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The Right Honorable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ont. K1A 0A1

Honorable Prime Minister,

For eight years I was honored to serve as the Secretary General of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Today, as an advocate for the conservation of wildlife, I write to urge caution on some of the positions taken recently in the chain letter addressed to the Honorable Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of the Environment and Climate Change. to preserve global biodiversity by implementing a strong prohibition on elephant ivory trade. While I applaud the interest for the well-being of this species, my concern is that the statements made are not conducive to facilitating effective wildlife conservation.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misinformation about the plight of the elephant ivory trade. The common perspective in the west, to which I am afraid Canada might succumb, is that prohibiting legal trade will save the species. Prohibition provides incentives for poachers, criminals and black marketeers and coupled with widespread corruption among government and enforcement officials, creates the very conditions for abhorrent and indiscriminate killing of the animals. History and experience teach us that these illegal activities are best curtailed by well-organized and controlled legal ones.

And while campaigners tell us that we must eliminate demand for elephant ivory and rhinoceros' horns, the reality is that demand will continue to exist, as it has for hundreds of years. It may be possible to "raise awareness" but eliminating demand for ivory will prove as elusive as turning back the tides. Burning ivory stocks achieves nothing beyond making headlines and generating good feelings – and by reducing supply, it makes further poaching more lucrative. The fact is that elephants will continue to produce ivory and poor rural communities will continue to share their land and life with the animals. Southern African countries have done an excellent job of providing local incentives for elephant conservation by allowing ivory to be utilized and the result is healthy elephant populations and low levels of poaching; others, like Kenya, have criminalized the utilization of ivory and are stricken with poaching. It is not "greed" that motivates this poaching, but the subsistence imperatives fueled by poverty.

Princess Diana was renowned for helping to alleviate human suffering. In the context of wildlife conservation, today's celebrities tend to espouse the cause of wildlife species while vilifying humans for using them. Unfortunately, this increases human suffering and widens income disparities for those relying on wildlife resources for their survival. Trade in ivory, like trade in more everyday products, serves a necessary purpose. It is not just some simple trinket trade that can be easily manipulated. It is a trade that involves centuries-old skills which have produced amazing artefacts, such as those found in the fabulous collections, private collectors, and numerous museums around the world.

Further, the value of "interrupting the supply chain" for wildlife products is not necessarily positive from the perspective of conservation or animal welfare. While I applaud companies for developing ethical and corporate responsibility policies, I am also experienced enough to understand that their actions are often taken for commercial reasons and are not entirely altruistic. As such, symbolism often weighs higher in importance to corporate executives than the production of any tangible benefit to wildlife.

Against this background, I would urge you not to promote the idea that legal trade in wildlife products promotes illegal trade. Scientists and wildlife managers have devoted (and continue to devote) considerable effort to analyzing this concept using the hard evidence they have gathered primarily from the ivory trade. The balance of evidence casts considerable doubt on its veracity. I and many fellow conservationists believe that the opposite is true – that a carefully managed legal trade will tend to crowd out illegal trade. Suppliers and buyers alike both prefer to operate in a legal market. And since a legal market can be regulated, policymakers can affect species management in a positive manner. The history of the last century disastrous prohibition of alcohol, and more recently the prohibition on gambling demonstrates that prohibition enriches those involved in illegal activities.

But buying and selling old ivory in Canada will not change anything for elephant poaching, as it is just recycling the ivory already in Canada, or antique ivory coming in from abroad. None of that is from recently poached elephants. No one knows how many elephants there were a century ago, but it does not really matter. What is important are elephant and human population trends, rates of poaching and ivory demand and price trends since about 1970 (~50 years), what caused elephant population decreases, and what the future looks like.

In recent years poaching and ivory prices are down. As to the letter, none of the modeling scenarios ever showed 50,000 elephants poached in a year. The highest the UNODC modeling showed was a bit over 30,000 in 2011, the peak poaching year. Years 2019-2020 were below 10,000 each year and will probably be the same for the current year.

It might be appropriate for the Government of Canada to contemplate prosecuting the unknown authors of the chain letter for grossly misleading and providing inaccurate information to the public. Such behavior is unacceptable and should be denounced.

How did the world come to this tragic situation where the elimination of one evil generates an even worse evil? In our view, the world allowed a genuine concern for the on-going well-being of an animal species to be hijacked by groups interested in using this sympathy to enhance their own power and prestige on the world stage.

Canada could add to its leadership role in areas of global concern by leading an honest, scientific-based, review of ivory policy unfettered by the biased positions now maintained by animal rights groups.

Hoping Canada will carefully consider these points as he moves forward with any future initiatives to promote the conservation of wildlife around the world.

With my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Lapointe', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Eugene Lapointe
IWMC President
Former Secretary General of CITES (1982-1990)