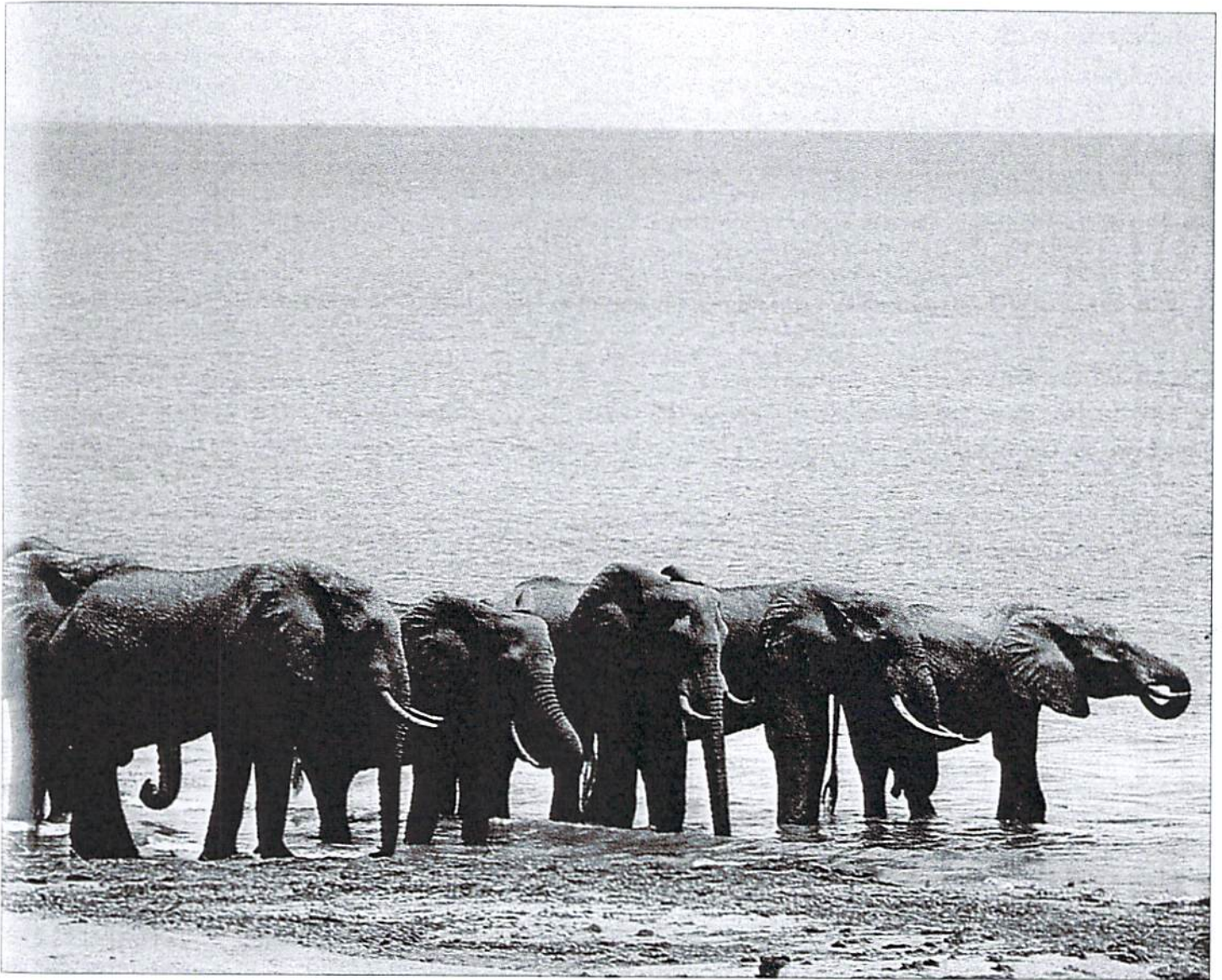


# Politics and African Elephant Conservation

by  
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Elephants drinking on the shoreline of Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe.

“Animal rightists are justly accused of anthropomorphism of furry and cuddly animals, but as practical campaigners they cannot behave otherwise.

The most important qualification for animal rights is size—the bigger the better.”

— Andrew Kenny, *The Spectator*

“In emergent Africa you either use wildlife or lose it.

If it pays its own way some of it will survive.”

— Norman Myers, *International Wildlife*

Photo by P. Urs Kreuter

These statistics show that countries with no elephants or whose elephant populations were decreasing rapidly were imposing conservation policy on countries with effective conservation programs.

