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The Chinese government announced last December the closure of its legal ivory market by the end of 2017 to fulfill commitments jointly made by President Xi Jinping and then U.S. President Barack Obama in September 2015.

China's remaining 105 ivory carving entities and retail outlets are scheduled to be shut down before December 31.

Challenges include finding alternative livelihoods, including alternative carving materials, for the licensed carving factories, and the disposal of legal raw ivory and unsold worked ivory after the trade ban.

John Scanlon, secretary-general of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, witnessed the shuttering of some of the ivory outlets in Beijing.

"Last December, China announced its decision on the closure of domestic ivory markets. It is now rapidly moving ahead, which is clear from my visit to Beijing this week," said Scanlon.

"The closure of domestic ivory market by the Chinese government affects the processing, trade and movement of elephant ivory both within and between the provinces," he said, "which gives it extraordinary reach across the country."

China's ivory market closure is in keeping with a decision by CITES Parties at CoP17 in Johannesburg, South Africa in September-October 2016 that calls for the closure of all domestic markets for ivory.

Poachers kill elephants, cut off their tusks and smuggle them into countries, such as China, where the ivory is in demand for intricate carvings that command high prices from wealthy buyers.

While the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists Asian elephants as Endangered and states that "Asian elephants are now extinct in ... most of China," Scanlon said today that the population of Asian elephants in China is "healthy and increasing."

Today, an estimated 200–250 elephants survive in the wild in China's Yunnan province, a remnant of the thousands that once ranged widely over much of southern China, including Guangxi province, where they survived into the 17th century.

Figures released earlier this month by CITES on the **2016 trends in the poaching of African elephants**, listed as Vulnerable to extinction, show that the steady increase in the levels of illegal killing of elephants seen since 2006, and peaking in 2011, has been halted and stabilized, but at levels that remain unacceptably high.

Scanlon today visited some ivory carving factories and retail outlets, including the famous Beijing Ivory Carving Factory, as well as one of its retail outlets to be closed today.

"The ultimate goal of the closure of domestic ivory markets is to stop the illegal trade in ivory. It must be supported by ongoing law enforcement and international cooperation right across the illegal supply chain," Scanlon said.

"As far as destination countries are concerned, this includes ongoing efforts to prevent the laundering of illegally sourced ivory carvings, such as with mammoth ivory and antique elephant ivory carvings. China has led through its actions, which serves as an inspiration to other destination countries to follow, as well as for range and transit countries," said Scanlon.

This week, the CITES Secretary-General had a series of meetings with the State Forestry Administration, which is the CITES Management Authority of China, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the General Administration of Customs where the ministries reported on the progress made on implementation and enforcement of the Convention, particularly the CoP17 decisions.

There, the Chinese government announced the donation of US\$100,000 to the CITES Secretariat in support of implementing the outcomes of CoP17. This may be the first of its regular annual extra-budgetary contributions to the Secretariat.

China's contribution to the regular budget of the CITES Secretariat has increased by 250 percent since 2010.

Scanlon said, "I am greatly encouraged to see first-hand how the bold decisions taken by CITES Parties at CoP17 are being translated into equally bold actions on the ground in China, and we express our deep appreciation to the government of China for its strong leadership."

Elephant conservation groups are encouraged by the move.

"These closures prove that China means business in closing down the ivory trade and helping the African elephant," said Peter Knights, CEO of WildAid, a U.S. nonprofit group with an office in China. "The price of ivory has dropped by two-thirds from previous highs, so it is now a very bad investment. We expect further drops as the full closure approaches at the end of the year."

A report released March 20 by Save the Elephants found that the wholesale price of ivory tusks in China had fallen to US\$730 per kilogram, down from \$2,100 in 2014. Their investigation shows that some retail outlets have closed already due to slow sales.

"This is a critical period for elephants," said Iain Douglas-Hamilton, president and founder of Save the Elephants, which carried out the research.

"With the end of the legal ivory trade in China, the survival chances for elephants have distinctly improved. We must give credit to China for having done the right thing by closing the ivory trade. There is still a long way to go to end the excessive killing of elephants for ivory, but there is now greater hope for the species."



Some Chinese ivory carvers are highly skilled. This carving of the Chengtu-Kunming railway was a gift from China to the United Nations in 1974. Eight elephant tusks were used; 98 people worked on it for more than two years. (Photo by Rob Young)

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