

Declaring an Unjust War on Elephants

By Michele Pickover

Letter to The Sunday Independent (11 October 2005)

David Mabunda's obfuscatory article in *The Sunday Independent* of October 9 leaves many questions unanswered.

The issue of culling elephants has everything to do with South Africa's assertive position on 'consumptive' use. Consequently, it also wants to keep on stockpiling ivory in the hope that the ivory trade will be fully reinstated. So culling seems to be based on economic interests rather than ecological or ethical ones. The currently debated issue of whether or not to cull elephants is a complex matter and one can't look at the issue of resource or respect without examining the trade in ivory. Elephants and ivory are powerful ingredients in any contemporary debate about conservation. Since the Europeans arrived in Africa with their guns, elephant numbers have significantly diminished. And it is in fact the wealthy industrialised countries in the North that consume wildlife products excessively.

It is thought that there may have been 3-5 million African elephants in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of extensive trade, the number of elephants both in Africa and Asia declined significantly. In 1979 there were approximately 1.3 million elephants in Africa. By 1988 this number had fallen to about 600 000. In 1986 alone about 100 000 elephants were killed to satisfy the demand for ivory. By the end of the 1980s Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia had lost about 80% of their herds. Uganda 95%.

The ivory trade is regulated by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) which is a UN Treaty which came into force in 1975. It is supposedly designed to protect wildlife and plant populations from declining because of excessive trade. CITES operates from the premise that wild animals, even so-called 'endangered animals', have an economic value and can be commercially traded. It is therefore a treaty that regulates, as opposed to prohibits, trade. Internationally, animal protection organisations often refer to CITES as 'the animal dealer's charter'. Debates and controversies about elephants at CITES have over the years not only divided the signatories down the middle but have almost threatened the existence of CITES itself. At the heart of these struggles have been the southern African nations who, together with countries such as Japan and Norway, are the main proponents of the 'wise-use' doctrine of 'it stays only if it pays'.

In 1989, as a result of the devastation elephants were experiencing, the parties to CITES (which included the majority of African nations) decided to ban all international and commercial trade in ivory in order to save elephants from a disaster. However, out of the 37 African countries, six Southern African countries - Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe - opposed the ban because they had stockpiles of ivory. Together they hold about 40% of Africa's elephants. After the ban was implemented - and also because of concomitant hard-hitting anti-ivory public awareness campaigns - there was a dramatic decrease in the demand for ivory, elephant poaching fell steeply in East and Central Africa, on the international market ivory prices plummeted and the opportunity to launder poached ivory into the legal international trade was also removed. But, at the 1997 CITES meeting, as a result of pressure from Southern Africa, a decision was taken to ease the total ban on the international ivory trade by allowing the trade to be reopened from southern Africa to Japan. This pressure from the southern African countries is on-going and at every CITES meeting they press for new concessions and the reopening of the ivory trade.

As the trade in ivory is regarded as a cornerstone of so-called 'sustainable utilisation' policies the decision to down-list elephants was a major endorsement for this concept. It also reflects the fight for the soul of conservation in Africa -

those pro and those anti-sustainable utilisation. Consumptive-use defines and dominates the sustainable use model. Elephants are seen merely as a resource that must pay their way with their ivory and consequently with their life.

Whatever the arguments put forward to legitimise the ivory trade, ultimately, killing large numbers of elephants is about what it was always about, money. And Southern Africa, far from supporting the other African elephant range states, is spearheading the lobby for the greedy ivory trade and pushing for the sale of ivory stockpiles. Even though this will mean that an enormous burden will be put on the more than three quarters of the 50 elephant range countries who have much fewer resources for law enforcement and would not be able to control the increased poaching and smuggling which such sales provoke.

It is ethics and compassion that should be essential considerations in our relationships with elephants. Too much is now known about them to ignore their intelligence and deep emotions. As author Alice Walker commented, those who dismiss the concern with animal exploitation as sentimental, "are people who have destroyed great tracts of feeling in themselves."

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