

Ivory Trade: The Devastating Impact It Has on East African elephants

Most African elephants are facing local extinction due to illegal killings for their ivory tusks. Last year in Kenya a pilot was flying over Tsavo East National Park when he spotted eleven dead elephants, their tusks hacked off, while the rest of the survivors were moving among them. The elephants were killed by an armed gang of Somali poachers. According to an article by Catrina Stewart, Tsavo, Kenya “had 35,000 elephants in the late 1960s, but by the late 1980s, elephants numbered just 6,500, an 80 percent fall.” [1] Organized and heavily armed gangs are targeting the elephant population, while conservationists are doing whatever they can to save the species. The poachers are even tempted now more than ever since the price of ivory went up. The elephant species is going extinct, but the demand for ivory from Asia, particularly China, doesn't seem to stop anytime soon. Kenya Wildlife Service is working to preserve elephant habitats and guard the Tsavo East National Park with armed rangers. [2] Since then, Tsavo's elephant population did partially recover.

In the last 200 years elephants' population kept declining because they are being killed for their ivory or simply for the sake of sport. The value of ivory gave it the nickname white gold. The poaching of elephants dates back to ancient times. Elephant tusks, preferably tusks from east Africa were used to make, jewelry, musical instruments and more before the invention of plastic. The idea of ivory trade has changed over time when we realized that the elephant species is being killed at an alarming rate, people began a movement to ban ivory trade globally. They succeeded in way except in china. But the ban hasn't stopped the illegal poaching. The practice still continues to this day and age. The continuous demand for Ivory directly contributed to the extinction of the elephant species. Although killing elephants for their ivory or for a trophy is a tradition that dates back to ancient times, it is now illegal and poachers need to stop killing these innocent animals because the species is in danger.

Hunting has always been a core tradition in Kenya, Tanzania, and other parts of Africa. The book "Black Poachers, White Hunters: A Social History of Hunting in Colonial Kenya" by Edward Steinhart states that prior to European colonization “Elephants were hunted for food as well as for their tusks, then increasingly for their ivories only.”[3] The ivory then was sold to Arab merchants. Eastern Kenyan hunters known as Waata used longbow and iron-tipped arrow to hunt elephants. Hunting played an important role in Tanzania as it did in Kenya. Uzigua is located in northeastern Tanzania. Pre-colonial Uzigua supplied livestock, ivory slaves to neighboring and distant settlements in exchange for cloth, beads and copper wire. The farmers used to trade and their difficult agronomic system to prevent crop loss in the time of drought. They also traded with migrant hunters from Kenya and southern Tanzania. Another book called The Politics of Environmental Control in Northeastern Tanzania: 1840-1940 by James Giblin talks about how in the last pre-colonial decade's more migrant hunters “became more numerous in Uzigua”[4] because at that time ivory trade didn't have a restrictive policy to follow. Also the demand for ivory increased

overseas because it was used for many purposes.

According to “Ivory in World History – Early Modern Trade in Context” by Martha Chaiklin, ivory was used in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt for jewelry, figures, and boxes. In the Middle Ages ivory was mainly used “for religious objects so it is fitting perhaps that in the age of exploration, they often used it for navigational and other scientific instruments.”^[5] Ivory was the material choice for scientific and medical instruments because compared to wood it is more resistance to shrinkage and swelling. It was also easier to read since it has gleaming white surface. African Ivory was also imported to the continent of Asia. Asia provided its own ivory until the early modern period, but in “the seventh century East African ivory was also exported to India and china because the demand was so high in these countries” ^[6]. The reason African tusks were in demand was because African ivory was bigger in size than Asian ivory.

The European market preferred East African ivory because it was cheaper than the ivory from southeast Asia. The book “Journal of African History” by R.W Beachey states that the East African ivory was also soft, which is great for carving. Ivory trade over-topped all trades, even slave trade at the time, which made East Africa the leading “source of ivory in the world” ^[7]. Extinctions of the elephant species is the outcome of ivory trade that existed for centuries.

Beachey argued that the East African ivory trade is very ancient and it is given more importance than the slave trade by early geographers and travelers. Arab merchants exported ivory from the East African coast throughout the early and later middle ages. But “the great development of the East African trade took place”^[8] in the nineteenth century. The demand for Ivory from Europe and America increased. Ivory was the number one export until the end of the century. Westerners were no only interested in the value of ivory, they were also interested in a type of sport called trophy hunting.

