

# Does destroying ivory save elephants?

The French today join the US and China as the latest country to crush its stockpile of seized ivory. The action is designed as a demonstration of commitment to the protection of elephants. But is it an empty gesture? With your help, Karl Mathiesen investigates.

Post your views in the comments below, email or tweet

**Karl Mathiesen**

Thursday 6 February 2014 13.08 EST

6.04pm GMT

## My verdict

On the surface, destroying ivory stockpiles seems to be a positive action, if only because it creates conversation and awareness about the illegal trade. But my feeling is that its effect remains mostly on the surface. Any causal link between burning stockpiles and elephant conservation is probably small and there is a definitive lack of evidence to support it.

The fact these caches exist at all is a mystery to me. Why don't all countries destroy ivory upon seizure like any other contraband? Holding ivory is costly and creates a target for criminality. And if you want to talk about messages, what kind of message does it send to stockpile ivory like any other valuable commodity? Surely the aim is to make it valueless, not priceless. To this end, all stockpiles should be destroyed.

The argument that destroying the stockpiles reduces supply and drives up the price for traffickers making it more lucrative is, frankly, a poor one. The act of seizing the ivory is what removes it from circulation and so any market effect would be felt at that point. Would these same people advocate that border authorities stop confiscating illegal ivory?

Having said that, Dan Stiles' behavioural economics theory has merit, although there is little evidence to back it up. The burning of huge stockpiles of ivory may create the perception that ivory is rarer than it is, thus artificially driving up the price.

The impulse to flood the market with cheap ivory is similarly flawed. It might stop gangs from profiting from the trade for a few years. But when the stockpiles of cheap ivory are exhausted and ivory has become an acceptable, accessible commodity, the market will be ripe for criminal vultures and speculators to profit from an even bigger demand than exists today.

Much of this debate is characterised by a lack of data. Tom Milliken, from Traffic, makes a good point when he says the recent set of very high profile destructions (with Hong Kong

soon to follow) should be closely monitored to see if they have any real impact on ivory demand and price. But assessing this will be tricky when you consider the huge amount of factors that influence the market - China's burgeoning wealth is the most influential.

Worryingly, this dearth of evidence seems to go beyond the efficacy of destroying stockpiles. No-one (outside of the trafficking syndicates) really understands how the Chinese ivory trade works. Hence the inability to assess the effect of releasing 102 tonnes of legal ivory into the market in 2008. The world seems to be acting on hunches, rather than data.

The danger in any of these stunts is that they lend a government legitimacy beyond its actions. Symbolism only goes so far. Next week's Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade in London is an opportunity for governments to commit actual, significant resources to the control of this grisly commodity.

Thanks for the comments today! Here's a live elephant to finish.

Updated at 6.20pm GMT

5.13pm GMT

### **Your tweets and comments**

Updated at 9.20am GMT

5.05pm GMT

AFP have reported that the French environment NGO Robin des Bois (Robin Hood en Anglais) estimates that France has 17 tonnes of ivory in storage. Today's event saw it only destroy three tonnes. I have asked the Ministère du Développement-durable why this is, but it's getting late in France so I might not get a reply.

I would guess that it is because the French have a lot of ivory stored in museums and private collections and that this is just the ivory their customs police have seized.

4.47pm GMT

Gabriel Fava, programmes officer at Born Free, mentioned to me that stockpiles in Africa are more of a concern than in France and the US. This is because of instability in some of these nations and a lack of money to fund proper security. These stockpiles are prime targets for criminality, making their destruction a matter of urgency.

4.06pm GMT

Alexander Kasterine, head of trade & environment at the International Trade Centre, said today:

*“Wildlife trade bans are failing because they have run into the same basic problem as the war on drugs. Prohibitions on trading wildlife products such as tusks and timber have ultimately*

*made them more valuable, and criminal organisations have moved in and taken over the market”.*

He also wrote an interesting blog in December debunking the rationale provided for the French stockpile destruction. The reasons given for the crushing are in bold. Kasterine's arguments are below.

