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## DYING FOR IVORY

by *Simon Robinson, Nairobi*

Delegates arriving in Nairobi for the biennial meeting on trade in endangered species this week can have little doubt about the top agenda item. Just outside the airport a sign welcomes them "to elephant country" and a few hundred metres along the road a family of 10 wrought-iron and scrap-metal elephants stands frozen in the middle of a roundabout. The sculptures offer visitors "something else to look at besides cigarette and beer billboards," says their creator, Kenyan artist Kioko Mwitiki. "By putting the elephants there, people will hopefully get the impact of our heritage."

It's a heritage that until a decade ago was threatened with extinction. Between 1979 and 1989, ivory poachers killed over half of Africa's elephants, reducing the population from some 1.3 million to 625 000. Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) moved to end the killings in 1989 by placing elephants on the convention's Appendix I, effectively banning all trade in elephant products. The price of ivory plummeted and poaching almost disappeared. Director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, Nehemiah Rotich, says the impact was "immediate and dramatic."

Since then, in a demonstration of how hard it is to reconcile attitudes toward conservation and tourism, African countries have argued over the best way to manage their elephant populations. Southern African states whose elephant populations actually grew during the worst poaching years resented the trade ban. At the CITES meeting in Harare in 1997, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe successfully lobbied to have their elephants returned to Appendix II, which regulates trade through a system of permits. They argued that they should be allowed to sell their ivory stockpiles, collected from dead or culled elephants, and use the money for conservation work. Last year the three countries held one-off sales of existing ivory stocks—around 50 tonnes in total—to Japan.

Backed by South Africa, which wants to sell stockpiled ivory and hides from Kruger National Park, the three southern states are seeking permission for further sales. "The trade of legal ivory regulated by CITES can and will benefit Southern African elephants," says South African Environment Minister Mohammed Valli Moosa. "The money we make will be used for elephant conservation and community development."

In Kenya, where the elephant population dropped from about 165 000 in the early 1960s to just 16 000 in 1989, before recovering to 29 000 today, officials take issue with that approach. Together with India, Kenya is pushing for a return to a total ban for fear that large-scale poaching is about to resume. It says the southern states have failed to institute a poaching monitoring system as required by the Harare decision, and point to evidence of a poaching upsurge since the one-off sales. They argue that the existence of legitimate ivory makes illicit sales easier. Poachers in Kenya's Tsavo National Park killed 29 elephants in 1999, five times the average annual total when the trade ban was in place. Officials seized 1900 kg of illegal ivory last year compared with an average of around 350 kg a year since 1990. "We don't think it's coincidence," says Rotich. "Illegal traders tell us they think legal ivory sales are about to open up again."

Environmental groups like the Born Free Foundation and the Environmental Investigation Agency, both based in Britain, back Kenya's claims of an increase in poaching. The EIA says the problem has even spread to Zimbabwe, where press reports claim poachers killed at least 350 elephants last year, with 31 slaughtered in a single park in just two weeks. But the CITES secretariat insists that only 235 African elephants were killed in 1998 and 1999. Whatever the case, says South African Environment Minister Moosa, "We have one of the best elephant management and monitoring programs on the continent. Why should we be penalized because other countries have problems managing their elephants?"

With a two-thirds majority required to change the

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existing rules, both sides are busy lobbying delegates and wooing journalists. For his part, sculptor Mwitiki last week covered his elephant artworks with fresh mud to make them look as if they had just emerged from a wallow.

“Elephants used to migrate straight through where Nairobi now stands,” says Mwitiki. “We forget they used to

roam everywhere.” While the fight to ensure their survival appears to have been won, the battle about the best way to manage them continues.

Source: Simon Robinson, “Dying for Ivory,” © 2000 TIME INC.

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**Activities**

1. Why did the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) place elephants on the Appendix I list in 1989?
2. Outline the arguments in support of this decision and the arguments against. Be sure to include the countries, organizations, and individuals involved.
3. Acting as a delegate at a CITES meeting, where would you stand on this issue? For example, would you completely lift the ban, enforce the existing ban, or partially maintain the ban by allowing “one-time” sell-offs? Justify your stance with evidence from the article.
4. After the 2000 meeting of CITES, African nations agreed to delay ivory sales for at least two years so they could develop an effective method for preventing poaching. In a small group, brainstorm ways of allowing trade without increasing poaching or the sale of illegally acquired ivory.
5. Check out the CITES Web site ([www.cites.org/](http://www.cites.org/)) to get an update on the status of the African ivory trade and to compare your ideas with those presented by African nations.