

Where Elephants Stand Today



It's the 4th annual World Elephant Day and we're overwrought. Is there anything we can say this year that we haven't said before? The issues plaguing elephants are still with us. But we also have hope.

Over the past year, the World Elephant Day campaign has reached millions of people, prompting hundreds of thousands of individuals to act in various ways to show their concern for the elephants' plight. We've seen dozens of organizations step forward with educational engagement campaigns. We've also seen some groundbreaking positive steps from such governments as United States, and countries in Africa and Asia, to pass new legislation to ban the ivory trade, and to implement strict enforcement against wildlife crime. Yet, the situation for both African and Asian elephants continues to be exceedingly dire.

Why?



In all of its complexity, the problem is rooted in something fundamentally simple: supply and demand. And whether it is the supply and demand of ivory, elephants, or habitat, we are running out of all of them at an alarming rate.

There are three species of elephants: African savanna, African forest, and Asian. To date, most of the media attention has been focused on the African elephants. But, it must be noted that the Asian elephant is just as beleaguered, if not more so, and continues to experience its own set of unique challenges. Classified as “Endangered,” there are less than 45,000 Asian elephants left in the world. They suffer primarily from a loss of their natural habitat as humans continue to multiply and expand upon their territory. Because the outlook for Asian elephants is as critical as that of their African cousins, this year we are highlighting the obstacles that Asian elephants face in their fight for survival. Please read more about that [here](#).

As for the African elephants, it’s estimated that only 300,000 to 500,000 remain, with 100,000 of them being African forest elephants, located primarily in Gabon. In Mozambique, recent data indicates that the African savanna elephant population has been cut in half since 2010.

In Tanzania, the figures are even worse – in four years, two-thirds of its elephants have been lost to poaching.

Yet in the midst of all this darkness there are glimmers of hope, some of which we would like to highlight:

In May, Zhao Shucong, head of China's State Forestry Administration, announced that China would eventually phase out its legal ivory trade, implying that this might occur sometime in 2017 when China's ivory stockpiles run out. This past year, China also imposed a one-year ban on the importation of ivory carvings.

And the United States continues to signal its desire to end the ivory trade once and for all. On July 25, in Kenya, with Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta at his side, President Obama indicated that new administration rulings – which will serve to eradicate the sale of almost all ivory across state lines – are in the works.

This follows from President Obama's 2013 Executive Order to Combat Wildlife Trafficking and more recently, the National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking in February 2014. Part and parcel of the executive order was the investment of millions of dollars of USAID money in a variety of programs across the globe to fight wildlife trafficking. Congress is also undertaking a study of the connection between terrorism and poaching, and the Department of Defense is stepping up with efforts to apprehend poachers/terrorists. That's what's happening on the federal level. On the state level, after New York and New Jersey passed laws outlawing ivory sales, other states are seeking to follow suit.

A powerful symbol of the world's growing awareness of the poaching crisis took place in June, when more than a ton of confiscated ivory was crushed in Times Square, building on earlier crushes that have transpired across the globe. These crushes, along with organized marches designed to mobilize the public, are becoming increasingly prevalent as people everywhere finally begin to comprehend what is at stake. In October 2014, people in 116 cities around the world participated in such marches.



These proactive steps were unfortunately set against several tragedies, including the sale and export of 24 baby elephants from Zimbabwe to China, a barbaric and ongoing practice that is, disturbingly, allowed by CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), but which should, without question, be outlawed.

To address the supply and demand forces that are driving the ivory trade, there has been a steady growth of awareness building to educate consumers, namely Chinese – but also Western consumers, particularly Americans – about the deadly impacts their demand for ivory ornaments has on elephants.

We've seen Thailand, one of the key transit countries for illegal ivory smuggled out of Africa, legislate its Elephant Ivory Act to strictly regulate its trade in domestic ivory and eliminate the illegal trade. The amount of ivory on sale legally in shops in Thailand is said to have declined by 85 percent. It's been reported that over 22,000 domestic ivory collectors declared approximately 150 tons of ivory to the authorities.

But on the supply side, enforcement practices in many countries, mostly African, must hold strong in the face of corruption.

This battle against organized crime and terrorism requires significant strategic and political measures to make a real impact on the prevention of poaching. While governments are working to implement new laws, the anti-poaching squads and wildlife rangers risk their lives to protect the elephants, rhinos, and other wildlife. They have no choice but to use force to protect nature from the violations of humanity. This warfare also has tragic effects on the livelihoods of local communities and their natural heritage. It diminishes their opportunities to create viable eco-tourism economies for visitors from afar to come experience elephants, wildlife, and nature.

To wind down this brief summation on a positive note, we can offer this encouraging news: Richard Leakey, the renowned elephant conservationist who was instrumental in halting the rampant poaching in Kenya in the 1980s, has once again been called to a leadership role at the Kenya Wildlife Service, where he will act as its chairman. It is hoped that he will work his special brand of knowledge, experience, and magic once again to eradicate the blight of elephant slaughter.

The sad reality is that the more rare the elephants become, the more valuable the ivory. Like any commodity, this value of its rarity will be what ultimately drives the elephants to extinction – unless we do something about it.

We have to consider what our role is in nature, as humans. Are we not to be stewards of the environment? The barbaric slaying of majestic, iconic beings such as the magnificent tuskers Mountain Bull and Satao in Kenya last year, and Cecil the Lion just a few weeks ago in Zimbabwe are brutally profound and symbolic reminders that we as a species are still far from being stewards of the environment. Rather, the polar opposite seems to be true – we are the destroyers of it.

But we can take a lesson from the elephants, and their honorable qualities that we so admire. They are our mirrors, a reflection of what we can be. By taking care of each other, other creatures, and our environment, nature will take care of us.

Hope is our strongest ally in this battle to save the elephants. With hope in our hearts we know that justice for elephants, and all wildlife, is on the horizon. It's hope that inspires our collective action and – whether through education and awareness, on-the-ground research and conservation, enforcement and protection, or legislation – it's hope coupled with action that will ensure the elephants' future.

We all must do what we can, no matter how big or how small.

Thank you to all of our Associates, and to [96 Elephants](#), the [David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust](#), [The Bodhi Tree Foundation](#), and [Safeguarding a Future for Africa's Elephants \(S.A.F.E.\)](#), for working tirelessly on behalf of the elephants.

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