

The future of Africa's Elephants will be decided at the end of this month

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When delegates from around the globe arrive at the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in Johannesburg at the end of September, a divisive debate about the trade in elephant ivory is expected to take centre stage.

If proposals submitted to the meeting by South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia are adopted, they will clear the way for these countries to sell stockpiled ivory on the international market.

A number of counter-proposals by West, Central and East African countries call for a continued and expanded ban on the export of elephant products and the destruction of existing ivory stockpiles.

Zimbabwe’s Minister of Environment, Water and Climate, Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri, and Namibia’s Minister of Environment and Tourism, Pohamba Shifeta, have published details about their respective governments’ positions which deserve critical analysis.

When it comes to wildlife conservation, both ministers subscribe to a philosophy of so-called ‘sustainable utilisation’. Their approach suggests that wild animals must yield financial profits to earn the right to be protected by people, instead of placing a responsibility on humans to ensure their survival in the face of growing habitat destruction and overexploitation.

They argue that without financial incentives for rural communities, many of which suffer loss of lives, crops and property as a result of elephants, “the species can be regarded as a liability”. “In the absence of financial security or value from the elephant,” says Muchinguri-Kashiri, “it will be seen quite correctly as a vexatious and omnipresent pest”.

The ministers suggest that allowing trade in ivory would represent the “most effective strategy” to counter this problem. Muchinguri-Kashiri also points to the economic contribution the hunting industry makes towards conservation efforts and the “huge losses” it would suffer if the killing of elephants for trophies were curtailed.

Both ministers overlook the fact that non-extractive wildlife tourism already yields much bigger financial returns than either the potential sale of ivory or the trophy hunting industry. They also ignore persistent reports alleging the misappropriation of funds raised by previous ivory sales. Suggestions that legalising the world-wide trade in ivory would reduce poaching have been strongly refuted by experts and economists.

The fact that Namibia’s elephant population has grown from “just over 7,500 to over 20,000 at present” during a time when the international trade in ivory is outlawed and Muchinguri-Kashiri’s statement that “at the moment, due to the economic value attached to the elephants, there is a huge incentive for conservation” appear to contradict the two ministers’ own assertions that the animals only have value because of their ivory or that their successful conservation necessarily requires the ivory trade.

Bizarrely, Muchinguri-Kashiri seems to lay the blame for a “local overabundance” of elephants in the Hwange ecosystem resulting in the extinction of “certain bird species” on the elephants

themselves, even though she acknowledges the “overabundance” to be the outcome of the “artificial supply of water”, i.e. a matter of conservation management.

Shifeta’s contention that previous CITES-sanctioned sales of stockpiled ivory “were successful in all respect” is far from accurate. Research published this year indicates that when Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa were allowed sell more than 100 tons of ivory to Japan and China in 2008, illegal ivory smuggling from Africa increased by a staggering 71%. At the time, Japan and China colluded to keep the price of ivory low on the international market while selling it at hugely inflated prices domestically.

It should come as little surprise that over 25 other African countries are vigorously opposing the Southern African proposals. Based on previous experience, additional ivory sales would threaten to push their already highly imperilled elephant populations to the brink of extinction. Muchinguri-Kashiri’s insistence that “the counter proposals essentially infringe upon Zimbabwe’s sovereign right to make decisions over its wildlife resources [...] without interference” rings particularly hollow given this dire threat to elephants in other countries on the continent.

The pro-trade proposals must be seen as especially reckless in the face of new evidence showing that poaching has wiped out 30% of Africa’s remaining savannah elephants between 2007 and 2014, and 65% of its forest elephants between 2002 and 2013.

Claims by the ministers that “ivory can be traded legally, in such a way as to prevent any ivory other than registered legal stocks from entering such legal trade” must be interrogated in the light of proof that government employees have been repeatedly been implicated in stealing ivory from national stockpiles.

In responding to a recent enquiry under the Promotion of Access to Information Act, South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs advised that the country is currently stockpiling just over 65,000 kilograms of ivory. Of this, an estimated 54,000 kilograms could potentially be sold if CITES were to give the go-ahead. At a market price of, say, US\$300 per kilogram, that would yield a mere US\$16.2 million.

Do profits of that magnitude really justify risking the survival of the species elsewhere in Africa?
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