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WILDLIFE WATCH

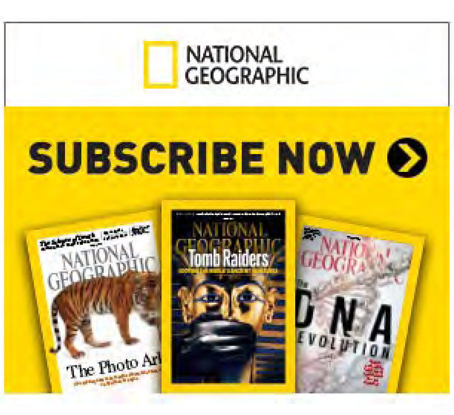
A Legal Trade in Ivory Would Wipe Out Elephants, Study Finds

New research suggests that demand far outpaces the amount of ivory Africa's elephants could sustainably provide.



Researchers used data from elephants in Amboseli, Kenya, seen here, to determine how many could be killed for their ivory before it started to negatively affect the population.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GERRY ELLIS, GLOBIO/ MINDEN PICTURES/ NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE



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Southern African Countries Are Trying—Again—to Legalize Elephant Ivory Sales

By Rachael Bale

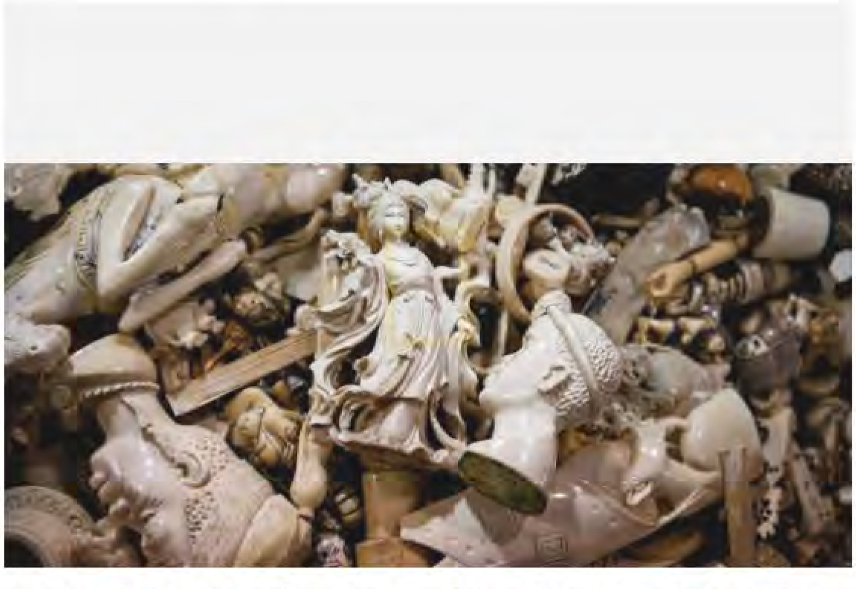
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Legalizing the ivory trade could more quickly make elephants extinct, a study released September 15 suggests. It finds that the demand for ivory is far greater than the amount of ivory that can be harvested sustainably.

This contradicts an earlier proposition by ivory trade supporters that a sustainable trade that could meet demand would be possible.

"There is no way to harvest sufficient ivory in a controlled way that won't drive elephant populations to extinctions," says Phyllis Lee, one of the study's authors and a researcher at the University of Stirling in the United Kingdom. "Our argument is based on one of the best protected populations of elephants. If we can't make the ivory trade model work here, it won't work anywhere."

Elephants are in crisis, and everyone is scrambling to figure out how to save them from extinction. Demand for ivory in Asia means that some 27,000 are killed by poachers each year, and poachers have become more organized and professional. (Related: "African Elephant Numbers Plummet 30 Percent, Landmark Survey Finds.")



Legalizing the international ivory trade is unlikely to solve the elephant poaching crisis because demand is so great, a new study finds.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATE BROOKS, REDUX

It's against this backdrop that countries around the world are set to debate in October the merits of bringing back the international ivory trade, which has been banned since 1989. Some argue it would hurt elephants by erasing the stigma around ivory and encouraging more people to buy it. They say that the illegal trade would increase as a result and that legal sales would provide cover for illegal ivory. Others argue that a legalized trade would help elephants by bringing the black market above board to be regulated, or that in some parts of Africa elephant populations are robust enough to withstand hunting for ivory.

Namibia and Zimbabwe have both proposed bringing back the ivory trade based on the latter argument, and along with South Africa, the three want the international community to set up a process for a future trade in ivory. This process, called the decision-making mechanism, would include sourcing ivory from existing government stockpiles of seized illegal ivory, natural elephant deaths, elephant culls, and intentional elephant hunts.

