

# Tsk Tsk, Tusk Tusk<sup>1</sup>

The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that poachers kill 100,000 elephants each year for their tusks. International criminal syndicates carry out much of this poaching using sophisticated military equipment, which makes the problem nearly impossible to solve. One approach to preventing poaching for ivory is to dry up the demand.

In 1990, the government of Kenya tried to persuade the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to add elephants to its list of protected species. To illustrate the issue, Kenya set twelve tons of confiscated ivory on fire. Whereas a single large tusk can burn for a week, a pyre of tusks burns longer and can billow black smoke throughout. The dramatic blaze succeeded in its purpose: CITES added elephants to the list of protected species, thereby prohibiting trade in ivory except under special circumstances. Further, officials claimed that the blaze significantly reduced the level of poaching in Kenya by sending the message that the only real and significant value of elephant tusks is to the elephant.

Other countries followed Kenya's strategy of attacking the market by destroying ivory. In 2012, Gabon burned its entire stockpile. In 2013, the Philippines became the first non-African country to burn its stockpile, thereby ensuring that their ivory couldn't re-enter the market through governmental corruption or lax oversight. American conservation groups joined suit in 2015 when they organized a public burning of one ton of ivory items in Times Square, donated by people who no longer felt comfortable owning ivory.

Kenya followed up its first burning with other such displays and, in April 2016, it conducted its fourth and largest public burning of ivory. It stacked 105 tons of ivory in mounds ten feet high and twenty feet wide. This ivory was worth more than \$100 million on the black market, which is more than Kenya spends in a year on its entire environmental and natural resources agency.

The Kenyan strategy has met with some criticism. Destroying so much ivory only makes it scarcer, which threatens to increase both its value and the motivation for further poaching. The fires themselves consume fuel and produce much pollution, which leads some to say that simply crushing the ivory would be better, though less spectacular. Some critics say that tracking down the traders would be wiser, perhaps by introducing into the market artificial but realistic tusks containing implanted GPS chips. After all, it makes little sense to destroy something as beautiful as ivory when not all of it comes from poaching; some comes from elephants that die naturally.

Other African countries have adopted very different strategies to protect their elephants. In 2008, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Botswana together raised \$15 million by auctioning off 102 tons of ivory. They then used the money for elephant conservation. Instead of following Kenya's approach of denying any economic value to the ivory, these countries focus on the high economic value of the living animals. The government of Botswana, in particular, launched a campaign to convince its citizens that elephants are more valuable alive than dead. A single elephant is worth approximately \$1.6 million in tourism over its lifetime, which is seventy-six times more than the tusks would fetch on the black market.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything morally objectionable about buying or selling ivory that has come from elephants that have died naturally?
2. What are the morally relevant similarities and differences between ivory and exotic furs and leathers as consumer goods? Should they be treated differently?
3. What, ethically speaking, are the relevant advantages and disadvantages of ivory destruction, compared to other strategies for addressing elephant poaching?

---

<sup>1</sup> This case is adapted from the 2017 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl Nationals Case Set. Many thanks to the IEB for allowing us to use it! For more information, visit them here: <http://appe-ethics.org/ethics-bowl/>