***Show the country’s determination to fight against ivory related crime.***

*Does “showing determination” achieve results? Are criminal gangs concerned by “determination” (ask the Mexican druglords or Malaysian wildlife traders).*

***Avoid theft or misappropriation of seized ivory.***

*Destruction not the only way - one can also improve security of the stocks by placing them in bunkers (rather than Museums).*

***Eradicate any temptation for speculation of ivory trade awaiting the possibility of reopening legal ivory trade.***

*Is there any evidence of speculation?*

***Demonstrate solidarity with African and Asian countries fighting against poaching and which deplore many victims among wildlife guardians.***

*Is solidarity needed or workable solutions? What evidence is there that armed militia in Africa concern themselves with the solidarity of Western governments? They appear to be increasing their level of poaching and thus unconcerned by such efforts of solidarity.*

***Join in the recent movement of voluntary destruction (Philippines, State of Maharashtra in India, and the United States).***

*Just because another country is doing it does that mean it is the right policy measure - this could be classed as a “Lemming Policy”.*

***Be consistent with destruction procedures of other seized substances and articles (drugs, medicines, Chanel bags or counterfeit Lacoste shirts).***

*How does consistency with the destruction of other illegal products constitute evidence for this being an effective policy measure? The other example are different in these objectives: Destruction of seized fake medicines makes sense as they pose a threat to human health. Destruction of fake branded items makes sense as it protects brand owners intellectual property.*

Updated at 4.30pm GMT

3.55pm GMT

One thing is pretty clear -the policy of stockpiling seized ivory is fundamentally flawed. Will

Travers, president of Born Free, says filling warehouses with something that is both incredibly lucrative and has no value at all creates problems in itself. It costs money to police warehouses and ivory often 'leaks'. There are a number of examples of pieces being seized more than once. If all border officials destroyed ivory immediately upon its capture it would stop these problems

Travers supports the destruction of existing stockpiles because of the message that they send to consumers. He says the solution cannot be found in the control of the market.

"We've got to move beyond the idea that we can build an economic model that will work in reality," he said. "It's gone beyond demand reduction, we need demand elimination."

Travers says the 2008 release by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) of 102 tonnes of ivory into the Chinese and Japanese markets failed to stop the price and supply of illegal ivory skyrocketing during the period. He says the Chinese government actually stockpiled the ivory and drip fed it into the market, making a 600% profit, while creating a legitimate trade and demand for the commodity. China destroyed its illegal ivory stockpile in January, but it still has legal ivory, supplied by CITES, with which it feeds its ivory workshops.

Dan Stiles, from the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, agrees with Travers that one off releases do little to affect the price or demand for ivory in any positive sense. In fact he thinks the 2008 example caused a great deal of confusion and anger through the creation of a legitimate industry that then has no legitimate supplier.

He says ivory demand is a reality that must be reduced, but cannot be entirely eradicated. He says much of the demand could be met by the use of elephant ivory from animals who have died of natural causes or are killed during "problem elephant control".

He also says the ivory market was heavily affected by the financial crisis, with speculators taking money out of property and shares and buying commodities such as ivory. He said this helped to drive up the price along with the increasing demand caused by the burgeoning luxury market in China.

Traffic has found that the involvement of organised crime syndicates, attracted by big profits, has stimulated the rapid growth in the illegal trade.

*"The remarkable surge in recent years reflects the increasing involvement of organized crime syndicates in the illegal ivory trade," said Tom Milliken, Traffic's ivory trade expert.*

*"Right now, criminals are lining their pockets while Africa's Elephants are paying the ultimate price."*

This is reflected in the above graph by the increase in large seizures of raw ivory - the profile of most illegal ivory.

*Note: This post originally quoted Stiles saying legal ivory could come from elephants culled due to overpopulation. This was incorrect.*

Updated at 9.18am GMT

3.15pm GMT

### **Flood the market!**

I think people think they should flood the market.

But what do you do once you've created a vast trade in cheap ivory and the stockpiles run out?

Updated at 3.23pm GMT

3.09pm GMT

Tom Milliken, ivory trade expert for Traffic, says the impact of the destruction of ivory is unproven and that the ivory trade must be closely monitored to see how the series of events play out in the market.

