

How to break the impasse between opposing camps in ivory trade debate

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23 May 2018

Elephants are in an extremely precarious state in both Africa and Asia. Demand for ivory from Africa has caused significant declines in wild populations. This is now accompanied by [new demand for elephant skins](#) from Asia.



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Resuming trade in elephant parts continues to be one proposal for improving conservation outcomes. But the contention that legal trade will curb poaching is not substantiated by available data. In the modern human economic era, there are few examples of wild animals larger than cattle being sustainably harvested.

Both those who propose a resumption in ivory trade, and those, like us, who oppose it, want to ensure elephants survive. We also want to foster equitable development in elephant range states. This is a necessary condition for achieving any conservation objective. But we are not convinced that sufficient evidence exists to support the use of market mechanisms as a principal conservation tool. Instead, the emphasis should shift towards policy measures supported by existing evidence to break the impasse.

Several of our biggest concerns about resuming trade are the following: ivory markets are concentrated and controlled by organised criminal syndicates that can [manipulate the price](#). They are not competitive. Similarly, ivory products are highly differentiated and constantly evolving. The fact is that price dynamics are not likely to follow the theoretical predictions of simplistic economic models. This reality has not been adequately addressed by proponents of market based policy instruments.

Sociopolitical realities of source and demand countries may also not be favourable to market approaches. The [sorry history of commercial whaling](#) provides key insights that are often ignored in discussions of elephants, tigers, vicuña and bears. Commercial harvesting all too easily degenerates into a commons tragedy. Elephants are not exempt.

Debates on the ivory trade ban too often focus on differences in people's core values rather than on how to achieve shared objectives. This merely perpetuates the impasse, as it has in other conservation debates over implementing tough policies. We believe there are ways to break this cycle.

Opposing camps

In recent pieces in the journal [Science](#) and in [The Conversation](#), authors strongly propose bringing back regulated ivory sales.

Opponents of this approach – like us – are designated as “prohibitionists”. But pejorative labelling doesn’t produce hard evidence to suggest that regulated ivory sales have improved livelihoods or the status of elephants.

South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe favour the reintroduction of a legalised ivory trade. The argument is typically that countries with well-managed populations should not be punished by others’ failure.

But [a study just published](#) in the conservation journal *Oryx*, shows that 77% of South Africa’s 78 discrete reserves that host elephants have populations of fewer than 100 elephants. This implies that they are not genetically viable. Habitat fragmentation is the primary problem, not ivory trade prohibition.

Meanwhile, poverty and marginalisation [remain strong features](#) for people living in the vicinity of most – if not all – conservation areas.

Poverty traps

There are few examples of communities escaping the poverty trap in a durable way through the exploitation of wildlife resources. The wildlife trade is no exception.

Efforts to legalise ivory trade haven’t translated into improved conditions for people living close to elephants. No published evidence shows that funds raised from sales in the four countries that sold ivory on a one-off basis – since the 1989 international ban – have translated into improved food security, education, well-being or equity.

And it’s clear that [no amount of ivory trade revenue is likely to solve the difficulty](#) of ensuring that benefits are distributed equitably.

Livelihoods can be improved without trading in threatened species. Some of these are set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and include:

- Reforming agricultural and trade policies;
- Tapping into indigenous knowledge systems for solutions;
- Educating girls, and involving women in decision-making;
- Improving habitat connectivity as fragmentation exacerbates negative human-elephant interactions and escalates remediation expense;
- Encouraging projects that help increase people’s tolerance of wildlife. This can be done by mitigating damage to human food crops – by, for example, using beehive fences to deter elephants – while boosting income; and

- [Wildlife-watching tourism](#) rather than consumptive activities like hunting elephants.

Recently proposed alternatives

Some conservationists have recently proposed an alternative to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species ([CITES](#)). CITES is a rules-based consortium of countries that classify how vulnerable each listed species is to continued trade. Trade permission is restricted on that basis. Their proposed alternative is to use the Paris climate change negotiations as a model.

But we don't think it's [appropriate](#) for reducing the illegal trade in ivory. One reason is that [it might](#) actually weaken the international capacity for collective action. The Paris Agreement gave way to a system of voluntary commitments. A similar devolution of commitment in the wildlife trade sphere could spell extinction for many species.

There may be other ways out of the impasse. One is to accept that the two sides may never reach total consensus. Environmental justice mechanisms suggest that while some parties may lose in negotiations, they will be more satisfied if they have had the opportunity to engage, state their case and have a voice. If evidence for – and consensus around – a ban on ivory trade continues to mount, all camps should still work together to creatively address the concerns of all elephant range states.

One model that demonstrates the value of collaboration is the [Vicuña Convention](#). First signed in 1969, it centred on restoring populations of a high-alpine South American camelid, the vicuña. The convention shows that disparate economic, cultural and social interests across multiple regions can be reconciled, and brought to the same table, in the spirit of achieving a legitimate negotiated outcome.

The convention - and the special provisions it generated under CITES - also illustrate that the non-lethal use of wildlife is far more likely to attain a long-lasting, international consensus. This is true even though it hasn't worked perfectly. [Poaching has still increased in recent years](#) and populations are [smaller](#) than they should be.

A way forward

Conservationists of differing persuasions agree that the greatest threats to elephants are habitat destruction and fragmentation, increased negative human-elephant interactions and demand for ivory.

Our view is that the conversation should move towards how demand can be reduced effectively. And to address the broader suite of threats, we would argue that diversifying discussions about improving livelihoods – by exploring alternatives to wildlife trade – would be the most prudent way forward.

Valued contributions to this article were also made by: Robert Hepworth, senior adviser to the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (UK), Alejandro Nadal, professor of economics at El Colegio de Mexico (Mexico), Andrew Dobson, professor of conservation biology at Princeton University (NJ), and Samuel K. Wasser, professor of conservation biology at University of Washington (WA).

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