

WWF position on African elephant issues at CITES CoP17

1. Some Parties and organisations subscribe to the view that the current elephant poaching crisis was caused by the 2008 one-off ivory sale and is driven by speculation about the possibility of future legal international commercial trade in ivory. This conclusion is not borne out in repeated analyses by the MIKE programme (Monitoring Illegal Killing of Elephants) or the ETIS programme (Elephant Trade Information System), both of which are rigorously reviewed by donors and by the CITES Parties¹. It must also be said that neither is the thesis of some pro-trade advocates that a legal sale would reduce the incentive to poach. Most studies, including MIKE, ETIS and UNODC (in its recent wildlife crime report) conclude that the causes of elephant poaching are more complex. Nevertheless, they agree that corruption in range, transit and consumer countries, together with the growth of wealthy elites in East and Southeast Asia are fundamental drivers. As with rhinos and tigers, where there has been no legal trade since 1977 and 1987 respectively, poaching and illegal trade persist because of these factors, and because the relevant countries are complicit through corruption or neglect.

2. At successive CITES CoPs, the issue of countries that are complicit in illegal trade has received inadequate attention because the deliberations have been monopolized by proposals – coming in some cases from countries whose inadequate legislation and enforcement are contributing to illegal trade – to reinforce the existing *de facto* ban on ongoing ivory trade or counter-proposals from countries that wished to sell ivory.

3. At CoP16 all such proposals were withdrawn, and much more attention was given to the issue of those countries whose inadequate implementation of CITES rules was contributing to illegal trade. The National Ivory Action Plan (NIAP) process in CITES was one that identified complicit countries and forced them to draw up plans to combat illegal ivory trade. We believe that this process should be supported and should be the major focus of CITES attention. Unfortunately, it is at risk of stalling, due to the burden of work involved in ensuring adequate oversight of the quality of the plans and progress with their implementation.

4. We are concerned that CoP17 is likely to be a rerun of the old pattern, with proposals and counter-proposals on legal international ivory trade and related matters, all diverting the attention of Parties from the real issues.

5. With this in mind WWF is calling for:

- a) A suite of Decisions that would give added vigour to the National Ivory Action Plan process;
- b) Withdrawal of both the Appendix I listing proposal and the two counter-proposals to allow ivory trade; and
- c) Support in principle for the closure of domestic ivory markets, recognising that pragmatic exemptions could be made where it is clearly demonstrated that a regulated domestic trade in a narrow category of product would have no impact on the illegal ivory market (e.g. musical instruments).

On the question of the Decision making mechanism, WWF recognises that the discussions on this issue were mandated by consensus Decision at a previous CoP. However, we question (i) whether it should be a priority at this time, and (ii) whether there is any prospect of developing a mechanism that will be acceptable to a sufficient number of Parties.

On the question of destruction of ivory stockpiles, WWF encourages steps to put ivory stockpiles – especially those of illegal or unverifiable origin – beyond use. However, there is a need for research as to whether or not high profile destruction events have a perverse impact on consumer behaviour in key demand countries.

¹ A research paper by Hsiang and Sekar published in June 2016 by the US National Bureau of Economic Research without peer review, which argued that there was a correlation between the sale and poaching patterns, received considerable media coverage. Its analysis has been called into question by a number of statisticians and others for a number of reasons, including that it overlooks other possible causes of the observed trends, and that it fails to explain the increase in rhino poaching in the absence of any one-off sale.