Stockpiles, natural deaths, and culls would only meet a fraction of the current demand for ivory. That means that to meet demand, the rest would have to come from hunted elephants.

One of two scenarios could happen, according to the new study: Either countries set quotas high enough to meet demand—which would result in overexploitation and drive elephants to extinction—or countries could set sustainable quotas, which wouldn't provide enough ivory. That means poaching would likely continue.

Either way, a legal trade wouldn't help elephants, the study says.

"A legal trade is going to be very problematic now and in the future," Lee says. "We have to work with the fact that there's still a huge illegal trade and huge demand."



Largest Ever Ivory Burn Destroys 105 Tons In April, the Kenya government destroyed more than 100 tons of elephant ivory in the largest burn of its kind ever, in the hopes of combating the illegal ivory trade and killing of elephants. The burn represented the tusks of more than 6,500 elephants killed, and also included more than a ton of rhino horns.

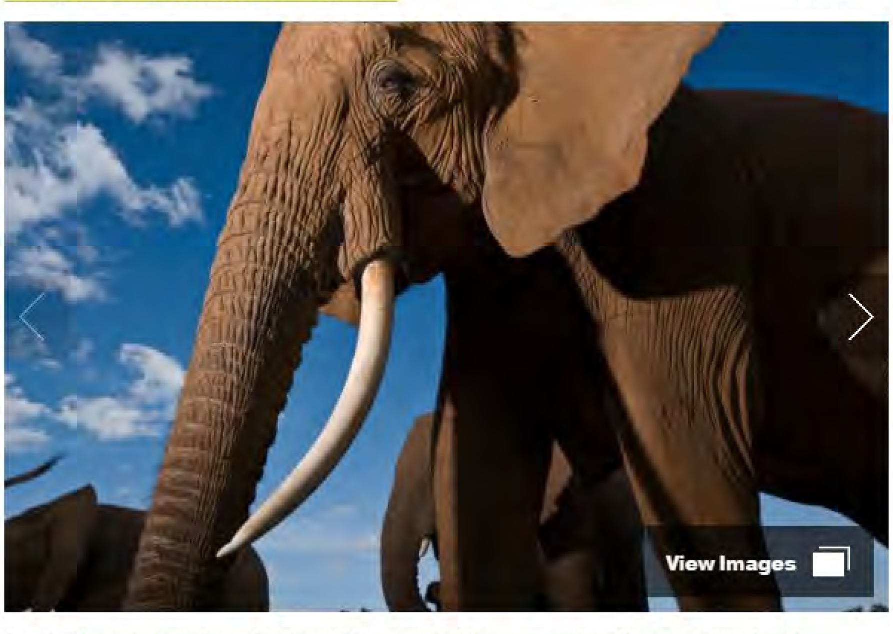
Lee and David Lusseau, a researcher at the University of Aberdeen, used population modeling to determine just how many elephants could be killed for their ivory (because that's the only way to get ivory) before their deaths start causing the population to decrease.

Unlike the model that supports the ivory trade, Lee and Lusseau's work takes into consideration the age and sex of elephants most likely to be targeted by hunters. For example, older male elephants have more ivory and would be hunters' first choice. But once the older males have been killed, hunters would need to kill several smaller or younger elephants to get the same amount of ivory as before. That has a greater impact on the population.

In their sample of a real-life group of 1,360 elephants in Amboseli, Kenya, their analysis suggests that about 220 to 330 pounds of ivory can be taken sustainably each year. On the other hand, demand for a population of that size, which was estimated based on how many pounds of illegal ivory are seized each year, would be between 900 and 1,300 pounds. That means a sustainable ivory harvest could meet, at most, 37 percent of demand.

And that's a best-case picture. It assumes that demand wouldn't increase and that poaching would stop if the ivory trade was legalized. And it also assumes each country will have adequate knowledge and expertise to perfectly determine how much ivory exists within its borders, which is the key to setting sustainable quotas.

Images of Elephants Worldwide 1 / 16



An elephant in Samburu National Reserve in Kenya stands tall among her herd.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL NICHOLS, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE

Lee says this points else to the need to focus on reducing demand for ivory more than anything.

"We cannot brush aside the fact that poaching has reached industrial scale," Lee and Lusseau write. "We must urgently work on finding ways to change consumer behavior as the only avenue by which we can resolve the ivory trade tragedy."

This story was produced by National Geographic's Special Investigations Unit, which focuses on wildlife crime and is made possible by grants from the BAND Foundation and the Woodtiger Fund. Read more stories from the SIU on Wildlife Watch. Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to ngwildlife@ngs.org.

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