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WILDLIFE WATCH

U.S. Adopts Near-Total Ivory Ban

The move is the latest step in the Obama administration's fight against wildlife trafficking.



More than a ton of ivory was crushed in New York City last year as part of the government's plan to crack down on the illegal trade. New regulations limiting trade are the next step.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW BURTON, GETTY



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Say you find an old elephant ivory trinket in your grandmother's attic that no one wants. How can you legally get rid of it?

According to new rules announced Thursday, there aren't many options—at least if you were hoping to make a buck off the item.

The regulations, which take effect on July 6, amount to a near-total ban on the commercial trade of African elephant ivory. Current law allows for the sale of ivory and ivory products in limited cases where the seller can prove the ivory is old and was lawfully imported. But the new rules further restrict exports and sales across state lines, as well as limiting ivory trophy imports to two per year, per hunter. Ivory trophy imports are currently unlimited.

"Today's bold action underscores the United States' leadership and commitment to ending the scourge of elephant poaching and the tragic impact it's having on wild populations," said Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell in a press release.

Poachers kill some 30,000 elephants a year in order to feed the global demand for ivory, with China by far the largest consumer, according to a 2010 report. A 2008 study showed that the United States is the second largest consumer, with much of the ivory being illegally imported from China.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says that wildlife traffickers have exploited previous regulations allowing for a legal trade in ivory and that the new rules will go a long way in helping law enforcement more easily distinguish legal from illegal ivory.

They also mark another step toward fulfilling President Barack Obama's 2013 executive order to combat illegal wildlife trafficking. Since then, the administration has inched toward shutting down the country's elephant ivory market. Thursday's announcement marks another milestone, and it fulfills an agreement with China made in December to restrict each nation's domestic ivory trade. (China has yet to take any significant public steps toward that goal.)

This brings us back to that ivory trinket dilemma. Say you want to sell it to someone in another state. Until July 6, that's allowed if you can prove the ivory was legally brought to U.S. before 1990, when an international convention that regulates international wildlife trade banned the trade in ivory. If it was imported after 1990, you have to prove it was imported from an elephant taken from the wild before 1976, when the convention first listed the African elephant as at risk.

But once the new rules go into effect, ivory can be sold out of state only if it's more than a hundred years old or is a small part of manufactured products such as an ivory-handled gun or part of a musical instrument.

If you want to sell it overseas, the rules are stricter. Previously, non-raw ivory could be sold abroad as long as the item was demonstrably made from ivory obtained before 1976. But under the new rules, it's allowed only if the item is considered an antique.

What if your neighbor wants to buy the ivory trinket? That could be legal—but only if you don't live in one of the four states that has banned the sale of ivory: New Jersey, California, Washington, and New York.

And gifting ivory? If it had been acquired legally, the owner can, and still will be able to, donate it to someone in another state. And until July 6, any worked ivory can be given to someone outside the country, but the new rules restrict non-commercial exports to items such as antiques, legally acquired pre-1976 musical instruments, or inherited ivory items (provided they meet certain requirements).

If you don't want to sell or give away your ivory, you can keep it. As long as it was obtained legally, the government doesn't care whether you stash it under your bed or display it in your window for all to see.

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