New Hope for Elephants

African and Asian nations team up to stop the illegal ivory trade

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BEN CURTIS—AP

A male elephant in southern Kenya wears a GPS collar so wildlife experts can track his migration route and help prevent poaching.

The illegal ivory trade has been a major problem in Africa for decades. Poachers and hunters have killed off hundreds of thousands of elephants to obtain this precious material. Now, affected areas are taking action. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) announced on Wednesday that key states where poaching takes place have pledged to stop the ivory trade and protect Africa's elephants.

Over the past few days, top officials and experts from 30 states met at the African Elephant Summit. The conference, organized by the IUCN and the government of Botswana, was held in Gaborone, Botswana's capital city

Conservation efforts will extend to countries outside Africa, including China and Thailand, where much of the ivory is sent. "Now is the time for Africa and Asia to join forces to protect this universally valued and much needed species," said Botswana President Ian Khama.

Years of Poaching

In the 1980s, as many as 1 million elephants across Africa were killed for their ivory tusks. The ivory was used to make jewelry and other items. This continued until 1989, when the Convention on International Trade in Species (CITES) voted to ban all trade in ivory. With trade choked off, demand for ivory fell. Governments cracked down on poachers. Elephant populations slowly began to increase. However, this progress was short-lived.

ALEX HOFFORD—EPA

This pile of captured ivory tusks is estimated to be from around 2,000 elephants.

According to the IUCN, 2011 saw the highest levels of poaching and illegal ivory trading in at least 16 years. Around 25,000 elephants were killed in Africa that year. Preliminary data from the IUCN shows even higher levels of illegal trade may have been reached in 2013. "With an estimated 22,000 elephants illegally killed in 2012, we continue to face a critical situation," said John E. Scanlon, CITES Secretary-General. "Current elephant poaching in Africa remains far too high, and could soon lead to local extinctions if the present killing rate continues."

MICHAEL LORENTZ—AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A herd of elephants passes through Zakouma National Park in Chad. Experts warn that Africa could lose as much as 20 percent of its elephant population if poaching is not slowed down.

A Zero-Tolerance Approach

At the African Elephant Summit, key African states where elephants make their home agreed to develop a "zero-tolerance approach" to poaching. These states include Gabon, Kenya, Niger, and Zambia. Asian trade states Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia were also part of the agreement, along with China and Thailand.

The deal calls for maximum sentences for poachers and hunters, and increased cooperation between affected states. Officials are committed to classifying wildlife trafficking as a serious crime—and to making sure that the people who commit it are punished. All participants at the conference agreed to sign the deal. With these states coming together, there may yet be hope for elephants.

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