

Conor Quinn- Be The Change

Since I was a toddler I have loved elephants with a special passion. When my family and I would visit the Syracuse Zoo I would pet the elephants and look right into their eyes. I felt without a doubt a connection, a literal communication of emotions and feelings, mine and theirs. I seek this experience to this day for I truly believe that elephants, and all animals for that matter, have feelings, emotions, opinions and rights.

So imagine discovering while reading the paper one morning that my state, New York, was the primary state for the illegal trade of ivory in the United States. My state above all others was responsible for the brutal murder of these beautiful feeling animals. My state and its constituents did not respect the current laws restricting ivory trade. I knew that something must be done and that I wanted to be a part of the change that I wanted to see in the world to paraphrase Gandhi.

My journey began with a call to the office of Assemblyman Sweeney who initiated a bill (A08824) in our state legislature to ban the sale of ivory in our state. The stated purpose of this bill is “To close New York State as a market for ivory sales, to help prevent elephant extinction and to reduce funding sources for terrorists.”ⁱ It is estimated by the Wildlife Conservation Society that 96 African elephants, an endangered species since the 1970’s, are illegally killed each day for their tusks; in other words, one elephant dies every 15 minutes.ⁱⁱ It is bad enough that so many elephants are losing their lives for profits earned from their ivory, but to discover that these profits are being used to fund terrorists groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and Al Shabaab, an Al Qaeda cell in East Africa from the Tanzanian Ambassador at a United Nations meeting held in 2013, was appalling.ⁱⁱⁱ I was able to speak with a legislative aide about this bill and its current status. I was informed that while the bill passed unanimously in the assembly, it still needed to be passed by the state senate and ultimately by

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Governor Cuomo. New York constituents needed to know and get involved. It would start with me!

After speaking with the legislative assistant, it was confirmed that my idea to formulate a petition of support for Assemblyman Sweeney's bill was a good start. My objective was to educate people about the horrible decimation of the elephants and inspire political action and support. I had never written a petition before so I looked up online a "How-to" for petition writing. I then realized I needed facts. The legislative assistant had recommended the Wildlife Conservation Society website. I explained that I was a member and committed to a deeper study of the information. This website proved its value immediately.

The Wildlife Conservation website confirmed what I already believed about this intelligent species. Elephants have tightknit family groups ruled by a matriarch and they care for each other in good and bad times." When acquainted groups reunite, they rumble and trumpet, click their tusks together, entwine their trunks, and flap their ears with enthusiasm. But their capacity for happiness is matched by one for heartbreak. Elephants mourn their dead, staying by the bodies of slain herd members for hours or even days."^{iv} I also learned that elephants play a crucial role in curbing climate change by dispersing seeds that reforest and replant. They support the ecological wellbeing of their ecosystem by digging water holes and clearing forest paths that many animals depend on. The problem is that elephant habitats, particularly forest elephants, "lie within countries with a history of civil unrest and poverty, both of which increase the incentive for poaching."^v

Few of today's poachers hunt for subsistence. Most poachers are seeking funds to support terrorist groups. They "hack their tusks out with an axe—an atrocity often committed while the animal is still alive," only to make trinkets like chopsticks or jewelry."^{vi}

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After accumulating the facts, I set out with my petition into the community. I sought support in my neighborhood, at the mall, at a local farmer's market, at the student center at the University of Albany and wherever I went, like horseback riding lessons or Homeward Bound Dog Rescue (where I volunteer regularly) or just the State Museum, libraries or restaurants. My objective was to get signatures and to educate. The positive responses from such a variety of locations and groups of people indicated the widespread support for the initiative. But, my job was not complete!

I was determined to gain support from people my own age. While we cannot vote yet, our voice can and should still be heard. So, I wrote a separate but equally informative petition for the students at Guilderland High School. I included information for further involvement such as addresses and emails for our local government officials as well as internet sites to visit for more information on the plight of elephants. Ms. Davis, a science teacher and the sponsor for the National Honor Society, agreed to be my teacher sponsor. I made posters to hang up around the school, and a one minute advertisement video for our morning announcements which are shown as a news program. This video was designed to tug at the emotional side of all these teenagers while still being cool. Elephants are cool so it wasn't very difficult and with such a short amount of time I had to really rope them in quickly while delivering the facts about where they would be able to sign the petition.

The response to the petition was actually very good. While I didn't get as many signatures as I would have liked, I do think that people were made aware of the horrible slaughter that is decimating the elephant population. I think perhaps if I was allowed to provide a copy of my petition to all homeroom teachers I may have had a better response. We do not have very much down time in our school. It is hard enough to make it to our classes on time or to wolf

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down lunch or catch the bus at the end of the day so changes such as going to a classroom not on your regular schedule is tough. Nonetheless, I am certain that these students won't be buying ivory any time soon and would dissuade their families as well.

As this cause is so very important to me and the elephants, I knew that sending in the petitions and calling the offices of my representatives would not be the finale for me. I was inspired by this process to share my love and commitment to animals as I had when I attended Farnsworth Middle School, by writing articles about endangered, threatened or obscure animals for my school newspaper. I submitted an article to my High School newspaper with regards to the elephant predicament in Africa. I offered geographical, political, cultural and scientific insight. I wanted to appeal to the unique talents that we as individuals possess to encourage a tolerance and respect for the unique qualities that African elephants have whether they live in the bush or the forest. I wanted my fellow students to truly feel the juxtaposition of humans with these elephants in these various environments and to understand the cultural impact the environment plays on their decisions and behaviors. I wanted my fellow students to identify with these cultures and feel a responsibility to them and to their environments and to the elephants and to embrace the unity of all living things. Honestly, I wanted them to care!

I hope to continue with my monthly articles to the school newspaper. I hope to continue to encourage awareness and responsibility to the world's endangered or threatened animals throughout my experience at Guilderland High School and for the rest of my life. "Conor's Critters" articles provide me with an opportunity to share my passion for all animals and to "Be the Change."

Political activism was not something I had involved myself with until this petition. As I mentioned previously and sincerely, elephants are feeling animals and are intrinsically valuable

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to this thing we somehow are lucky enough to call our planet. We share this space and need to care for it and each other, all living things. Bills and laws are written to squash chaos and provide order in a sometimes messy world. It is our responsibility to get involved .We must make sure that our voices are heard and that these bills and laws reflect the unity and value of all living creatures great and small. I know I was the change I wanted to see in this world and will continue to be that change for as long as I live! For like the elephant, I will never forget!

ⁱ <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.wcs.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://assembly.state.ny.us>

^{iv} <http://www.wcs.org/>

^v Cornell Lab of Ornithology Elephant Listening Project

^{vi} <http://www.wcs.org/>