

Forum: Ban on domestic ivory trade may be counterproductive

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As a former secretary-general of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), I share Singapore's abhorrence of illegal trade in wildlife species.

Hence, I was pleased to read that Singapore is investing in scientific research to identify the genetic links between global ivory seizures from 1995 to 2019, and that it is generating DNA markers for all eight pangolin species ([Dogs to sniff out wildlife smuggling, with ban on sale of ivory kicking in on Sept 1](#), Aug 27).

The success of these science-based projects would mark a major step in the global battle to clamp down on the illegal trade in wildlife.

But I cannot react so positively to Singapore's ban on the domestic trade in ivory, which came into effect this month.

Experience shows that the prohibition on legally traded ivory does not dent demand, but merely raises the value of ivory on the black market which in turn makes the trade more lucrative and attractive to criminals.

In southern Africa, there is an overabundance of elephants in countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Botswana.

Their groundbreaking conservation success was realised because their peoples saw value and profitable benefits from growing their elephant populations.

But the harsh fact is that the prohibition on the global trade in legal well-regulated ivory renders elephants in southern Africa commercially valueless to everybody except poachers and illegal traders.

There are two core problems to consider.

First, there is serious human-elephant conflict brewing in southern Africa as the pressure on land use intensifies. Unfortunately, elephants can be a menace to local people, particularly rural villagers and farmers.

The problem is that if local people cannot see any value from protecting elephants, they may turn a blind eye to poachers or, worse, give them a helping hand.

Second, the absence of tourist revenue because of the global Covid-19 pandemic has made it harder still to find alternative sources of funds to finance conservation work.

Without growing financial resources to maintain ever more expensive conservation programmes, there is scant chance of convincing poverty-stricken local people that it is worth their while coexisting with massive, yet often disruptive, elephant herds.

This explains why southern African countries, which host most of the world's elephants, believe that the prohibition on domestic and global trade in ivory threatens their ability to fight corruption and sustain their elephant populations.

My message to the people of Singapore is that we should be wary of ditching the efficacy of trade and the benefits of cooperation with

countries hosting most of the world's elephants in favour of prohibitions.

Especially given the massive advances being made in scientific detection and tracing, which makes a functioning well-regulated trade in ivory products viable, and criminals easier to catch and punish.

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