

Is the Tide Turning for Elephants and Rhinos?

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The debate between those who favour banning and those who prefer controlling the ivory trade came to a resolution of sorts at the Lausanne meeting of CITES in October, 1989: elephants were listed on Appendix I of the convention. The upgrading of the African elephant to endangered species status and the prohibition of commercial trade in ivory was heralded as a victory by the abolitionists. The reality was a contorted compromise that could enable the trade to resume within months, if the spirit of the watered-down Appendix I legislation is honoured.

The rowdy meeting in Botswana in July, 1989, ended with a resolution to deploy a special envoy to find common African ground. The mission never had a chance. The two factions held firm to their convictions. A heated press war did little to help. To the contrary, it widened the gulf and polarized international opinions over the economic uses of elephants. The irony was that African countries were not arguing over utilization which most accept and practise. The issue was, quite specifically, whether the ivory trade was sustainable. Zimbabwe championed the case for continued trade by comparing its growing herd under utilization practices with East Africa's slumping populations under protectionist policies. Other African countries were convinced that continued ivory exports from the south would encourage illegal trade and push their remnant herds to extinction.

The lines were drawn too simply. The future of the African elephant hinges not only upon whether the global ivory market can be regulated within sustainable levels, or whether Africa can muster the means to protect elephants, but upon both. The reality is that the global nature of the ivory market makes it impossible to isolate elephants in one country from the effects of trade in another.

At that time, the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) had not produced a unified ivory trade policy. In July, 1989, I asked each of the three regions to draw up a statement on the ivory trade as a prelude to a continental declaration. The chances of any unified position were slim, given the highly polarized and emotionally charged regional views. But the faltering efforts of the African Elephant Working Group (AEWG) and the prospect of a debacle at the Lausanne meeting called for an effort to find common ground.

I must interject a personal view at this point. Most of us commit time and effort to AERSG because we want to find solutions to problems of elephant and rhino conservation. To do so we must look beyond the confines of the few populations we know best, and beyond our national boundaries. We have to take a larger view, to look for solutions that can gain wide support. To do otherwise in the

case of species traded globally would be

to suffer the tyranny of small decisions and half measures. Sometimes we have to put aside our personal convictions in the interests of enforceable agreements. I hold strong convictions about the ivory trade. I think that a complete ban on trade gives elephants the best chance of survival, simply because control of commercial trade in commonly held resources has proved futile in virtually every case, be it whales, marine fish, hardwood trees, leopards or American bison. But, in the interests of finding a solution that can accommodate different proven policies, I see the need to make an effort for compromise, however much it goes against the grain.

Enough members felt the same way for AERSG to forge the only common African statement on the ivory trade. The following is a full text of that statement:

The African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group recognizes that the African elephant is declining rapidly over most of its range, but that some populations, particularly in southern Africa, are presently safe and expanding. Although a number of factors threaten the elephant, poaching for ivory, poor trade controls and lack of adequate conservation and management programmes in Africa, are the most important.

There is clear agreement that ivory off-take must be reduced to levels compatible with the conservation of the species. Opinions differ, however, on how that can be achieved. Many CITES member states have proposed, or support, an Appendix I listing. Some southern African states consider that their elephant populations are not

currently endangered and that harvests from well-managed populations are sustainable, indeed vital, to their conservation programmes.

AERSG fully supports those countries wishing to adopt an Appendix I listing, but contends that the legislation will be inadequate, perhaps counter-productive, without strong supporting measures. These include strengthened conservation and management policies, increased national and international funding and awareness campaigns to educate the public in Africa and internationally on the conservation issues, including sustainable utilization programmes.

AERSG considers that the southern African position must be accommodated in the interests of elephant conservation in the region and in the interests of supporting the CITES Convention. The dual listing of African elephants on Appendix I and Appendix II is supported but must be accompanied by strong controls to ensure that trading nations do not become a conduit for illegal ivory.