*“France’s move today sends a strong message to a European audience—particularly French tourists and businessmen—that buying ivory as souvenirs directly contributes to the elephant crisis we face today.”*

*“But frankly speaking, there is likely to be more impact from ivory destruction events in major consumer countries like China. Beyond influencing local consumers, however, the jury is still out on what effect destruction events like this have on the dynamics of illegal ivory trade.”*

*Classic economic theory holds that reduced supply in the face of strong demand could lead to increased prices, a prospect that could stimulate profit-seeking criminals to poach more elephants and traffic more ivory.*

*“We need to monitor the situation closely now and see what impact, if any, this string of ivory destruction events has produced,” said Milliken. “The evidence should tell us if we are on the right track, or if all of this supply reduction has been counter-productive.”*

2.58pm GMT

Dan Stiles, who works for the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, tells me that he has argued against the destruction of ivory stockpiles because of the impact it may have on the poachers and traffickers of illegal ivory. He said it could drive up prices, making trafficking a more attractive business. I asked him if he agreed that the seizure of these stockpiles had already effectively taken the ivory out of circulation, therefore any real market effect would already have been felt.

"Economics is as much psychological as reality," he replied. He said bonfires of millions of pounds worth of ivory create a perception of scarcity which could drive up prices and demand. Traffickers would be encouraged to stockpile ivory, seeing increasing scarcity as an excellent investment opportunity. Bad news for elephants.

On the other hand, he said. There was definite value in reducing consumer demand, which is what the destruction events are designed to do. He said that there was a possibility that the events would have this effect, but on balance he felt they do more harm than good. Especially because so little is known about the Chinese ivory market and consumer behaviour.

Very little empirical evidence exists to support either of these theories, but I'm working on finding something!

Stiles and Brendan Moyle from Massey University wrote on Tuesday in the South China Morning Post:

*The rise in poaching is not a puzzle. Nor is it a recent problem. It is a result of increasing affluence in Asia and increasing trade and investment between East Asia and Africa. It's also a result of instability and weak governance in Africa. The destruction of ivory has no effect on these factors. Civil war in Central Africa won't stop because Hong Kong destroys ivory. Chinese consumers won't become poorer because Hong Kong destroys ivory. Countries have been destroying ivory since Kenya burnt 12 tonnes of it in 1989, and it hasn't made a dent in the illegal trade. In fact, destroying stockpiles is risky. Advocates say it sends a message to poachers and smugglers that the black market in ivory is over. This is a fantasy. We're telling business-savvy criminals that their illegal hoards of ivory are going to drop in value because we've destroyed ivory they don't own?*

*The real message we're sending is that we're giving them control over the market, because they're going to be the only ones holding ivory stocks.*

Updated at 3.09pm GMT

2.43pm GMT

## **Ivory destruction in London**

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) are conducting a destruction of private ivory in London next week to coincide with the Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade. The UK has no public ivory stockpile as the Border Force destroys all ivory on seizure.

*Tania McCrea-Steele, from IFAW, said: "IFAW is staging a UK ivory surrender and destruction event because elephants are facing a poaching crisis and the ivory trade remains a major threat to the world's remaining elephant populations. Every piece of ivory comes from a dead elephant.*

*"The ivory surrender demonstrates support from the UK public for protecting elephants by destroying unwanted ivory trinkets. We have had a really positive response from the public with dozens of items being donated. Many people have told us they had pieces of ivory they felt uncomfortable owning but that they did not want the ivory to find its way back onto the market and this is a way to ensure it will be put beyond use."*

1.35pm GMT

Hong Kong announced in January that it would also destroy its ivory seizures. The Hong Kong stockpile is the largest in the world. The Hong Kong authorities will destroy 28 tonnes of the 33 tonnes they have in storage. Keeping the rest for "permitted uses" such as educational purposes.

