

Zimbabwe's Elephant Summit fails to rally continent-wide support for ivory trade
Joint NGO statement

The Summit, held at Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe from 23 to 26 May 2022, failed in its aim to achieve a common position amongst all African elephant Range States to restart ivory trade. A preliminary [statement](#)^{*}, purportedly the Hwange Declaration, on the Conservation of the African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), outlines multiple action points relating to elephant management and research, use of wildlife resources, Human Elephant Conflict (HEC), and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

On reading the statement, the intentions of its signatories become clear: those African countries responsible for managing elephant populations should be the sole decision-makers of how elephants and their parts are utilised, managed and disposed of. While we recognize that self-determination and sovereignty are common threads throughout the document, we are concerned that the statement downplays the fact that elephants are a migratory species across Africa, and that illegal trade in their ivory is a cross-boundary, regional and global issue the solutions to which requires international collaboration.

Similarly, the statement does not adequately address the trade in live elephants to inappropriate destinations. Worryingly, the statement also calls for CITES and non-affected countries to not interfere in the rights of countries to utilise and seek to derive benefits from their natural resources, sidelining other stakeholders from the joint responsibility for biodiversity conservation. Highlighting the contentious nature of the Summit, out of the 14 African countries invited, it is understood that only five of the six attendees appear to have endorsed the statement– namely the Republics of Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, with South Africa's position still unclear. Also in attendance were representatives from Japan and China. Following the closure of China's domestic ivory market in 2017, [Japan](#) remains the world's largest legal ivory market and we renew our calls for Japan to close its domestic market as a matter of urgency.

As was anticipated, the declaration promotes the development of a "viable instrument" by which to manage stockpile sales (of elephant and other wildlife products), although no further details or commitments are provided to ensure that the proposed trade would not trigger increased illegal killing and trafficking.

It is important to acknowledge that the Summit addressed other crucial matters relating to elephant management, beyond ivory trade, including some where there is common agreement. We recognize that Southern African Range States are facing many challenges in balancing their socio-economic development needs, the importance of protecting public safety, and their international commitments to elephant conservation. Finding innovative and collaborative solutions to manage elephant populations in the region is necessary to reduce the impacts, including through Human Elephant Conflict, associated with these populations, that African elephant Range States currently feel they bear alone.

We stand ready to help identify and implement these solutions through collaboration and cooperation with Range States. We are concerned, however, that repeated efforts to bring ivory trade arguments to CITES has resulted in a politicised, polarising and counter-productive atmosphere which is not conducive to collegial and productive discussions. As a result, we argue that Southern African nations are missing opportunities to engage constructively to identify opportunities for support and interventions to address the challenges they face.

^{*}The draft statement is subject to change and edits.

Whilst not explicitly calling for a reinstatement of both legal hunting and culling, the statement does outline a commitment to “adopt sustainable elephant management strategies in reducing Human Elephant Conflicts” though it remains unclear as to what is meant by sustainable elephant management in this context. We are concerned that this may be reflective of the intent to reduce elephant numbers for commercial gain.

It should not be forgotten that the vast majority of the 37 African elephant Range States that oppose reopening ivory trade were not invited to participate or are [reported](#) to have “stayed away” from the meeting, [including Kenya, Senegal and Rwanda](#). Indeed, while the Summit’s stated goal was to develop a unified ‘African’ voice for elephants, such a unified position already exists in that the majority of African elephant Range States do not support the re-opening of ivory trade, including from stockpiles. Therefore, we encourage those countries who endorsed the statement to align themselves with both the majority African and global position that stands firmly against ivory trade and live elephant sales.

This statement is endorsed by the following organisations:

1. Action for Elephants UK
2. Africa Nature Investors Foundation
3. African Climate Alliance – South Africa
4. All Rise – Attorneys for climate and environmental justice, South Africa
5. Amboseli Elephant Trust
6. Animal Defenders International
7. Animal Talk Africa – South Africa
8. Animal Welfare Institute
9. Baboon Matters – South Africa
10. Baboons of the South – South Africa
11. Ban Animal Trading – South Africa
12. Beauty Without Cruelty – South Africa
13. Betty’s Bay Baboon Action Group – South Africa
14. Born Free Foundation
15. Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education – South Africa
16. Centre for Biological Diversity
17. Conserv Congo
18. Corbett Foundation, India
19. David Shephard Wildlife Foundation
20. Environmental Investigation Agency
21. Elephant Reintegration Trust – South Africa
22. EMS Foundation- South Africa
23. Fondation Franz Weber
24. FOUR PAWS South Africa
25. Future 4 Wildlife – South Africa
26. Future for Elephants
27. Gifted for Good – South Africa
28. Global White Lion Protection Trust – South Africa
29. Hands Off Fernkloof – South Africa
30. Institute for Critical Animal Studies – South Africa
31. Jane Goodall Institute New Zealand

32. Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund
33. Lilongwe Wildlife Trust
34. Monkey Helpline – South Africa
35. Mizu Eco-Care, Zambia
36. Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
37. Parliament for the People – South Africa
38. ProWildlife
39. Rhinos in Africa – South Africa
40. South Peninsula Khoi Council – South Africa
41. Southern African Fight for Rhinos
42. Vervet Monkey Foundation – South Africa
43. Voice4Lions
44. WildAid Southern Africa
45. Youth Climate Group- South Africa
46. Zimbabwe Elephant Foundation