WHY IS THE SALE OF IVORY FROM AFRICAN ELEPHANTS CONTROLLED OR BANNED?

Ivory has been prized globally for thousands of years, since it was widely introduced by the armies of Alexander the Great. The ivory and slave trades later fed on each other as traders captured men and women to carry the tusks to their ships. Early in the 1900s, colonial administrators, concerned at the alarming depletion of elephants and other animals, passed hunting laws and set aside wildlife reserves in Africa.

Beginning in the 1960s, the killing of African elephants escalated once again as automatic weapons became plentiful and the demand for ivory increased, especially in Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe, where it was reworked into carvings. Ivory carving moved to the assembly line and the price for ivory rose from $3 to $125 per pound. The result: between 1979 and 1988, the population of African elephants dropped from 1.3 million to 750,000. By 1992, only 600,000 African elephants remained. Over 700 tons of ivory, representing tusks from more than 70,000 African elephants, were being sold annually. Some wildlife experts feared that the species might be extinct by 2025.

In 1985, increasing levels of elephant poaching persuaded countries of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to establish quotas for the sale of ivory. It was soon decided that the quotas were not effective. Only 16 of the 35 African countries that agreed to the quota system complied. Illegal ivory traders altered trade routes and used regulation loopholes. In 1988, over one-third of the world's raw ivory was shipped out of Burundi – a country that then had only one elephant. Penalties for ignoring the quotas were too mild to stop the illegal trade. Fines of as little as $3000 were levied on people smuggling $400,000 worth of ivory.

Kenya, Gambia, and Somalia argued in favor of a total ban on the ivory trade at a CITES meeting in 1989. They wanted the African elephant placed on CITES Appendix I list, which mandates a total ban on commercial trade, rather than the Appendix II list, which allows a limited trade. Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa, all with large elephant herds, lobbied for an Appendix II listing, as did several Hong Kong business interests. CITES voted to temporally impose a total ban in 1990. Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, and Malawi voted against that resolution.

In 1989 the United States passed the African Elephant Conservation Act. This law makes it illegal to export or import raw ivory from countries in violation of CITES controls. A person who provides information leading to fines or criminal conviction may receive a reward of up to $25,000.

After the 1990 ban went into effect, the demand for ivory declined dramatically. By 1993, the black market price had dropped to $5 per pound. Only 50 elephants were killed by poachers in Kenya in 1993, compared with thousands annually prior to the total ban.

Despite restrictions on the ivory trade, the African elephant is still at risk. Some African countries and countries elsewhere in the world involved in the ivory trade continue to exert political pressure to downgrade the status of certain elephant populations to the CITES Appendix II list.

References:

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