12.34pm GMT

## NGO reaction

Rob Brandford, director of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust said:

*"Beyond the symbolism, Africa is losing one elephant every 15 minutes to poaching for the ivory trade. Wiping out the trade includes ending demand for ivory, and this begins with destroying stockpiles. Government's routinely destroy other contraband, ivory should be no different. As an illegal product, it can't be put back onto the market yet stockpiles along with legal domestic trades create confusion, ambiguity and doubt, making law enforcement extremely hard. Holding onto stockpiles, with the aim to sell at a later time, only creates the impression ivory is a legal commodity. No other products from lucrative illegal trades are sold on for demand reduction efforts, and monitoring of the protection of stockpiles requires funding that could be better spent on anti-poaching or demand reduction programmes.*

*Destroying stockpiles is the first step. As well as symbolism, the act tells the world that illegal ivory is not tolerated. We call on other EU countries to follow suit immediately, commit to destroying their stockpiles as a first step and go further in banning domestic legal markets that only create confusion."*

President of Born Free, Will Travers, said:

*"By destroying this ivory, France is sending two key messages to the global community: that the illegal ivory trade is completely unacceptable and that ivory should never be allowed to enter the marketplace, where it fuels demand and contributes to the death of both elephants and the wildlife rangers trying to protect them."*

The Born Free press release continued:

*Many of the world's governments are in possession of increasingly large stockpiles of ivory, as a result of seizures made by enforcement agencies. Keeping the ivory secure from criminals can be a huge drain on scarce resources available for wildlife conservation. In some countries, widespread corruption means that these stockpiles are vulnerable to leakage, with ivory sold to traffickers by corrupt officials. It has been known, for example, for the same ivory to be seized by enforcement officials more than once. Therefore, in the face of alarming levels of elephant poaching and huge volumes of ivory being trafficked, governments are increasingly accepting that stockpile destruction is the only viable long term solution.*

Updated at 1.37pm GMT

12.13pm GMT

This National Geographic infographic gives an idea of the scale of the ivory demand in Asia, driven by increasing wealth, mostly in China. The US is the second largest market for illegal ivory, although it falls far short of China.

Updated at 12.21pm GMT

12.05pm GMT

The Guardian's Kim Willsher has just filed a story on the Paris ivory crush.

*In bitterly cold drizzling rain, the tusks were fed one by one on to a conveyer belt and into a pulveriser that spewed out a fine, dirty-white dust.*

*It was intended as a powerful message to the poachers and traffickers: there is no future in ivory.*

*The destruction of France's impounded ivory comes as London prepares to host a global summit to tackle the \$19bn a year illegal wildlife trade on February 12 and 13, led by Prince Charles and David Cameron, to which 50 heads of state have been invited.*

*Most of the tusks, either whole or carved into batons of ivory, weighing 2,304kg, had been seized by customs officers at Roissy and Orly airports either in freight cargo or from passengers.*

*A further 15,357 pieces of ivory, including statues and jewellery, weighing 800kg, were also fed into the grinder. Officials said the powder would be encased in a composite material to make it impossible to retrieve, and used in construction.*

Updated at 12.19pm GMT

11.19am GMT

## **Countries who have destroyed their ivory stockpiles**

Kenya (1989) - President Daniel arap Moi ignited 12 tons of elephant tusks in a gesture to persuade the world to halt the ivory trade.

Kenya (2011) - Kenya's president set fire to more than five tonnes of elephant ivory worth £10m to draw attention to poaching deaths.

"Through the disposal of contraband ivory, we seek to formally demonstrate to the world our determination to eliminate all forms of illegal trade in ivory," said President Mwai Kibaki.

Gabon (2012) - The confiscated stock totalled 4,825 kilograms, including 1,293 piece of rough ivory mainly composed of tusks and 17,730 pieces of worked ivory, an overall quantity that would correspond to around 850 elephants.

Philippines (2013) - Philippine government workers used a backhoe and an incinerator to



crush and burn more than 5 tons of smuggled elephant tusks worth an estimated US\$10 million.

US (2013) - The US Fish and Wildlife Service crushed 5.4 tonnes of elephant ivory, seized since 1989 when US and international laws banned international trade of most types of African elephant ivory.

China (2014) - Officials in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, pulverised 6.1 tons of confiscated tusks and carvings.

Patrick Bergin, chief executive of the African Wildlife Foundation, said: "This is a courageous and critical first step by China to elevate the important issue of wildlife trafficking and elephant poaching among its citizens and around the world. The Chinese government is to be commended for taking the issue seriously."

Updated at 6.12pm GMT

11.01am GMT

## **Arguments against the crush**

Daniel Stiles, a member of the IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, wrote a blog for the Guardian in November in which he said destroying ivory might send a symbolic message to voters about governmental commitment to stamp out the ivory trade, but the message the poachers are getting is quite different.

