



**Statement of
The Society for Conservation Biology
On the Use of Ivory for Religious Objects
As Developed by the
Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative (RCRC)
Of the Society's
Working Group on Religion and Conservation Biology**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Elephant massacre in Africa has escalated to record levels today over the last 30 years. This alarming rate can be traced to the demand for ivory for religious artifacts, trinkets, and other purposes in Asia, which, if unchecked, could reduce the African elephant to small isolated populations, some of which will disappear altogether over the next 2 or 3 decades. In addition to the ethical concerns raised by the possible extinction of elephant populations or species, the ivory trade is associated with considerable bloodshed for humans as well as elephants. The Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative (RCRC) of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) has concluded that the requirements of religion and conservation should be and, indeed, can be complementary in reaching the best possible outcome whereby religious faith is respected and the future of elephants safeguarded, religious communities are advised of the problems pertaining to the use of ivory, and religious leaders are willing to prompt a change in attitudes and practices that ensure the survival of the African elephant.

Context and Importance of the Problem

For centuries, elephant ivory has been esteemed as a luxury material and has been traded among countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Ivory is soft and can be carved using non-metal tools. Once polished, its surface yields a characteristic glossy, creamy and slightly translucent surface for which it is highly regarded. Traditionally, the tusks of the elephant have provided ivory, though various substitutes have emerged in the market, including vegetable ivory from palm nuts in Africa and South America (Hornbeck, 2012). Unlike deer, which shed their antlers while they are alive, the tusks of the elephant can only be removed when the elephant is dead. Therefore, the global demand for ivory has significantly impacted elephant populations in Africa. In the 20th century, African elephant populations have been greatly reduced by a surge in demand for ivory-carved luxury items.



Currently, more than 25,000 elephants are poached annually in the African continent, most coming from Central Africa—a region rife with violence sometimes resulting from the ivory trade (Christy 2012a, Lombard 2012). The seizure of large volumes of illegal ivory suggests that the rate of elephant poaching is reaching a crisis (Wasser et al. 2007, Christy 2012a, Mathema 2012, Milliken et al. 2012) and that the ivory trade would likely extirpate elephant populations if current demands for ivory persist and prevail. Researchers have estimated that there is an annual decline of 8% of the remaining 470,000 elephants in Africa, higher than the 7.4% annual decline that occurred over the 10 years prior to the 1989 international ban on trading ivory (Douglas-Hamilton 1988; Said et al. 1995; Blanc et al. 2007; Wasser et al. 2008). If this trend continues, Wasser et al. (2008) project the virtual extinction of the Sub-Saharan African elephant species across most of its range by 2020. These facts, estimates, and projections would be a key concern at any time, but have special poignancy during this second year of the United Nations 2011-2020 Decade for Biodiversity.

An article published in the October 2012 issue of *National Geographic* traced a previously undocumented component of the market demand for elephant ivory to carved religious objects and statues in Asia, especially the Philippines, Thailand, and China (Christy, 2012a). The author highlighted how the demand for ivory-carved religious objects was a significant driver of the illegal trade of African elephant ivory. For many Filipino Catholics, the use of ivory is believed to reflect one's level of adoration of and piety to God. While fiberglass and wood are substitutable materials, ivory is most preferred because the monetary investment in a statue is considered a measure of one's devotion. In Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, a parallel belief is held among Buddhist followers regarding the use of ivory-crafted amulets blessed by certain Buddhist monks. The use of these amulets is believed to bring luck and protection against black magic. In China, ivory statues are seen as a financial investment, since ivory is considered a more precious material than gold. Ivory statues in China are often crafted after religious icons or to express mythological motifs. Crafting religious icons from ivory is also considered a form of respect and a way of honoring the figure that is crafted. While the article focused on the major drivers of the illegal African ivory trade, they apply similarly to the illegal ivory trade that occurs in Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. The threat from the ivory trade in these countries is not, however, as significant to Asiatic elephants as it is to African elephants (Elephant Family, 2012). Ivory is also channeled into the US market. A seizure of more than \$2 million worth of illicit ivory items was made in 2012 in Manhattan (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2012). The ivory was mostly used to make small jewelry, animal statues, and carved tusks. However, in the main, Asia takes a larger share of the demand for ivory.

Because the illegal ivory trade is driven substantially by religion in Asia, the RCRC is committed to engaging religious communities in addressing the impact of the use of ivory in crafting religious objects. The RCRC seeks to provide information to religious leaders and adherents about the adverse effects of extracting ivory from elephants, to foster dialogue among religious leaders and adherents regarding these adverse effects, to discuss the conservation and human problems



associated with elephant poaching, and to declare our position as a body of concerned professionals. This position paper is aimed ultimately at reaching a consensual resolution of the problem among religious communities, governments, and society whilst also safeguarding the future of elephants.