In the light of this position AERSG recommends that a meeting be held, before the CITES meeting, between those countries which have proposed the transfer of the African elephant to Appendix I and the countries of southern Africa. Such a meeting may allow the development of an amendment to the current proposal so as to accommodate the best interests of both parties. More specifically it may allow those states which wish to place their populations on Appendix I to do so without forcing those states which wish to retain their populations on Appendix II to take out a reservation.

Should the dual listing of elephant populations be agreed then AERSG urges that the following steps be taken:

1. The development, by producer states, of clear and openly stated criteria on which their elephant management programmes are based.
2. The introduction of simple and stringent controls on the movement of both raw and worked ivory between producer states and trading partners to preclude the laundering of illegal ivory.
3. The introduction of mechanisms for routinely verifying the origin of ivory shipments between legal trading partners.
4. The introduction of a moratorium by range states wishing to export ivory until such time as adequate criteria and controls have been developed and implemented.
5. A declaration by each of those states opting for Appendix I on how they intend to deal with confiscated ivory, ivory originating from management programmes such as problem animal control, and ivory from natural mortality. The volumes of ivory involved and its disposal should be clearly and openly reported to the CITES secretariat.

The statement was adopted as the underlying policy of IUCN and went a long way to bridging the gap between opposing views. It was a position many parties could live with if they had to, but no one was willing to give up easily their deeply held convictions. The entrenched positions made the Lausanne meeting more a circus than a caucus. A straight Appendix I vote never had sufficient support, but neither did a split listing with a moratorium on trade. What emerged was the Somali Amendment, a compromise which listed the species as endangered, but provided for countries with

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Elephants in Amboseli National Park, Kenya

well-managed populations to resume trading as soon as a technical committee and a mail ballot of member states gives the green light. In principle this compromise falls far short of the moratorium proposed by AERSG or the straight Appendix I listing called for by the pro-ban lobby.

The Somali Amendment failed to please the pro-traders. Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and China among others, filed reservations with the intention of ignoring the Convention on ivory trade. And, in the most astonishing and duplicitous turn around, Britain filed a six-month reservation on behalf of Hong Kong after having urged all CITES members at Lausanne to forgo the three months grace period and stop all trade with immediate effect.

There can be little doubt that ivory trading on the international market has slowed to a trickle. Not even Hong Kong is able to off-load much stock. Elephants appear to be safer as a result of the global ban. However, this conclusion may be too simple. We have little evidence yet that the trade down-turn is reflected in reduced poaching in Africa. Anecdotal reports indicate a drop in illegal hunting in Tanzania and Central Africa, but hard evidence is scant. More to the point, these reports preceded the CITES legislation, suggesting that decreased trading had more to do with domestic bans in Europe, the United States and Asia than with the international ban imposed in January.

The uncertainties must be resolved. I believe that AERSG is the appropriate organ to convene an international workshop to review all the evidence and look ahead to the consequences for elephants. This could be done immediately before an African elephant conference proposed in 1990. I am exploring the possibilities with AERSG members and other agencies. The same forum could also enable AERSG to take a closer look at the status of rhinos and the success of various conservation measures across the continent.

Africa's rhinos have taken a back seat to elephants over the last two years, despite their more precarious state. The preliminary results of the present AERSG Africa-wide census of black rhinos are not encouraging. The numbers are down from some 3,800 in 1987 to probably 3,000 today. The rate of loss is slowing considerably, with some indication that protective measures are working in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. But these are the exceptions among the countries within the rhino's range. The price of horn on the Asian market is still rising, and demand is sufficient to spur further poaching. As little as a ton of horn a year

entering the world market will keep the rhino count on its downward path. Small, outlying populations decline towards extinction as a result of illegal hunting and the built-in demographic and genetic effects which assail small and isolated groups. It seems that little can be done to protect rhinos in the face of persistent trade in horn. A tremendous effort will be required to reverse this.