*The message is: Ivory is scarce and with stockpile destruction is getting scarcer. The three since 2011 have taken almost 30 tonnes of ivory out of circulation, enough to feed China's 37 legal ivory factories for five years. Now the US government plans to reduce potential global supply by another 5.4 tonnes. That means, with demand remaining stable, ivory prices will increase. Raw ivory prices in China have doubled since 2011, according to my sources. Poachers and those paying them now have increased incentive to go out and kill more elephants.*

*Ivory workshop owners in high ivory consumption countries such as China and Thailand have already begun buying any and all African ivory they can get their hands on. If stockpiles are going to be destroyed, and legal ivory is unavailable, and more illegal shipments are being seized because of more vigilant law enforcement, workshop owners realise they need to stockpile as many tusks as possible for future use, because the senseless system now in operation in which domestic ivory markets are legal while raw ivory to supply them is illegal, is guaranteeing extinction of the elephant. Those with the most tusks will make the biggest profits as the price of ivory goes through the roof with the demise of the elephant.*

*Why is this economically absurd system in place? Because those advocating it know almost nothing about how the ivory industry operates. For the most part they are zoologists and animal welfare people, whose expertise lies elsewhere. They have not engaged in objective, data-driven research of ivory markets, and they have not learned from published scientific reports on the subject. They speak from preconceived ideology and opinion, not from knowledge.*

*USFWS have never destroyed ivory before and one must ask why are they doing it now? Because they are acting on public opinion, not on scientific knowledge, in violation of their responsibility to conserve wildlife.*

Updated at 6.12pm GMT

10.54am GMT

## **Background**

This blog, published by Scientific American after the US government destroyed its ivory cache last year, outlines the history of ivory destruction and the reasoning behind it.

*The U.S. is not the first country to destroy its seized ivory. In 1989, Kenya responded to rampant elephant poaching by burning its stockpile. More recently, with poaching surging to record levels of 30,000 elephants or more a year, Gabon and the Philippines have destroyed their ivory, too. The U.S. ivory crush on November 14 followed President Obama's July 1 executive order calling on government agencies to step up efforts to combat the illegal wildlife trade.*

*[Note: China also destroyed its ivory stockpile in January this year]*

*Experts from government and nongovernment organizations who spoke at the U.S. ivory crush event defended the decision to destroy the stockpile. Peter Knights of WildAid, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in San Francisco, observed that people who argue against the destruction of ivory stockpiles think that having a legal supply is the answer to the poaching problem. But attempts to flood the market with ivory in the past have had disastrous results, actually increasing poaching rather than curbing it.*

*FWS director Daniel Ashe said that another problem with putting more ivory into the legal supply chain is that it would create a smokescreen for illicit trade in ivory, making law enforcement and effective prosecution of criminals more difficult.*

*Destroying ivory stockpiles also makes practical sense, according to Crawford Allan of the World Wildlife Fund and TRAFFIC. In countries that lack the finances to secure their stocks of ivory effectively, he said, corrupt officials are selling it out of the backdoor of the storeroom and into the illegal trade.*

*The root of the problem is soaring demand for ivory in China, which has by far the largest market for the product. Once a luxury few could afford, ivory is now within the financial grasp of the masses, thanks to the explosive growth of the country's middle class. A recent National Geographic survey of 600 middle and upper middle class Chinese found that 84 percent of respondents planned to buy ivory in the future.*

Updated at 11.01am GMT

10.36am GMT

**French officials prepare the pile for destruction and begin putting it on the crusher**

conveyer belt.

10.25am GMT

## Welcome to the eco audit

French officials from the Ministère du Développement Durable (MDD) will today destroy the country's 3 tonne stockpile of ivory. The horde of elephant tusks represents 20 years of customs seizures by French border officials and is worth almost €1 million.

The MDD says:

*By this strong action, the French government wants to show its determination to fight against crime in ivory. 2013 was probably the deadliest year for African elephants for decades.*

But what is the link between destroying ivory and saving elephants - beyond symbolism?

Please join in the discussion by contributing in the comments below, tweet me, or email me. If you are quoting figures or studies, please provide a link to the original source. Later I will return with my own verdict.

Updated at 10.26am GMT

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