

# *Disappearing Elephants*

Overview of African and Asian elephants

## *Why are they important?*

Elephants play a significant role in maintaining biodiversity in forest and savanna ecosystems. They eat about 300-500 pounds of hundreds of different plant species every day and cover large swaths of land, so they disperse seeds across great distances. The seeds of many plants also depend on elephants, as they will not germinate until they have passed through an elephant's digestive tract.

Elephants are some of the most intelligent animals on earth. Cognitive research reveals that elephants display behaviours associated with grief, self-awareness, learning, cooperation, compassion, memory and language.

## *African Elephants*

It is estimated that in 1800 there were 26 million elephants on the continent of Africa. The turn of 20th century saw a burgeoning demand for ivory mainly from western countries. Elephants were killed for their ivory, which was used to make combs, pool balls, brush handles and piano keys. By 1913 there were only 10 million elephants left in Africa. The trade continued for the next several decades, and in the latter half of the 20th century growing Asian economies also desired ivory. In 1979 there were about 1.3 million elephants left in Africa.

Prosperous countries continued to demand this luxury good, and with no strict regulations on the sale of elephant tusks, the population dropped to 600,000 in 1989. Many conservation groups and governments wanted to create regulations to control the poaching of elephants. In an effort to create global awareness surrounding the threat to the elephant species and to devalue ivory, Kenya burned its stockpile of twelve tonnes of ivory. Shortly afterwards, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) classified African elephants as Appendix I, effectively banning international trade in ivory.

With a worldwide ban on the trade of ivory, elephant populations began to recover in Africa. Illegal poaching was still taking place, but with strict border controls, it was harder for illegal ivory to make its way onto the market.

In Asia ivory is carved into trinkets, delicate pieces of art, chopsticks or religious symbols. Asian elephants either have no tusks or have much smaller tusks than their African counterparts, so the increasing disposable income in countries like China coupled with the desire for ivory posed a dangerous threat to African elephants.

When illegally trafficked ivory was seized by authorities or when elephants died naturally and its tusks were removed, this ivory became part of a country's stockpile. In an attempt to profit from their increasing stockpiles, Southern African nations requested that CITES lift the ban on ivory to allow for a sale to the growing demand in Asia. In 1997, CITES allowed a one-off sale of ivory and two years later nearly 50 tonnes of stockpiled ivory were sold from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to Japan.

CITES was pressured to allow another one time sale, and in 2002 it agreed to another one-off sale of ivory from Southern African nations. There was concern from many environmental and conservation groups that argued that the sale would lead to an increase in demand of ivory and even more illegal poaching. The debate ended in 2008 when CITES allowed Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe to sell 102 tonnes of ivory to Chinese and Japanese accredited traders for a total of USD \$15,400,000.

The one-off sales of ivory confused the market, allowing illegally poached and smuggled ivory to be disguised as legal ivory that was sold through the CITES agreements. Elephant populations became increasingly threatened by illegal poaching in Africa and illegal smuggling into Asia, usually passing through the port of Hong Kong. The increase in global media attention surrounding the ivory trade led to increase in activism and many countries started burning their stockpiles of ivory.

Today poachers seeking ivory kill an estimated 100 African elephants each day.

## *Asian Elephants*

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For 4,000 years the Asian elephant has been an important part of life for people in Asia. They have hauled logs, carried soldiers and even today are still used for ceremonial and religious purposes. They serve as a sacred symbol and have been worshipped for centuries.

There are far fewer Asian elephants than African elephants. Exact figures are impossible to determine, but it is estimated that 30,000 Asian elephants remain, of which about 30% are captive. While countries such as India, Vietnam and Myanmar have banned the capture of wild elephants in order to conserve the species, they are still caught. Not only does the capture of elephants decrease the amount of elephants left in the wild, many are killed because of poachers' crude capture methods. Once captured, Asian elephants are trained, traded and used for entertainment in tourism where mistreatment and abuse is a common problem.

The main threats for wild elephants are human-elephant conflict and habitat loss. About 20% of the world's human population lives near present range of elephants, therefore farmers in Asia encounter elephants eating their crops. Retaliation by the farmers and villagers often result in killings of these elephants, and experts have already considered that these kinds of confrontations are the leading cause of elephant deaths in Asia.

Development and urbanization in Asia has led to habitat loss for elephants, destroying their natural environment and making it harder for the species to survive. This development is also cutting off elephant corridors and isolating groups of elephants. It is estimated that fewer than ten contiguous regions of more than 1,000 individuals exist in Asia today. This fragmentation of the population leads to interbreeding and results in a loss of genetic diversity.

Asian elephants are also threatened by poachers seeking ivory, but they have smaller tusks and in some cases no tusks and are valuable to the tourism industry. Therefore the ivory trade is less of a threat to Asian elephants.