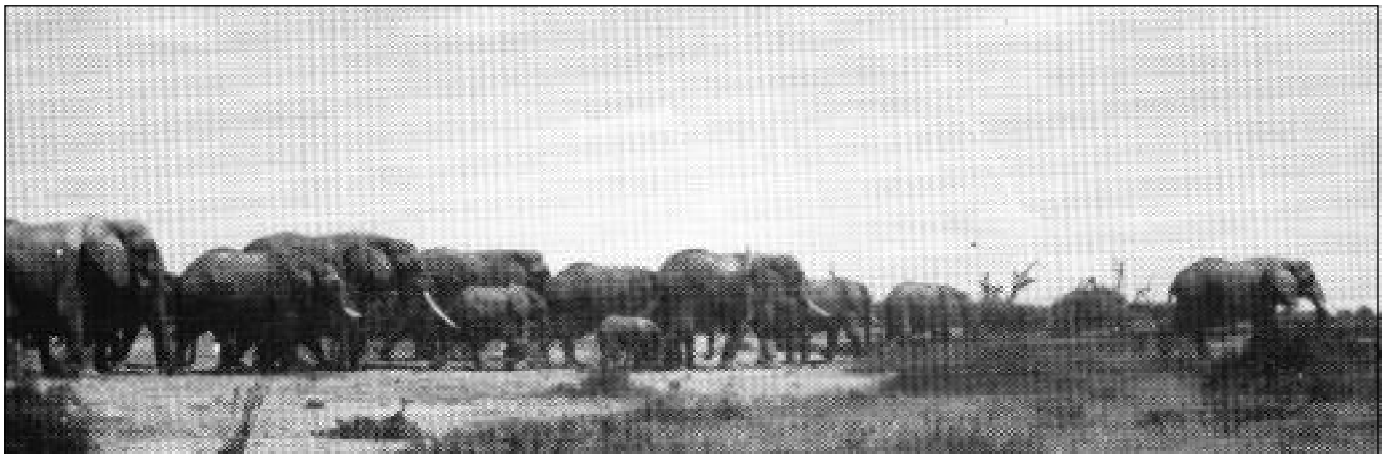
The question of how much horn is entering the market is almost academic when the volumes involved are so small and the markets so diffuse. This point is brought home by a series of articles on the undetected volume of rhino horn entering the trade. In *Pachyderm* No 11 I suggested that between a third and a half may be un-accounted for, and that the missing fraction would be found in either unknown markets or underestimated known markets. In this issue of *Pachyderm*, Esmond Bradley Martin and Terry Ryan calculate that very little is missed. Tom Milliken and Cecilia Song, after a survey of South Korean medicinal shops, disagree. Whatever the real market level, the point is that trade measures are insufficient.

The message emerging is that a decade of efforts to throttle trade by squeezing markets has failed to stop poaching. Field efforts are, in contrast, succeeding where the effort is sufficient. This is not to say we should abandon trade studies and lobbying, but, clearly, field efforts are more fruitful.

The opposite may prove true for elephant conservation. If trade bans are slowing the rate of poaching then they have succeeded where field efforts have failed. Different solutions may apply to elephants and rhinos despite the common threat of commercial trade. Perhaps we should not be surprised given the ecological differences between the species and the disparities in uses of their products. Rhinos can be transported easily, require little area and can be safeguarded. Elephants are difficult to transport, use an enormous home-range and are hence far more difficult to protect. Rhino horn, except in North Yemen, is used as a drug in widely scattered markets and, as with illegal drugs, trading in it is difficult to detect and suppress. Ivory, on the other hand, is a luxury commodity, worn or used for pleasure or prestige and, like leopard-skin coats, is a fashion and hence susceptible to public opinion.

The time has come to take stock, to ask what has worked and what has failed in the chequer-board of elephant and rhino conservation programmes across Africa. This is a role I hope AERSG will play later this year.

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“... pacing along as if they had an appointment at the end of the world.” Isak Dinesen 1885—1962. Amboseli National Park, Kenya.