U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

U.S. Ivory Crush

Questions & Answers

Why is the United States destroying elephant ivory?
We want to send a clear message that the United States will not tolerate ivory trafficking and the toll it is taking on elephant populations, particularly in Africa. The United States believes that it is important to destroy ivory seized as a result of law enforcement investigations and at international ports of entry because elephant poaching in Africa is at its worst in decades and we are committed to protecting elephants from extinction. Destroying this ivory tells criminals who engage in poaching and trafficking that the United States will take all available measures to disrupt and prosecute those who prey on and profit from the deaths of these magnificent animals.

Has the U.S. Government ever done this before?
No. The Fish and Wildlife Service has stored contraband ivory at the National Wildlife Property Repository and other appropriate facilities. The agency has never before destroyed large quantities of ivory.

Why wasn't the ivory destroyed when it was seized?
Pieces of elephant ivory and other seized wildlife are maintained as evidence until criminal and civil cases are concluded. Once cases are resolved, the Service uses items that are examples of illegal wildlife trade for educational purposes and for training our law enforcement officers. Over the past 25 years, we have accumulated far more elephant ivory than we can use for these purposes and decided to destroy this material as a demonstration of our commitment to combating wildlife trafficking.

Have other countries destroyed ivory?
Yes. The Philippines (which like the United States represents a market for illegally acquired elephant ivory) did so in June 2013. Kenya burned large quantities of ivory in 1989 and again in 2011, as did Gabon in 2012. Both countries hold large populations of elephants that are vulnerable to poaching.

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Pallet of seized raw ivory

Why doesn't the Service sell the ivory?
As a matter of principle and policy, the Service does not sell confiscated wildlife derived from endangered and threatened species. Illegal ivory trade is driving a dramatic increase in African elephant poaching, threatening the very existence of this species. It is extremely difficult to differentiate legally acquired ivory, such as ivory imported in the 1970s, from ivory derived from elephant poaching. Our criminal investigations and anti-smuggling efforts have clearly shown that legal ivory trade can serve as a cover for illegal trade. Therefore, selling the ivory stockpile and allowing it to enter the marketplace could contribute to increased elephant poaching and stimulate even more consumer demand for ivory.

Won't destroying this ivory make elephant ivory rarer, thus driving up the cost and creating a greater incentive for poaching?
As we explained above, this ivory would never be made available to the market. Its destruction has no impact on the overall supply and does not create any incentive for poaching. By demonstrating our commitment to combat poaching and illegal trade, and to arrest and prosecute people who engage in these activities, we are providing a strong disincentive to poachers and wildlife traffickers.

Why did the Service decide to crush the ivory instead of burning it?
Ivory is very resistant to burning, and so typically still requires crushing to break it down into pieces small enough to be of no commercial value. Crushing from the beginning is thus more efficient for destroying ivory. Crushing also eliminates air quality concerns and fire risks that could be associated with an ivory "burn."

In the future, will the Service destroy forfeited ivory?
Yes. However, the Service will retain small amounts of ivory for use in conservation outreach and education as well as ivory needed for investigative and forensic purposes and for training our wildlife law enforcement officers, our wildlife detector dogs, and officers with our partner agencies (such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection).

About the Ivory

How much elephant ivory will be destroyed?
The Service will destroy nearly six tons of African and Asian elephant ivory. The ivory to be destroyed includes full tusks, carved tusks, and hundreds of smaller carvings and other objects.

How did the Service acquire this ivory?
The ivory to be crushed was seized and then abandoned or forfeited to the Service as a result of its criminal

investigations and anti-smuggling efforts at the nation's ports of entry.

Over what time period was this ivory accumulated?
Most of this ivory was seized by Service law enforcement officers from the late-1980s to the present.

What types of crimes were committed in connection with these seizures?
Some of the ivory was smuggled into the United States in large quantities; some was also intercepted on its way out of the country or as it was being unlawfully sold in interstate commerce. Some arrived in the United States without the appropriate Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permits or was brought back by travelers who did not know (or did not follow) wildlife laws and regulations.

Laws violated in connection with the ivory seizures include the Endangered Species Act (which implements CITES in the United States), the African Elephant Conservation Act, and the Lacey Act.

How many dead elephants does this amount of ivory represent?
Conservatively, we would estimate that this ivory represents at least a couple thousand elephants.

Could it represent more elephants than that?
Yes, that's possible. We have a large number of carvings, jewelry and other small items, which makes estimating difficult.

What is the value of this ivory?
Because this ivory was seized in connection with violations of U.S. conservation laws and regulations, it cannot be legally sold in the United States. We consider it to be contraband that has no market value.

What will be done with the ivory once it is destroyed?
The Service is working with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums to develop a creative and informative use of the crushed ivory. Our goal is to educate the public about the threats that poaching and illegal trade pose to elephants and other at-risk species. By partnering with AZA and its member institutions (which reach over 180 million visitors each year and another 8 million online), we hope to raise massive public awareness about the African elephant poaching crisis and illegal ivory trade and engage the American people in our efforts to stop that trade.

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African Elephant

About Elephants

How are African elephants protected?
The African elephant is listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) and is also protected under the African Elephant Conservation Act. Nations across the world regulate trade in this species under CITES.

Under these U.S. laws, it is generally illegal to:

- Import or export African elephant ivory for primarily commercial purposes
- Import or export it for other purposes without CITES documents
- Buy or sell unlawfully imported African elephant ivory in interstate commerce

Are there any exceptions?
Yes. At present, U.S. laws and regulations accommodate the following:

- The import of unworked African elephant ivory (i.e., raw tusks) as part of a lawfully taken sport-hunted trophy for which appropriate CITES permits are presented
- The import and export (including for commercial purposes) of worked African elephant ivory that meets the requirements for an "antique" under the ESA (CITES document required)
- Export (including commercial) of ivory that qualifies as "pre-Act" under the ESA and "pre-Convention" under CITES
- Sale within the United States of African elephant ivory lawfully imported into the U.S. as "antique" under the ESA
- Sale of legally acquired African elephant ivory within the United States unless restricted by "use after import" limitations associated with items imported after the listing of the species under CITES or unless prohibited under State law

Given the current elephant poaching crisis, will the United States consider additional protections?
We are evaluating all available legislative and regulatory options to strengthen U.S. controls on ivory trade, particularly for ivory already in the United States. We are also working closely with the Presidential Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking to address protections for elephants and other endangered species.

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November 2013

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