

I saw this picture on the Internet whilst researching for this essay that burrowed to the deeps of my soul and has stayed there, making me wholeheartedly believe that conservation of elephants is incredibly important, as I love elephants. They're my favorite animals, and many others could easily agree with me. See, the elephant was dead. Somehow, the body's volume seemed off, looking like a balloon low on air inside. There were holes in the creature's hide, disrupting the grayscale of the skin with points of crimson. The shock came when human eyes reached the face, or at least, where the face should have been. There were heaps of maroon-colored brain matter remaining inside of the split cranium, and there was blood pooled around the head, but there was no face. The elephant's trunk was thrown carelessly aside, and it looked like a dead worm that had dried up on hot pavement. The tusks were nowhere to be found. There were hoof-prints stamped into the dry ground, most likely from horses. A few bullet shells were shining in the bright red sunlight of the morning. It was obvious who had committed this horrible crime: poachers. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon occurrence in Africa, where an estimated 60,000 elephants are killed every year by poachers for their valuable ivory tusks (Straziuso). It is because of this that the survival of the African elephant is entwined with the economy surrounding the burgeoning illegal ivory trade.

The ivory trade has exploded as demand for the resource has increased in the growing economies of China and Japan, where ivory is prized as a sign of social affluence (Kaufman) (Straziuso). Currently, the average selling price for a kilogram of ivory is \$1800 USD (Straziuso), giving incentive to all of those involved to do their dirty deeds. It's also incredibly easy to get away with doing. In Africa, there are very few safe havens for elephants, mostly national park areas, like Zakouma National Park in Chad and Tsavo National Park in Kenya, where armed rangers patrol the borders of the parks for poachers during the dry season ("Ivory Wars") (Straziuso). However, when the rainy season comes, the elephants often migrate out of the parks, searching for more food and water. Unfortunately, the rangers cannot follow, as they can only stay within the park, leaving the elephant herds vulnerable to attacks ("Ivory

Wars"). Sometimes, these attackers are members of local tribes, seeking more money to sustain themselves in an era in which they cannot live without a proper amount of said money by selling ivory to poachers. The poachers then sell to Asian middlemen, usually in league with crime syndicates, who use their vast resources to get the ivory smuggled into Asia without issue (Straziuso). It's child's play to smuggle illegal articles out of Africa, greatly due to the instability of the continent, with many civil wars and rebellions going on and high amounts of corruption within the governments that remain in power for the time being (Straziuso). Regrettably, the usual punishments for being caught in this illegal trade are minor fines and nothing more, making this the perfect job for criminals and the poor to take up as a low-risk, high-rewards deal.

But it wasn't always this way. In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (otherwise known as CITES) had a treaty passed in the United Nations that banned the international trade of ivory harvested from poached elephants. It also required that nations that wished to continue ivory trading be able to prove that their poaching situations were under control and weren't an issue. This made for the elephant population to recoup after a massive bout of poaching issues in Africa (Kaufman). The treaty worked initially because wealthy nations in the United Nations would fund African governments' efforts in protecting elephant herds (Kaufman). However, time has passed, and support from other nations has dwindled as the wealthier nations of the world have been caught up in economic recession, more exceptions have been added to the treaty, and awareness of the real situation has dramatically decreased.

Many Westerners hear about the increasing number of elephant attacks on humans or the flourishing elephant population in Botswana (Kaufman). Of course elephants would attack humans more often these days; Africa is becoming more urbanized, and the extreme amount of poaching certainly hasn't helped our standing in the eyes of the very intelligent elephants. And of course Botswana (and

only Botswana) has a massive amount of elephants, for the country protects its elephants so well, that they have begun overpopulating the small nation (Kaufman). In reality, experts say that if the ivory trade is not put under control, African elephants may be nearly extinct by 2020 (Straziuso), only nine years away. Samuel Wasser says that "the impact that loss of this keystone species would have on African ecosystems is difficult to even imagine" (Straziuso).

Actually, it's more difficult to bear than to imagine. Elephants are highly important to the ecosystems in which they reside. In the savannahs of Africa, elephants keep the grasslands from being infested with trees. This is important, as a forest growing in the savannahs would destroy the already existing ecosystem. Too many trees would block the sunlight, causing the grass (most grassland herbivores' primary food source) to die. The effects would cause the entire ecosystem to change. Elephants protect the grasslands by, essentially, "de-weeding" trees, by eating them or just uprooting them from the ground (Field Trip). In the forests of Africa, elephants also take part in upholding the local ecosystems by being some of the only animals tall enough to eat seeds from the trees and spread them around the woods, creating more tree species diversity that sustain more things in the forest habitats (Field Trip). Taking elephants out of the picture would create an ecological change that would rock Africa's ecosystems.

So how on Earth do we humans go about saving the elephants, so important to the ecosystems of an entire continent? Samuel Wasser suggests an "aggressive, well-funded anti-poaching program" and an anti-ivory education program in Asia, because many people there don't understand the reality of the situation as far as causing the possible extinction of one of the world's most important species (Kaufman). While I can agree that these are good ideas in theory, they simply are not big enough and not sustainable enough to last for a long time. I believe that CITES most assuredly needs to be more aggressive in its ivory trade regulations so that things don't slip under the radar, and that the United

Nations needs to continue to encourage its more economically developed members to give monetary aid to nations who comply with the 1989 treaty and, as a safeguard for the future, pledge to use the money to improve their economy and be able to prove that the economy is truly getting better. This, in turn, would help the floundering economies of Africa to grow and give its citizens better jobs than poaching elephants. In addition, a policy such as this would help African nations to better stabilize themselves, and would give them the opportunity to have their security forces better attuned to protecting the wildlife and checking shipments to see if they aren't really disguised containers full of elephant tusks. But would all of these things make such mass poaching a thing of the past? Not quite, in my opinion. There would still be the issue of high demand for ivory in Asia. The education programs would help to reduce that demand by creating awareness in those nations of the terrible origins of the ivory they treasure so much. But why stop in Asia? It seems that a lack of awareness on the international level is part of what condemned this cause in the first place, when the wealthy nations of the world stopped sending funds to African nations to protect their elephants. Not only that, but increased awareness would also help to add pressure onto Asian governments if they don't try to help the dire situation that they are faced with.

Times are very desperate in Africa, for both the people and elephants that live there. Both futures are connected to each other, and if one doesn't begin to improve, the other will not either. Without elephants, the African ecosystem that we once knew will change so much that it will cease to exist, and we cannot let that happen. The natural order of things must be preserved, for our future and the future of the elephants that we love so much. The end of killing these beautiful creatures and the rebirth of the elephants from near-extinction would be, if successful, a story to be told for generations to come, a story for all of humanity to be truly proud of. The path is open. Are we ready to walk on it?

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