Legal title to African elephants is vested with the governments of the countries in which they occur. But many rural Africans have come to regard elephants as open-access property, providing no direct benefits while competing for resources. In the absence of effective law enforcement there have thus been strong incentives for people co-existing with elephants to illegally hunt them. Elephant numbers consequently declined rapidly during the 1980's, particularly in east and west Africa.

Concern over elephant decreases led to the 1989 proposal that the African elephant be added to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). CITES prohibits trades in Appendix I species.

This call was led by East African countries, concerned about the disappearance of a major species underpinning their tourist industries. But it was actively supported by many western conservation groups who enthusiastically embraced the African elephant as a fund raising totem due to its high aesthetic and emotional appeal. "Elephant Extermination Imminent" became one of the most effective fund-raising slogans in the environmental movement's history.

#### *But is the African elephant really endangered?*

At the first CITES Meeting in Bern in 1976, it was agreed that *to qualify for endangered status a species must be currently threatened with extinction*. Research has suggested that about 2,000 animals is the minimum viable population for African elephants. Since there were at least 10 populations exceeding this number in 1989, the species as a whole was not facing extinction and the CITES endangerment criterion was not met.

In addition, the reliability of the 1989 elephant population estimates are questionable. Nearly

75% of the estimates were no more than informed guesses, particularly in Central and West Africa, and a former CITES Secretariat member has been quoted as stating that *ad hoc* revision of the Zairian elephant estimates resulted in over 300,000 non-existent elephants disappearing from the estimates overnight.

Massive slaughtering for ivory during the 1800's did lead to drastic declines in elephants but the 1930's depression broke the ivory market and colonial governments began to increasingly suppress hunting. By 1970, elephants populations had become unsustainable in many areas exacerbating competition for resources between people and elephants, a point commonly ignored by preservationists. Recognizing the conflict, many newly independent African governments were reluctant to apprehend poachers working for corrupt officials. This emerged as a common underlying cause of illegal ivory trade and resulted in conservation actions being compromised during the 1980's. Nevertheless, the associated declines in elephant numbers were not sufficiently severe and widespread to qualify the African elephant for Appendix I under CITES regulations.

#### *Why was the ivory-trade ban implemented?*

Believing that ivory trade *per se* was responsible for the decline in elephants, the majority of Parties at the 1989 CITES meeting voted for listing the African elephant as endangered because, by CITES regulations, this would initiate an international ivory-trade ban within 90 days of voting. Of the 76 countries voting for an ivory-trade ban only 20% had elephants while of the 11 countries voting against 73% had elephants. Furthermore, according to the most frequently published elephant population estimates, numbers declined by 74% between 1979 and 1989 in the mainly east and west African countries voting for the ban, but they increased by 9% during the same period in the mainly southern African countries voting against the ban. If votes had been weighted by the 1989 elephant population estimates, elephants would not have been listed as endangered.

These statistics show that countries with no elephants or whose elephant populations were decreasing rapidly were imposing conservation policy on countries with



Photo by Urs P. Kreuter

effective conservation programs where elephant populations were stable or increasing.

The popular perception that Africa is on the brink of ecological collapse seems to have given license for international intervention in rural development in Africa and for preservation of wildlife in pristine habitats to be promoted. Yet the preservation philosophy has resulted in the decline of African wildlife. In Kenya's Tsavo National Park, for example, eliminating subsistence hunting in the early 1960's and the subsequent increase in elephants led to mass starvation of other animals depending on the browse which starving elephants destroyed during droughts of the early 1970's. The adoption of an international ivory-trade ban is particularly ironic in view of the total failure of a similar trade ban on rhino horn to reduce the demise of the black rhino.

#### *What has been the effect of the ban?*

The ivory-trade ban was promoted by preservationists under the assumption that it would reduce international demand for ivory, making it less valuable and thus reducing the incentives for poaching elephants. But, since ivory trade has always consisted of legal and illegal components and trade bans provide no incentives for increasing management expenditures, it was also predicted that banning ivory trade would provide incentives for expanding its illegal component.

The U.S., the European Community, and Japan, the main pre-ban consumers of worked ivory, all agreed to cease importing ivory—though the internal sale of ivory imported prior to the ban was not prohibited. But both China and South Korea continued to import ivory after the ban went into effect. In a 1992 World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report it was furthermore reported that raw ivory is being sold to dealers from North and South Korea, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Zaire though the volume is below pre-ban sales. Thus, although the hard currency consumers were largely eliminated by the ban, demand for ivory has remained strong with the entrance of new buyers.



