

## Conservation Congress Votes to Ban All Domestic Trade in Elephant Ivory

Posted by Joan Russow  
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By [Guy Dinmore](#)

HONOLULU, Hawaii, Sep 11 2016 (IPS) - The international conservation community has taken an important step towards saving African elephants from mass slaughter by voting at a major congress to call on all governments to ban their domestic trade in ivory.

A resolution at the World Conservation Congress of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was passed overwhelmingly by governments and NGOs on its last day on Saturday despite fierce opposition from a minority of countries led by Japan, South Africa and Namibia.

Tusks end up smuggled by criminal organisations to Asia where they are carved and sold openly -- mostly in China, Vietnam and Hong Kong -- under the guise of legal ivory imported before a ban on international trade came into force in 1989.

Motion 007 was the last and most contentious of 105 resolutions voted on at the 10-day IUCN congress in Honolulu. Delegates cheered and applauded as some 20 amendments put forward by Namibia and Japan were defeated, and the text of the resolution was approved.

The resolution, sponsored on the government side by the United States and Gabon, aims to deprive illegal poachers of market demand for elephant ivory. Results of a recently released Great Elephant Census of 18 African countries showed that poachers are killing some 27,000 savanna elephants a year, resulting in an annual population decline of 8 percent.

Activists say an elephant is being shot for its ivory every 15 minutes. Tusks end up smuggled by criminal organisations to Asia where they are carved and sold openly — mostly in China, Vietnam and Hong Kong — under the guise of legal ivory imported before a ban on international trade came into force in 1989.

“It is fantastic this was approved,” commented Susan Lieberman of the Wildlife Conservation Society, an NGO co-sponsor of the motion. “It is a great victory for elephants. We are calling on governments to say it is over, it is done — no more domestic trade in ivory.”

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The IUCN does not have legal authority to force governments to adopt policies, but as the most authoritative voice on conservation issues – grouping nearly 1,400 states, government agencies and NGOs – its policy decisions carry considerable weight.

Next stop for conservationists on this issue is the meeting of parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Johannesburg on September 24. CITES banned the international trade in elephant ivory in 1989 but allowed two major auctions of ivory in the late 1990s and again in 2008. These sales led to a spike in poaching in Africa and resulted in CITES declaring a 10-year moratorium which expires in 2017.

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Delegates in Honolulu said the IUCN policy decision would make it virtually impossible that the CITES conference would agree to South Africa or other nations being allowed to resume limited sales of ivory. A motion will also be put to CITES to call for a ban on the domestic trade in ivory.

Lieberman highlighted the push by most African states and civil society to ban domestic trade in ivory. Speakers at the IUCN congress calling for the ban included Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Benin, Congo, Senegal and Gabon.

“The loudest voices were African from the range countries who spoke out,” Lieberman noted.

But South Africa and Namibia argued that their elephant populations were growing because of their countries’ successful conservation efforts, funded in part by domestic sales of ivory. Both

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countries said they should not be penalised for the failings of others and that it would be a breach of their sovereignty to be ordered how to manage their wildlife.

Similarly Japan said it had strictly controlled its internal market and prevented the smuggling of ivory, and that efforts should focus on helping other countries achieve tougher regulation. A total ban on domestic trade also contradicted the concept of sustainable development championed by IUCN, Japanese Ministry of Environment official Naohisa Okuda told the Congress.

“Conservation and sustainable use should go hand in hand,” Okuda said.

NGOs however challenge Japan’s claims to have stopped the flow of illegal ivory across its borders. Activists also suspect that the opposition coalition between Japan and the two African nations concealed an intention by Tokyo to try to persuade CITES to allow Japan to buy ivory once more.

IUCN’s proposed ban will also encourage and support China to close its booming domestic trade in ivory where smugglers can earn over \$1,000 a kilogram for tusks.

China and the US announced jointly a year ago their intention to ban ivory from their respective markets. The US went ahead – with limited exceptions such as ivory used in musical instruments – while China has not set a timetable.

Chinese government delegates did not speak during the debate over motion 007 but told activists privately that China welcomed the worldwide ban. NGOs are hopeful China will set a timeframe for its domestic ban by the end of this year.

The US urged all IUCN members to support the motion. “Legal markets mask illegal markets. To think otherwise masks the truth,” a State Department official told the plenary session.

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At times the debate was heated. A speaker for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, a South African provincial agency which funds much of its budget from business operations, denounced what she called the “pseudo-science theories” of “smart people” who wanted to tell South Africans how to manage their wildlife.

Safari Club International, a pro-hunting lobby group, said the proposed ban violated the sovereignty of nations.

One of the strongest statements in support of the ban came from Uganda, speaking on behalf of 29 states grouped in the African Elephant Coalition. “The people benefiting from ivory are criminals and terrorists,” said a Ugandan wildlife official, accusing the Lord’s Resistance Army which operates across four countries, of funding its operations through ivory. “I have buried 100 of my Rangers in this war,” he said.