

Ivory Trade Restrictions and Elephant Population

In 1979 Africa had more than 1.3 million elephants. Today the population is approximately 415,000¹.

Nearly a 70% decline in less than 40 years – almost completely due to ivory poaching. So you would think the sale of ivory would be completely illegal worldwide, right? Actually it depends on the country you're in.

Timeline

- 1979** More than 1.3 million elephants are roaming Africa.
- 1980's** Poachers kill approximately 200 elephants a day.
- 1988** African elephant population plummets to around 625,000 (50% decline in 10 years).
- 1989** CITES² lists all African elephants³ in Appendix I⁴ and bans all commercial international elephant ivory trade.⁵
- 1990's** After the 1989 ban, poaching slows to manageable levels.
- 1999** CITES allows Japan to legally buy 49 tones of stock-piled ivory in a one-off sale.
- 2000** After first one-off sale, EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency) exposed how legal trade is used to launder illegal ivory and 90% of ivory sold in China came from illegal sources.⁷ EIA cautions any future one-off sales.
- 2002** China itself blames the one-off sale for increasing the illegal ivory smuggled to their shores.
- 2008** CITES allows China & Japan to legally buy 108 tons of stock-piled ivory in a one-off sale.
- 2010** Tanzania and Zambia were denied selling their stockpiles of ivory at the CITES COP
- 2012** Immediately after the sale, China holds on to most of its legal ivory, stimulating local demand and raising prices, thus increasing illegal ivory trade. Poaching is catastrophic as a result with 100,000 elephants slaughtered between 2010 and 2012.
- 2014** 25,000 forest elephants poached in last decade in Gabon's Minkébé National Park (80% decline).
144,000 savannah elephants poached in last 7 years across Africa (30% decline).⁸
Price of raw (unprocessed) ivory in China reaches peak of US\$2,100 per kilogram.
- 2015** China and US announce an agreement to a "nearly complete ban" on ivory import/export and commercial domestic ivory trade⁷ in both countries (no completion date given).
Tanzania, one of the most important countries for elephants, lost 60% of their elephants in just 5 years.
- 2016** **January:** Hong Kong pledges to a complete ban on commercial domestic ivory trade by 2021.
June: US passes new regulations that ban almost all domestic ivory trade.

August: IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawaii results in international commitment to close domestic ivory markets. Four countries object - Canada, Namibia, South Africa & Japan.

October: CITES conference in Johannesburg fails to put all elephant populations in Appendix I by only 9 votes - Canada, US, UK & EU vote against it. However, Botswana, with the most elephants, reverses their pro-ivory trade policy and supports a total ban.

2017 January: Price of raw ivory in China falls to US\$730 per kilogram (65% drop in less 3 years) due to Chinese economic slowdown, anti-poaching team success and crackdown on corruption.

February: Draft EU guidance document indicates possible ban on raw ivory re-exports by July 1, to make sure that illegal tusks are not laundered with legal tusks.

March: China closes the first of its 67 licensed ivory carving factories and retailers, and promises to close its domestic ivory market by end of 2017.

March: Hong Kong says a bill on ivory trade will be introduced by end June. Hong Kong also convicts 2 people for illegal ivory possession, using radiocarbon dating to prove post-1990 ban.

2017 May: EU will suspend re-exports of raw ivory from 1 July 2017, even if they qualify as old/“pre-Convention” specimens as well as recommending tougher scrutiny of worked ivory movements.

2017 May: Japan revised its wildlife trade legislation, the Law for Conservation of Endangered Species (LCES), to tighten the registration of ivory businesses. TRAFFIC (2017)

2017 June: Ivory seizure exposes Japan’s lax ivory trade controls. TRAFFIC (2017)

2017 October: EU Commission closes potential loophole issuing new guidance to effectively block the export of raw ivory as outlined in its Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking made in 2016.

2017 November: 29 member countries of AEC call to end all trade in elephant ivory highlighting the EU and Japan as playing active roles in the ivory trade.¹⁰

2018 January: Hong Kong closes loophole in ivory ban outlawing all sales.

2018 January: UK Government looking at drastically tightening the law to ensure that even the sale of antiques made of ivory is outlawed.

Footnotes

¹ The population covers 37 countries (called "range states") in sub-Saharan Africa.

² CITES – Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora

³ Asian elephants were put on Appendix 1 on July 1, 1975 and commercial international sale of their ivory has been banned since then.

- 4 Appendix I – the highest level of protection meaning a ban on all international sale and trade.
- 5 Need to clarify the inclusion of trade in antique ivory (before 1947); pre-Convention ivory (before 1976); and pre-ban ivory (before 1990). Also, since 1989 the populations of Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa have been transferred back to Appendix II, but their ivory is still in Appendix I, so still included in ban.
- 6 EIA - Environmental Investigation Agency
- 7 Advocates of total ivory bans believe legal domestic ivory markets perpetuate illegal international trade because older, pre-ban ivory cannot easily be distinguished from poached ivory.
- 8 The Great Elephant Census report findings were announced at the 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress.
- 9 Exceptions for century-old antiques and a few other categories.
- 10 AEC - African Elephant Coalition