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Global ivory trade has been banned for decades, so why are there still stockpiles?

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Let's grind these big teeth down. Vincent Yu/AP

China is the most recent nation to destroy its ivory stockpile. It is the world's largest market for illegal ivory, and the move is welcome news for threatened elephant populations.

Ivory represents a tusk hacked, at the point of death, from the elephant, a cognitively and socially complex creature.

One of the problems with ivory is that, like whale oil, it comes from a creature that reproduces very slowly. Female elephants mature at 15 and can calve only every five years. On average they produce just eight calves in their lives. Any population model will tell you that "sustainable harvesting" to meet even modest consumer demand is just not possible with replenishment this slow. It was not possible for whales, nor is it possible for most deep sea fisheries.

In 1986, one economic model of ivory production found that the highest yields could be gained from populations protected from direct exploitation. This was based on obtaining ivory from animals that survived to a very old age and died naturally – they had the largest tusks. Even then, nothing like a global market could be sustained with this rate of growth, death and demand.

After earlier attempts at a licenced trade failed, there has been tinkering with the concept of a regulated ivory trade for the past 25 years under a global trade ban. Lately these have been supplemented with highly controversial and potentially unethical **one-off sales** to Japan and China. Over the same period, average tusk size in seizures has gone from 8.5kg to about 4kg. This fall demonstrates that tusks are taken from calves and juveniles, and that overhunting large tusked elephants has removed them from the gene pool.

The unintended consequences of killing elephants for their tusks – as is currently happening throughout West, Central and parts of East Africa – will not be known for several more generations, if indeed they survive that long. In this context, continuing to regard ivory as a legitimate commodity for trade, wealth generation, or for sustaining local indigenous industries can only lead to the species' extinction. Despite arguments made for sustainable trade, soaring demand would outstrip supply.

Ivory cannot fund conservation

However, for some the sanctioned sale of ivory could fund conservation efforts, and in their eyes the crushing or burning of confiscated ivory represents a significant loss of potential conservation income. But this economic argument cannot provide a future for elephants.

Ivory cannot contribute to conservation funding. There is too little of it in any one local area to sustain the genuine costs of long-term conservation on the ground.

Adding ivory proceeds to government coffers is more likely to generate more demand for additional sales. Any immediate conservation gains from ivory sales would be negated by the long-term unsustainability of the project. Ivory production requires continual elephant deaths to reap a continuing harvest. Not to mention the direct and ethical conflicts between the initial conservation aims and harvesting. Protecting elephants and their habitats is an inherently long-term activity.

So the destruction of any illegal ivory stockpile is emphatically a good thing, as it means there will be less ivory of any sort on the market. But its destruction doesn't on its own represent a common good, with benefits for all.

Such ivory is already illegal, and so should never have been in circulation in the first place. Its destruction in China, the US and elsewhere over recent months illustrates the lack of controls and enforcement on every aspect of the ivory trade – not on the poachers, nor the local traders who deal with them, nor those who stockpile and ship ivory across Africa's borders and out of its ports. The problem posed by elephants' looming extinction goes far beyond the destruction of 20-30 tonnes of illegal ivory.

But the destruction of seized ivory does send a clear and important signal about the transient nature of this commodity, about the ease with which it goes from "white gold" to dust. It should also give consumers a clear signal about what it is that they are consuming – mere dentine, cementum and death, not jewels or actual gold. The more we see of such public and high profile acts, the more we can hope that the ivory consumers of the world will rein in their insatiable demand and leave their grandchildren some of these magnificent animals roaming the earth.



Elephants

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