

Statement on the Zimbabwe Elephant Summit and legal ivory trade

From the 23 to 26 May 2022, the Republic of Zimbabwe will host a three-day Elephant Summit in Hwange National Park with the goal of rallying support to restart the international ivory trade in preparation for the 19th meeting of the Conference of Parties (CoP19) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in November 2022.

Representatives of 14 African countries as well as from China and Japan, two large consumer markets of ivory, are reported to attend the Summit, which has its goal the development of a 'common stance' among African nations to restart trade.

Invitations have not been extended to the majority of African elephant range states which have repeatedly opposed restarting ivory trade.

Attempts by Southern African nations to restart ivory trade and water down the protection of elephants are not new, despite being a clear and acknowledged risk to the survival of the species.

African elephants are closer to extinction than previously understood. In 2021, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List assessed the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) as Critically Endangered and the African savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) as Endangered. The main threats to this iconic, keystone species' survival are poaching for ivory and habitat loss, both of which continue at present.

Across the continent, elephant populations are declining, with African forest elephants falling by more than 86 per cent over a period of 31 years and the African savanna elephant populations decreasing by at least 60 per cent over the past 50 years.

The upcoming Summit is sending a dangerous signal to poachers and criminal syndicates that elephants are mere commodities, and that ivory trade could be resumed, heightening the threat to the species.

The international commercial ivory trade was outlawed in 1989 under CITES when all elephants were listed on Appendix I of the treaty. However, the ban was undermined by two CITES-authorized "one-off" sales in 1999 and 2008 which resulted in a sharp escalation in the illegal killing and poaching of elephants across Africa to supply the resurgence of a black market for illicit ivory, undercutting legal markets, especially in China¹.

Legalising the ivory trade, including by authorising another "one-off" sale could have similarly disastrous consequences. In its attempts to restrict trade in ivory and elephant specimens, CITES has since acknowledged that legal domestic markets can increase the risk to elephant populations and local communities due to the opportunities they create for the laundering of illegal ivory under the guise of legality.

¹ A 2014 [scientific study](#) found the proportion of illegally killed elephants increased from 25 per cent to 60-70 per cent since 2004.

In response to the resurgence in poaching and trafficking following the 2008 sale, the vast majority of African elephant range states called for the closure of all domestic ivory markets worldwide (the [Cotonou Declaration of 2015](#)). In 2016 the CITES Parties agreed a resolution, calling on Parties to close their domestic ivory markets. As the single largest destination for illegal ivory, China closed its domestic ivory market in December 2017 a decision now hailed as a significant conservation gain for elephant conservation. The USA, Singapore, the EU, the UK, and numerous African countries have also closed their markets, mindful of the blurred lines between legal and illegal trade².

Global appetite for legal ivory trade is at an historic low. At the last CITES CoP in 2019 (CoP18), efforts to restart trade and lower the protection of elephants by Southern African countries were once again vetoed by most Parties, including the vast majority of African elephant range states.

Should Zimbabwe or other Southern African countries decide to leave CITES in order to sell their ivory, it is crucial to highlight that any potential consumer country would also have to leave the convention or find itself in serious contravention of its legal obligations, which could result in trade sanctions and economic consequences³. Southern African countries stand to lose much more than just their reputation if they choose to abandon CITES.

As Niculin Jager, Swiss ambassador to Zimbabwe, stated on behalf of European envoys ahead of the summit⁴, illegal wildlife trade is an international issue characterised by the involvement of transboundary organised criminal networks.

Between 2009-22, there were at least 152 large-scale ivory seizures (each above 500kg), totalling approximately 270 tonnes of ivory⁵, indicative of serious organised criminal activity. Attempts to restart legal trade would provide organised crime networks with further opportunities to poach and launder trafficked ivory into the legal market. As a result, law enforcement efforts to clamp down on illegal trade would be further undermined. Not even a week ago, 1.5 tonnes of ivory originating from countries in Southern Africa was seized in southeast Democratic Republic of the Congo, highlighting how illegal transboundary ivory trade is a current, persistent threat across the continent.⁶

Elephants are a migratory species and therefore require coordinated international conservation efforts. At a time when demand for ivory is at an historic low and awareness of the need for sustained biodiversity is at an historic high, we urge the international community and policymakers to resist attempts by Zimbabwe and Southern African countries to restart ivory trade.

² Such as the 2014 Elephant Protection Initiative and the 2015 Cotonou Declaration of the African Elephant Coalition.

³ As per the CITES Trade Database, since the last CoP in 2018, South Africa has recorded 5,267 instances of commercial trade exports in at least 580 different CITES-listed species; Zimbabwe 295 instances in 34 species, Namibia 161 instances in 32 species and Zambia 100 instances in nine species.

⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-urges-sale-of-stockpile-of-seized-ivory-/6578334.html>

⁵ As per EIA database

⁶ <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/05/ivory-from-at-least-150-poached-elephants-seized-in-the-drc-raid/?amp>

In light of the current global biodiversity crisis, we cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Statement signed by:

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. Animal Defenders International
6. Animal Talk Africa – South Africa
7. Animal Welfare Institute
8. Baboon Matters – South Africa
9. Baboons of the South – South Africa
10. Ban Animal Trading – South Africa
11. Beauty Without Cruelty – South Africa
12. Betty's Bay Baboon Action Group – South Africa
13. Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education – South Africa
14. Centre for Biological Diversity
15. Conservation Action Trust, India
16. Conserv Congo
17. Corbett Foundation, India
18. David Shephard Wildlife Foundation
19. Environmental Investigation Agency
20. Environmental Foundation Ltd, Sri Lanka
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. Humane Society International
31. Institute for Critical Animal Studies – South Africa
32. Jane Goodall Insititute New Zealand
33. Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund
34. Lilongwe Wildlife Trust
35. Monkey Helpline – South Africa
36. Mizu Eco-Care, Zambia
37. Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
38. Parliament for the People – South Africa
39. ProWildlife
40. Rhinos in Africa – South Africa
41. Satpuda Foundation

42. South Peninsula Khoi Council – South Africa
43. Southern African Fight for Rhinos
44. Tiger Research and Conservation Trust, India
45. Vervet Monkey Foundation – South Africa
46. Voice4Lions
47. Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand
48. Wildlife Friends International
49. WildAid Southern Africa
50. Zimbabwe Elephant Foundation