

Now is the time for an EU-wide ivory ban

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Opinion

We need action across all 28 member states to stop the current purge on elephants, writes Catherine Bearder.



Catherine Bearder | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Think of Africa, and you think of elephants. But sadly, these magnificent and glorious animals are under serious threat from poaching. It is estimated that there is an elephant killed every 15 minutes by poachers who are part of a chain of criminal activity that makes immense profits from selling ivory tusks into the global market.

This illegal ivory is distributed all around the world, with routes mirroring those of drugs, guns and human trafficking. It is shocking to find that more raw and carved ivory is traded to the world through the EU than anywhere else. It is this ivory that has been meeting a seemingly insatiable appetite for elephant tusks in China and east Asia.

There is progress, but it is too slow. China announced a ban on ivory imports earlier this year and has been closing ivory processing factories all over the country. Pressure is now growing on the EU to act.

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The EU action plan against wildlife trafficking and my parliamentary report in 2016 represents good progress in terms of making environmental crime a high security priority by delivering extra funding for Europol to tackle waste and wildlife crimes. Yet the fact remains that ivory is still traded legally through the EU (even though a raw ivory export ban was introduced in July) and that feeds the demands in the east.

Therefore, it's good news that the Commission has now come forward with an ivory consultation, which runs until 8 December. This consultation is an important way for citizens, businesses and NGOs to tell decision makers what they think about the ivory trade.

I have been working with my MEPs4Wildlife group and a coalition of NGOs to promote this consultation to the public and help them fill out the questionnaire (which is a bit technical in places).

I am now asking all MEPs to send the consultation to their constituents so citizens can have their say. There will undoubtedly be concerns about banning all ivory, especially antique ivory, which some people feel very attached to, but this cannot be beyond the wit of policymakers to address.

This consultation will allow people with these concerns to come forward, giving us a balanced view before further action.

There are already international treaties in place to protect all endangered and threatened species, including elephants. CITES (the convention on international trade of endangered species) is an international agreement that was set up to protect animals and plants and to ensure that trade does not threaten their existence. It clarifies what species and derivatives thereof are prohibited from being traded in the international market.

Under the CITES agreement there is an international ban on the trade in ivory. However, it allows for the trade in ivory that predates the CITES 1989 agreement. This can be sold domestically and internationally.

However, the legal trade in historical ivory is fuelling a trade in illegal ivory. It is almost impossible to differentiate between legal historical ivory and illegal ivory. Traders are using a variety of methods to disguise ivory, for example staining newer ivory with tea to make it appear older. Current EU regulations are insufficient to protect against the illegal ivory trade.

There are currently no permits or certification required for antique ivory in the EU; where documents are required they can be easily forged. This helps to maintain an illegal trade that is difficult to detect.

National bans are welcome, but we really need action across all 28 member states together to stop

the current purge on elephants. Many EU member states still permit the trade in legal pre-CITES ivory, while others are beginning to take notice.

France, for example, introduced a total ban on the ivory trade last year, while in the UK, there are moves to implement a near-total ban on ivory that would introduce tighter controls and prohibit the sale of pre-1947 antique ivory.

Currently the main market for ivory trade are in China and Hong Kong. Due to continued pressure, China will cease to permit the domestic trade in ivory by the end of the year. With nations like China taking action, it is imperative the EU does not lose credibility by failing to implement tighter controls and regulations while instructing other governments to do so.

Elephants need our help. As the supply of ivory reduces - as it surely must - there will be an increasing demand and value. There has been an increase in ivory seized at EU borders; this alarming trend is leading to a rapid decline in vulnerable African and Asian elephants, which may eventually lead to the extinction of these species.

Not only is the ivory trade damaging to elephant populations, it is also detrimental to communities and economies in developing areas. It funds organised crime including terrorism, it risks the lives of the rangers who protect the animals against poachers, and it is destructive to the rest of the biodiversity in elephant habitats.

Elephants are the gardeners of the forest, they are the architects of the savannas and are critical for the long-term health of their habitats. We must all act now to stop the slaughter.

About the author

Catherine Bearder (ALDE, UK) is Parliament's rapporteur on the EU action plan against wildlife trafficking



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