An article titled “Trophy Hunting in Sub-Saharan Africa: Economic Scale and Conservation Significance” by Peter A. Lindsey claimed that trophy hunting by European settlers and explorers was uncontrolled and had a harmful impact on wildlife species like elephants. In the late 19th century people noticed that the elephant species was going extinct so they decided to preserve it and came up with controlled hunting and revenues from trophy hunting will go to wildlife conservation. “During the early 20th century, the tourist trophy hunting industry started in Kenya, wealthy European and American visitors paying settler farmers to guide them on hunting safaris in the area.”^[9] Later on tourist hunting industries progressed in other parts of Africa as well. Lindsey

also argues that “trophy hunting has created financial incentives for the development and/or retention of wildlife”.^[10] The idea of killing an animal for sport could save the species might not make sense but her argument is that the money gained from the trophy hunter will go to wildlife conservation.

A New York Times article talks about what World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is doing to save the elephants species in East Africa, specifically in Tanzania. It states that WWF has provided vehicles for anti-poaching units to arrest poachers. Poachers are responsible for the decline rate of the elephant’s species. Unspoken assumption that could be drawn from this article is that rangers that guard the elephants have to fight the poachers, which could even result in death. Hundreds of wildlife rangers have been shot while trying to protect the animals. The article also states that “In 1975 alone, 423 poachers were arrested and 3000 snares were confiscated.” ^[11] Arresting the poachers would be more effective if ivory trade is banned in every country.

A journal article called “The Perilous Future of the Elephant” written by Science News in 1977 claims that ivory sale should be banned in the United States since the elephant population is decreasing. It says the reason why elephants are still being targeted is because the price of ivory is increasing. The article also discusses how pulling out elephants from their natural habitat and forcing them to live in the zoo or national parks is harmful. These parks are overcrowded so the elephants would eat all the grass and the leaves, which will then lead them to starvation. Then the starvation and poaching together would cause the population to decline. ^[12] So they suggest that government to take action before elephants are completely wiped out from some areas.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned international commercial trade in African ivory in 1986. After the ban, the demand for ivory in the US decreased and some ivory carving and shops closed down in china and Hong Kong. Yet CITES allowed a “one-off sale of tons of stockpiled ivory from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to Japan in 1999. ^[13] After that the ivory market sale went back to the rise again. In order to prevent this from happening again, it’s a must to ban ivory trade without exception internationally. To show that some countries like the United States and Hong Kong destroyed their stockpile of confiscated ivory. The purpose of this act was to send a message that ivory sale has no place or value in the US and to inspire other countries to do the same. The greatest threats to elephants are humans but we also have the ability to save elephants if we unite to ban poaching. According to this organization countries all over the world are being urged to destroy their stockpiles of ivory and put a ban on its trade. If these steps are taken the African elephants’ population will eventually recover.

Endnotes

[1] Catrina Stewart, “POACHING THREAT IS DEADLIER THAN EVER,” *The Independent London*, January 03, 2014, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1473662480?accountid=14902> (accessed January 20, 2017).

[2] *The Independent London*, January 03, 2014.

[3] Steinhart, Edward I. *Black Poachers, White Hunters: A Social History of Hunting in Colonial Kenya*. Oxford: James Currey, 2006: 9

[4] Giblin, James L. *The Politics of Environmental Control in Northeastern Tanzania: 1840-1940*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1992: 28

[5] Martha Chaiklin, "Ivory in World History – Early Modern Trade in Context," *History Compass* ,8/6 (2010): 535

[6] *History Compass* ,8/6 (2010): 535

[7] R.W Beachey "The East African Ivory Trade in the Nineteenth Century" *Journal of African History*, 8, 2 (1967): 269

[8] *Journal of African History*, 8, 2 (1967)

[9] Peter A. Lindsey "Trophy Hunting in Sub Saharan Africa: Economic Scale and Conservation Significance" (2008): 41 <http://www.fao.org/3/a-aj114e/aj114e09.pdf>

[10] "Trophy Hunting in Sub Saharan Africa: Economic Scale and Conservation Significance" (2008): 41

[11] *New York Times*, New York, 1979

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/120782251?accountid=14902>

[12] "The Perilous Future of the Elephant." *Science News* 111, no. 21 (1977): 327.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3961674>.

[13] "CITES National Ivory Action Plans." *CITES National Ivory Action Plans | CITES*,

www.cites.org/eng/niaps.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Illegal-Ivory Bust Shows Growing U.S Appetite for Elephant Tusks.

2012. <https://www.wired.com/2012/07/2-million-illegal-ivory-bust/>

Figure 2. Ivory trade in East Africa,

1880. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivory_trade#/media/File:Ivory_1880s.jpg

figure 3. killing for sport, 2011 <https://www.bantrophyhuntingltd.com/wall-of-shame>