Environmental and Ecological Concerns

Elephants are regarded as a keystone species in their environment and are important for ecosystems, as they are effective seed dispersers, a fact that has the potential to influence vegetation dynamics (Campos-Arceiz & Blake 2011). Major reductions in elephant populations in Central Africa can negatively impact ecosystem integrity with regards to the long-term regeneration of forests and their viability as carbon storage systems (Blake et al. 2009; Lewis et al. 2009). Recent studies reveal that populations of African elephants are declining at an alarming rate (Bouché et al. 2011) and that this decline is related primarily to poaching for the lucrative ivory trade (Bouché et al. 2010). The impacts of poaching also have far reaching consequences for the biology of African elephant populations. Average tusk weight has fallen significantly since 1970, probably because the older animals with large tusks have already been killed; leaving current stocks of younger elephants (van Kooten, 2008). Scully (2002) reports that 55 elephants gave rise to 1 ton of ivory in 1979, compared to 113 elephants around 1990 – a reduction from 18.18 to 8.85 kg per animal.

Broader Ethical Concerns

Elephants are not the only casualties from the illegal ivory trade. In conflict zones where anti-poaching campaigns are launched, hundreds of people have been killed as a result of fighting between poachers and park rangers (Lombard, 2012). Ivory is financing local conflicts, and could be financing international terrorism (Puhl, 2012) through Al Qaeda's Somali wing, Al Shabaab (Gathura, 2012), the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) (Witcher, 2012), and Sudan's Janjaweed. The escalation of elephant poaching has rendered large parts of Eastern and Central Africa insecure for all, including poor rural communities and businesses, especially tourism (Goldenberg, 2012). And the ivory trade is increasingly being driven by criminal cartels that threaten not only elephants and other species, but also people, their livelihoods, and national security. In recent speeches, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton pointed out that wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world, and that wildlife trafficking needs to be addressed through partnerships as robust as the criminal networks (Clinton, 2012). She noted that governments, civil society, businesses, scientists, and activists must work together in educating people about wildlife trafficking. The violence, especially in Central Africa, has been escalating as the demand for ivory in Asia rises. In Kenya, the illegal wildlife trade is reported to fuel crime, corruption, instability, and intercommunal fighting (Gettleman, 2012). The illegal ivory trade disrupts social harmony among local communities living in these areas and threatens the livelihoods of people who are dependent on healthy, sustainable elephant populations to support the wildlife tourism industry. These dire consequences of the demand for ivory in Asia call for an



unprecedented change in orientation by religious adherents, society, and government on the continent.

Elephants are respected by adherents of the same religions that value ivory artifacts. In Buddhist scriptures, elephants have been associated with qualities such as patience, intelligence, gentleness, etc. (Dhammika, 2013). In the Catholic theological tradition, other species are viewed as intrinsically and instrumentally valuable creatures made possible by God through the evolutionary process (Schaefer 2009). The RCRC is encouraged by the statement of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cebu, Jose S. Palma: “*Let it be made clear that the Church supports the ban on ivory (PD, 1979 and CITES, 1990) as it is consistent with her doctrine on stewardship of creation.... The Church does not condone ivory smuggling or other illegal activities, although in the past, ivory was one of the materials used in the adornment of liturgical worship. While these ivory artifacts crafted long before the ban are considered the cultural heritage of the Church, in no way does she encourage the use of ivory for new implements*” (Christy, 2012b). The Federation of Environmental Organizations Sri Lanka also states: “*As a Buddhist nation Sri Lanka should be ashamed to add value to this Blood Ivory by gifting it to Buddhist temples as objects to be valued and venerated. As custodians of the greatest philosophy on ahimsa Buddhist monks across the nation should reject this Blood Ivory as it will stain the sacred grounds of their temples*” (FEOSL, 2013). These facts suggest that there is potential for engaging religious leaders to raise awareness of the decline of an animal that is important to their spiritual and ethical practices.

Positions

The RCRC of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) SCB takes the following positions:

1. Elephant populations in Africa are being massacred by organized and well-armed poachers; if this menace to Africa’s flagship species persists, entire ecosystems will be adversely affected (see Western, 1989) and our children would lose a heritage of renown.
2. Based on the October 2012 *National Geographic* report, religion in Asia is a crucial determinant of the future of the African elephant; religious leaders in the Catholic and Buddhist faiths are presented with a unique opportunity to influence positively the future of biodiversity in Africa and secure the survival of the African elephant.
3. Religious leaders have the responsibility and influence to reorient their followers on the procurement and use of religious artifacts made from the ivory of African elephants, and the precarious life of the humans who protect them.
4. Religion and conservation biology can be complementary in reaching the best possible outcome when religious faith is respected, religious communities are open to understanding the problems pertaining to the use of ivory, and religious leaders are willing to prompt a change in attitudes and practices that ensure the survival of the African elephant and the integrity of our planetary future.



Recommendations

The RCRC recommends that conservation biologists should:

1. Provide awareness and educational tools for use by religious leaders to reorient their adherents about religious ivory and to elicit an empathic response on the plight of the African elephant.
2. Encourage religious leaders to issue public statements on the severity of the ivory trade and the direct and negative impact that the religious use of ivory has on elephant populations and local communities and, where appropriate, on the relevant teachings of their religions, such as teachings concerning practicing stewardship of creation.
3. Urge religious leaders to issue statements to their followers discouraging the use of ivory for religious artifacts (e.g., statues or amulets) and instead use other material (e.g., fiberglass, wood) as substitutes and seek to engage religious leaders in consultations concerning which materials are most suitable from a conservation, as well as a religious, standpoint.

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