

CITES: If illegal trade is a crisis, make it legal

- Ivo Vegter
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Ivory trade opponents promote dodgy statistics in an effort to get CITES delegates to afford “maximum protection” to elephant populations that are not in danger. That isn’t surprising, considering the heavy presence of NGOs ideologically opposed to sustainable use of wildlife, but emotive alarmism won’t save the elephant, or any other species.

The headlines in the lead-up to the CITES conference being held in Johannesburg this week and next were dramatic. According to the [final report of the Great Elephant Census](#) (GEC), Africa suffered a 30% decline in elephant numbers in just seven years. This stunning news made headlines around the world. As it was designed to do.

Sadly, it does not have much merit. The total number found by the GEC may have been 30% lower than expected, or 30% lower than previous estimates, which is certainly a matter for concern. However, to make a specific statistical comparison you need comparable data, collected using a consistent methodology over time. Since the GEC – as its name implies – was the first aerial survey of its kind, there is no comparable previous data. In fact, it was launched for the very reason that existing data on elephant populations was uncertain, fragmentary, based on differing research methodologies, and often unreliable.

This first comprehensive survey can give us a useful baseline for future comparison, provided future counts duplicate its methods and scope, but it cannot tell us anything about how elephant populations have changed in the past. All it can tell us is that the new count is lower than the previous average estimate, but then, previous estimates did vary by some quarter of a million animals, which is a huge error range compared to the 352,000 animals the GEC counted.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which is an authoritative source, [released a new report](#) only days ago, in which it estimates the elephant population to be 415,000, almost a fifth higher than the GEC estimate. It believes this number to be 111,000 animals fewer than a decade ago, and this [has been reported](#) as the “worst decline in 25 years”.

However, the IUCN report adds that there may be an additional 117,000 to 135,000 elephants in areas not systematically surveyed, which would account for a quarter of the population. This would mean there are possibly as many as 550,000 animals, which more than makes up for the losses claimed by both the IUCN and the GEC, and comes near the previous upper estimate of 600,000.

These statistical shenanigans cast doubt on the reliability of elephant population numbers in general. For such dramatic, headline-grabbing findings, one would have wanted a strong scientific basis.

Perhaps this deception, and the carefully timed release mere weeks before the 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP17) of CITES, being held in Johannesburg as I write this, reveals the real objective of its sponsor. The GEC was funded by Paul Allen, a technology billionaire who believes “[every elephant counts](#)”. Way down his article, he mentions that “[r]elative success stories include Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, and the complex of parks spanning the border of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin”.

But those success stories did not appear in the alarming media headlines about a 30% decline in elephant populations. The very concept of “endangered species” means the media does not distinguish between separate populations, instead treating an entire species as if it faces the same threats to its survival everywhere.

This is very unfortunate, since there is little doubt that poaching is a significant and growing problem for many elephant populations. If we are to combat this, it would be nice to start with reliable, honest information instead of alarmist propaganda.

Eugene Lapointe, former secretary-general of CITES and now president of the International Wildlife Management Consortium, recently wrote [an editorial published on IOL](#), which is very much worth reading in its entirety. He makes a telling point: his organisation predicted almost a decade ago that the ban on ivory trade would undermine the protection of elephants and increase the threat of poaching, because illegal trade in ivory is so profitable.

As the WWF's Carlos Drewes [noted in these pages](#), the root cause of poaching is not only "rampant demand in Asia" – despite millions spent over decades to reduce demand worldwide – but also "corruption, inadequate laws and lack of enforcement along the illegal trade chain". [Another Daily Maverick piece](#), by John Mukela for independent investigative journalism outfit amaBhungane, confirms the involvement of senior government personnel in illegal wildlife trade.

It is always thus, when you prohibit trade in anything. It was that way with alcohol, when moonshiners outgunned the police, and corrupt officials enabled the trade. And those are the exact same reasons cited for the failure of the war on drugs, despite its staggering death toll.

If the WWF or anyone else thinks that all we need to do is eliminate corruption in elephant range states, they're smoking something. It just paints them as naïve idealists. If eliminating corruption is a precondition for saving elephants, or any other species, then we had better get used to the idea that the species are doomed. And better enforcement is devilishly expensive in blood and treasure, which is a heavy demand to make of nations who struggle with widespread poverty, yet have to do the heavy lifting of actually managing elephant populations.

Besides, if enforcement was the solution, why has the war on drugs, funded and enforced by the most powerful nations in the world, not succeeded in ending the production and consumption of harmful narcotics?

It does not have to be this way. As a Japanese reader wrote to me recently: "I believe that both the species of African elephant and traditional craftwork of ivory could last compatibly in the future, ... if CITES comes back to the doctrine of sustainable utilisation of natural resources."

He makes a case that is often forgotten in the zealous campaign to demonise trade in ivory: "In my country, craftwork of ivory is traditional culture, which has been taken over from generation to generation with the pride of artisans for hundreds of years. I think it is a precious heritage which should be taken over to next generation. However ivory craftworkers, who are sometimes regarded as if they are criminals, are now ... seriously endangered."

Of course, elephants are not the only source of ivory, and demand has naturally shifted towards ivory derived from hippos and other animals. An important source of ivory today comes from vast numbers of mammoth remains, dug up in the Siberian tundra. This has led to the [laughably absurd notion](#) that an animal that has been extinct for thousands of years should be listed as a protected species, just so the Western green elite can ban trade in its long-dead ivory. (No doubt [successfully cloning](#) the mammoth will immediately put it on the endangered list for zealous and expensive protection.)

Countries like Namibia and Zimbabwe have proposed to be allowed to sell ivory from legally-owned stockpiles. However, animal rights NGOs are hoping to upgrade elephant populations in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana from Appendix II to Appendix I, despite all of them having had a successful conservation record.

This won't actually achieve anything, because ivory trade is already banned outright. Moreover, [Drewes argues](#) that it could even create a window to legal trade. I guess nobody should suspect green ideologues of logical thinking in their single-minded pursuit of banning everything they don't like.

The proposals by Namibia and Zimbabwe (and a proposal to trade rhino horn by Swaziland) will in all probability be defeated by a massive margin. After all, for every voting delegate there are 10 advisers

and lobbyists at the CITES conference. About half of the attendees are not government representatives, and most of those are associated with powerful and wealthy animal rights groups who are ideologically opposed to wildlife trade in general.

Let's hope the voting delegates realise that these lobbyists do not subscribe to the sustainable use principle established in the IUCN's World Conservation Strategy, and do not have the interest of of the countries that actually manage wildlife at heart. Besides, we've tried their solution, and it has failed. It has failed the rhino, and failed the elephant.

Why on earth would we want to double down on a losing bet, instead of trying proven trade-based approaches to wildlife management that can ensure not only the conservation of species, but also improve the livelihoods of people who live in proximity to nature. **DM**

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