

Don't go overboard about Ivory
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There is a definite problem about ivory. On the one hand, nobody in their senses in our community of instrument makers is going to go out and shoot an elephant just to put ivory mounts on a flute or any other instrument. On the other hand, in some parts of Africa, where elephants are properly managed and looked after, and where there is no poaching problem, elephants do have to be culled; what are we to do with their tusks? Throw them away?

It is in southern Africa, approximately from Zambia and Malawi southwards, that elephants are properly looked after in reserves. There is a limit to the size of these reserves, and there is a limit to the number of elephants that each can hold. As a result, elephants have been treated in much the way that any cattle are treated on a farm; they are a crop whose numbers have to be controlled, which can from time to time increase the protein available in the native diet, and which, as in Zimbabwe, produces a significant amount of foreign currency.

It has been recently pointed out in the press that these controlling countries are getting pretty annoyed that the countries that can't control their elephants, and either cannot, or will not, control the depredations of poachers, are now calling the tune and look like wiping out the export trade of those countries which are doing a decent job, whose elephant numbers are increasing, but who haven't got the space to move their human populations off all the open country and cram them into towns just so that the elephants can take over more of their land.

What is more dangerous to the survival of the elephant is the very practical point that if they can no longer treat the elephant as a part of their gross national product, whether as protein or as trading income, there won't be much point in allowing elephants to roam around in reserves, and they might as well use the land for something else, such as farming to produce that protein that they will no longer be allowed to crop from elephants, or a cash-crop that will replace the hard currency earnings from the ivory that they will no longer be allowed to export.

And that could be the end of the elephant farming and the end of the elephants.

Thus a total ban on elephant ivory could finish the elephants altogether.

The real problem is how to control the sale of ivory. No creature on earth can be allowed to multiply indefinitely. We say, as lords of creation, 'except man', but in fact, man can't multiply indefinitely either, but the controls are usually inadvertent ones such as wars, famines, floods, and so forth. If the elephants in properly managed countries are to be controlled, it will only happen if those countries can continue to receive a financial quid pro quo. However, if they are allowed to sell their ivory, and the sale of all ivory from less well managing countries is prohibited, the price of ivory will rise, and then it will become even more worthwhile than it is now for the poachers to operate and for the venal to sell 'legal' licences by the back door.

There is no easy solution. The reason for writing this Comm is to point out that a global ban is not in itself a sensible solution, nor a practical one. I don't profess to know what the solution is, but as in so many searches for the truth, it may help in the long run to point out the dead ends and the wrong paths, of which a global ban is clearly one.

This is not, in any way, intended as an attack on what Bruce Haynes and Ardal Powell and others have been writing in our pages, but as a contribution to general discussion. So far as we are concerned, as instrument makers, those of us who'd rather not have bits of dead elephants on our instruments, whether legally killed or illegally, are now in the majority, and very rightly so. I hope that none of us would go so far as to agree with the lunacy of the American government, who won't now allow a bit of elephant dead for centuries into the country. Presumably no foreign orchestra is now going to tour the States — can't have those violin bows in with their ivory plates

under the point, nor those fiddle pegs with ivory spots. I hope too that none of us would agree with the lunacy of the African government that burned all those tusks — those elephants really did die in vain. I'm not going to hide my ivory Stanesby junior flute, nor my African side-blown horns. And if I need a new ivory mount to replace a missing one, I'm not going to hesitate before I put an old billiard ball on the lathe.

But I'm not going to buy a raw tusk until we see what happens at CITES, and if sense prevails there, I'm not going to look at new ivory without some very strong evidence for provenance, legal licencing, and so on. Let's keep new ivory out of our business, at least until we really know where we are, and at the same time let's think of the problem as a whole, over all of Africa and not just the bits where corruption, venality, and poaching are rampant, and let's not forget about Asia, where elephants live in India and Burma. Let's not go off at half cock, knowing only half the problems.