to manage ivory supplies. This means that they could trade in a regular flow of raw ivory to the benefit of range states.



WILDLIFE PHILOSOPHY

If you start from the ethical perspective that it is always wrong to kill or use animals for any purpose, then it follows philosophically that all trade in animal products must be banned. For many animal rights groups, this proposition has been flipped into a key campaign imperative since the 1980s – prohibiting international trade is seen as means to stop the use of wildlife.

If, instead, you begin from the perspective that wildlife should be conserved, then different means of conservation can be applied to different circumstances. The objective of true conservationists is to ensure that species as a whole are managed in a sustainable manner. The utilization of animals is one mechanism through which long-term conservation can be achieved.

Trade can be harnessed into a beneficial activity so long as it can be carefully managed. But the lawful trade in wildlife has inevitably become a top target for animal rights groups to attack.



COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION

Where poaching is least common, it is no coincidence that communities have been provided with incentives to manage elephant populations carefully.

Community-based conservation recognizes the ownership rights of local people and gives them access to local resources. It also ensures that revenues obtained from utilizing these resources are reinvested in the community to improve livelihoods.

It is clear that community-based conservation programs could address the serious threats faced by African elephants in some parts of their range by providing institutional development assistance and enhanced enforcement capacities. The sustainable and regulated use of wildlife could reduce human-elephant conflicts while improving long term management and conservation.



CAPABILITIES

Many African elephant range states successfully manage an array of wildlife. They have national resource management agencies with qualified staff, appropriate capabilities and extensive hands-on experience.

In many cases management resources would benefit from being increased. However, it is incorrect to suggest that developing countries do not have the competency to properly manage their wildlife. Many range states have long since demonstrated their ability to conserve wildlife in general and the African elephant in particular.

Developing countries also have a moral duty to ensure that these resources are utilized for the benefit of their citizens. Resources can be lost through poaching, international regulations that are too restrictive or by their physical destruction, such as the burning of ivory stockpiles. In whichever manner these resources are wasted or relinquished, it is local communities that suffer.

So in addition to providing management oversight, wildlife officials in range states oftentimes must also act as advocates for sustainable use at international meetings, such as CITES.

Since African elephants were transferred from CITES Appendix II to Appendix I in 1989 and some populations transferred back to Appendix II from 1997, the processes that allow for ivory sales to Japan and China have moved exceedingly slowly.

POACHING – CAUSE AND EFFECT

The status of elephant populations in Africa does not follow a single pattern. In many parts of their range, African elephant populations are at healthy levels. But in others they face serious threats through human-elephant conflicts, food insecurity, illegal killing for ivory and meat, illegal trade in ivory, habitat loss and fragmentation, and localized overabundance.

While the reasons for poaching can be complex and have many causes, one of the main driving factors is a lack of tangible benefits for local communities. Some poor areas that are desperate for food and income are being deprived of lawful access to their wildlife resources. Combined with limited economic opportunities, this creates a powerful incentive for poaching. It also establishes conditions that can be exploited by organized crime.

Demand for wildlife products tends to remain relatively constant over time. Wildlife products do not create their own demand like iPads and other modern consumer goods. Contrary to the assertions of animal rights groups and their supporters, there is no strong evidence that the carefully controlled legal trade in ivory inflates demand and leads to increased poaching in other range states.

Since poaching is more directly related to conditions found at the point of supply, focusing on demand or placing additional pressure on law enforcement will not have any lasting impact on the extent of poaching. Once poaching takes hold, there is little that law enforcement agencies can do with limited resources. It is only by operating lawful markets that regulators can regulate and enforcement can be realized.

Ironically, the failure of some range states to adopt sustainable practices and thereby conserve their elephant populations, is used within CITES as an excuse to restrict ivory sales in general. And the uncertainties created by deals at CITES to limit ivory sales are exploited by poachers and organized crime. Unfortunately, today it is the illegal exploiters of wildlife who can ensure a steady flow of product and who therefore gain a market advantage.



ENDURANCE

Elephant ivory has been used since ancient times. It is no coincidence that through all these thousands of years, elephants have also endured.

Within this vast spectrum of existence, the role of CITES is relatively insignificant. And while CITES can certainly help elephant conservation today, it can do so precisely because there is a demand for ivory.

For this we must be thankful to the ivory carvers who have transcended through countless generations to produce artistic treasures.

The use of ivory and the conservation of elephants have a long history together that will continue to stand the test of time.



SUMMARY

- Ivory carvings are works of art that can take months to complete. Master carvers use skills that have been passed down through generations over thousands of years. They invest decades of their labor to perfect their carving skills.
- The interaction between ivory craftsmen in Asia and wildlife managers in Africa provides a powerful example of the benefits that managed trade can bring to conservation.
- Society is served by a “sustainability triangle” based on respect for culture and traditions, access to economic development and wildlife conservation. Together these provide the basis for incentives that help to nurture wildlife and ensure that it is utilized in a carefully managed manner.
- Of all the natural resources that mankind has utilized over time, ivory can be singled out for its remarkable endurance. Ancient carvings attest to a longstanding demand for ivory over thousands of years.
- Raw ivory acquired from natural mortality and managed hunting programs has been traded with the approval of CITES. Using this supply, craftsmen in the Far East can to continue their carving traditions.
- The industry of these artists substantially increases the value of the ivory, reinforcing incentives in Africa to conserve elephant populations. Since the trade is carried out under the auspices of CITES, and with the close supervision of range states, the entire process is carefully managed.
- Conservationists ensure that species as a whole are managed in a sustainable manner. The utilization of animals is one mechanism through which long-term conservation can be achieved. Trade can be harnessed into a beneficial activity so long as it can be carefully managed.
- Community-based conservation recognizes the ownership rights of local people and gives them access to local resources. It also ensures that revenues obtained from utilizing these resources are reinvested in the community to improve livelihoods.
- Community-based conservation programs could address the serious threats faced by African elephants in some parts of their range by providing institutional development assistance and enhanced enforcement capacities. The sustainable and regulated use of wildlife could reduce human-elephant conflicts while improving long term management and conservation.
- Many range states have long since demonstrated their ability to conserve wildlife in general and the African elephant in particular.
- Developing countries also have a moral duty to ensure that local wildlife resources are utilized for the benefit of their citizens. Resources can be lost through poaching, international regulations that are too restrictive or by their destruction, such as the burning of ivory stockpiles. In whichever manner these resources are wasted or relinquished, it is local communities that suffer.
- One of the main factors driving poaching is a lack of tangible benefits for local communities. Some poor areas that are desperate for food and income are being deprived of lawful access to their wildlife resources. Combined with limited economic opportunities, this creates a powerful incentive for poaching. It also establishes conditions that can be exploited by organized crime.
- Elephant ivory has been used since ancient times. It is no coincidence that through all these thousands of years, elephants have also endured. The use of ivory and the conservation of elephants have a long history together that will continue to stand the test of time.



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January 2013