Photo courtesy Lis P. Kreuter

An elephant-damaged tree.

Evidence for the trade-ban effect on prices is limited because ivory is now sold only on black markets. In 1990 WWF claimed that most African ivory markets were inactive and that prices had dropped from a high of \$200–300 per kilogram prior to the ban to as little \$2 per kilogram in Central Africa. But the 1992 WWF report stated that ivory prices to hunters had increased since 1989 in Zambia, Tanzania and parts of the Cameroon while they had decreased in other parts of Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and Zaire. Officials from nine other African countries also said that ivory prices had decreased. Although these statistics do not suggest an overall trend in ivory prices, they do not support the claim by pro-ban proponents that the ban has drastically reduced ivory prices by reducing demand.

The continuing demand for ivory together with a lack of financial resources for government anti-poaching efforts has resulted in continued illegal elephant killing in several countries. But there has been decreased poaching in Zambia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and Zaire since 1989, and while six other countries also declared reduced poaching, four reported increases and four reported no change. The 1992 WWF report showed that poaching rates were significantly related to law enforcement resources provided mainly through donor aid. Properly channelled law enforcement resources, not reduced demand nor reduced ivory prices, appear to have produced decreased poaching rates in some areas.

Since African elephants range over an estimated 5 million square kilometers and about \$200 per square kilometer is required for effectively protecting elephants against poachers, a total annual law enforcement budget of a billion dollars is required. But it is unlikely that either foreign donors or the governments of elephant range states will provide such vast resources. In general, the donor community has not provided the critically-needed funding promised to these range states in 1989 and dwindling African government budgets cannot accommodate the need. Even if such resources were available, anti-poaching law enforcement has not promoted self-sustaining conservation because it has historically alienated people from wildlife.

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Photo by P. Jay Ferner

What is a realistic alternative for elephant conservation?

To be effective and sustainable, conservation policies must not only be ecologically sound and economically efficient, they must also be locally acceptable. Yet few countries have placed human incentives at the center of their wildlife conservation strategies. One notable exception is Zimbabwe which has adopted a policy of conservation through utilization and promotes exploitation for profit as the best hope for conserving wildlife. The policy was initiated through elephant harvesting to maintain elephant herds within the carrying capacity of their home range. The wildlife utilization philosophy was extended to communal farming areas through the Communal Areas Management for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) Project in 1982.

CAMPFIRE's objective is to encourage the establishment of co-operatives with territorial rights over well-defined communal resource areas. Since its inception, the program has generated substantial revenue in several communal areas primarily from safari hunting.

The success of CAMPFIRE in encouraging rural Africans to regard wildlife as a valuable asset has been directly related to the level of involvement of local villagers in the decision making process. Where decisions were made at the government level, people saw little relationship between conservation and wildlife related benefits. But where villagers themselves were allowed to decide how to allocate the revenues derived from their wildlife there has been great support for wildlife conservation. For example,

in the Mahenye Ward of the Chipinge District in southeast Zimbabwe, poaching activities decreased dramatically and the people voted to relocate seven villages on an island in the Save River to expand the wildlife area after the meat from two elephants shot by foreign hunters was distributed to the villagers. This was a remarkable decision from people who had been evicted from their ancestral homes when the nearby Gonarezhou Game Reserve was established only twenty years earlier. In another example, the inhabitants of the Chikwarakwara Ward were allowed to decide how the revenue from two elephants shot in their area should be divided between community projects and household dividends. At the village gathering arranged to make the decision, the District Council Chairman said: "This money comes to you from your wildlife. You did not have to work for it, just have wildlife. It is your money. The decision is yours."

Both Chikwarakwara and Mahenye demonstrated that with direct receipt of benefits, local communities readily appreciate the value of their wildlife resources, and education on the benefits elephant and other wildlife conservation is unnecessary. The only sustainable strategy for conserving African elephants is to promote wildlife as a valuable resource which provides direct benefits to the people who incur the costs of co-existing with it. To achieve this, the full economic potential of elephants must be realizable and local management and decision making processes must be promoted. In supporting the international ivory-trade ban, preservationists do not enhance the value of wildlife and are therefore likely to promote rather than abate the continued demise of the African elephant.

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