

DAILY  MAVERICK

(<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za>)

OUR BURNING PLANET

IVORY DEMAND OP-ED


Elephant poaching in Africa is on the decline — but there's no room for complacency




📷 *Elephants with a juvenile at the Kruger National Park, Limpopo. (Photo: Sarel van der Walt / Gallo Images)*

 [s://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/adamcruise/](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/adamcruise/))

By Adam Cruise (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/adamcruise/>)

 Follow (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/sign-in>)

02 Jun 2024  0

The wave of elephant poaching over the past two decades appears to have substantially subsided while prices of ivory have collapsed, but there remain serious threats to some elephant populations.



Listen to this article

9 min

According to the 2024 [report from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wildlife.html) (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wildlife.html>), the international ivory market is shrinking, prices are collapsing while ivory seizures and elephant poaching figures are decreasing. This appears to be the result of a multitude of supply and demand interventions.

The closure of a number of key domestic markets, such as those in China, the US, Europe and Thailand have constrained demand while on the supply side, a series of convictions of high-level traffickers who operated in Africa and Asia “may have facilitated a constrained flow of illicit ivory, as captured in the decline in aggregated seizure volumes”.

Importantly, these factors have not resulted in an increase in ivory prices. According to the report, the collapse in prices means that demand for ivory has “truly declined”.

This runs contrary to the long-held belief

(<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/impacetevaluations/trade-or-not-trade-ivory-s-going-be-question>) of southern African governments that ivory price reduction will only occur after a legalisation of international ivory trade when legal supply would outstrip demand and reduce prices, making poaching uneconomical.

From 2007 to 2014, Africa lost around one-third

(<https://elephantswithoutborders.org/projects/great-ivory-census/>) of its savannah elephant populations, while forest elephant populations dropped by 86%

(<https://www.iucn.org/news/species/202103/african-ivory-species-now-endangered-and-critically-endangered-iucn-red-list>). Seizure data analysed in the UNODC World

Wildlife Crime Report in 2016 (https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/World_Wildlife_Crime_Report_2016_final.pdf) showed that most of the extensive illegal flow of elephant ivory was headed for Asian markets.

Bursting the bubble

However, in the mid-2010s, trends in indicators of poaching, trafficking, and the retail market all suggested that the supply of ivory had begun exceeding demand and that this trend has, in recent years, accelerated as national ivory controls in the US and China came into effect. Based on several independent data sources analysed by UNODC, the destination market wholesale prices in 2018 were one-third what they had been in 2014.

By 2020, prices appeared to be dropping to new lows in both Africa and most of Asia. In Africa, between 2014 and 2018 the price per kilogram of raw ivory was around \$400. By 2023, those prices had dropped to under \$200/kg.

Other research shows that the prices paid for raw ivory in Africa in 2020 were as low as \$92/kg (https://wildlifejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WildlifeJusticeCommission_Rapid-Assessment-Of-The-Illegal-Ivory-Trade-in-2020_August2020_Spreads.pdf) on the black market. On the demand side in Asia, prices dropped from more than \$1,000/kg of raw ivory in 2015 to an average \$400/kg in 2021 on the retail market.

This makes a mockery of Zimbabwe's claim (<https://www.voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-urges-sale-of-stockpile-of-seized-elephant-ivory-/6578334.html>) that its ivory stockpile of 130 tonnes is worth \$600-million, which gives an unrealistic figure of more than \$4,600/kg. Therefore, a more realistic valuation (<https://www.conservationaction.co.za/southern-africas-ivory-delusion/>) of Zimbabwe's ivory stockpiles, using an optimistic wholesale price of \$150/kg, would give a potential income of only \$19.5-million. This is a 30th of Zimbabwe's estimate.

Zimbabwe, along with Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, are pushing to sell their stockpiles on the international market.

This further undermines South Africa's intention (https://www.greengazette.co.za/notices/national-environmental-management-biodiversity-act-10-2004-comments-invited-on-the-draft-national-biodiversity-economy-strategy_20240308-GGN-50279-04492), as laid out in the recent National Biodiversity Economy Strategy (NBES), to “stimulate the domestic market in elephant ivory” for Asian tourists. This is a dangerous ploy in view of this report's revelations that the closure of domestic ivory markets has reduced elephant poaching. It follows that any stimulation of demand would naturally increase poaching.

The latest information suggests that these trends are continuing. The number of detected poached elephants continues to decline overall, with 2021 being one of the lowest totals on record. Apart from a spike in 2019, the number of ivory seizures has reduced too.

According to the most recent Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area ([Kaza](https://www.kavangozambezi.org/2023/08/31/kaza-launches-its-2022-kaza-elephant-survey-results/)) survey (<https://www.kavangozambezi.org/2023/08/31/kaza-launches-its-2022-kaza-elephant-survey-results/>), elephant populations are stable but with a statistically insignificant growth rate of only 1.2% per year coupled with high carcass ratios. Kaza, which spans five southern African countries – Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe – is home to almost 230,000 elephants, the largest stronghold of savannah elephants on Earth.

Botswana-based organisation Elephants Without Borders (EWB) released a [technical review](https://elephantswithoutborders.org/site/wp-content/uploads/Final-EWB-Ele-Pop-Trends-KAZA-report-Mar24.pdf) (<https://elephantswithoutborders.org/site/wp-content/uploads/Final-EWB-Ele-Pop-Trends-KAZA-report-Mar24.pdf>) of the Kaza elephant survey. The review flags the high levels of poaching indicated by high carcass ratios across northern Botswana. A carcass ratio of 8% or higher means the population will begin to decline as deaths exceed birth rates. The fact that carcass ratios have increased from 8% to 12% for Botswana means it's one dead elephant for every 10 live ones counted. This statistic of one dead for every 10 live elephants remains roughly the same across the whole Kaza region.

Since October 2023, a total of 85 elephants have been [poached in Botswana](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2024-04-24-numbers-dont-support-botswanas-threat-to-send-30000-elephants-to-europe/) (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2024-04-24-numbers-dont-support-botswanas-threat-to-send-30000-elephants-to-europe/>). There are clear indications that gangs from Zambia and Namibia are operating in these areas with impunity.

Furthermore, analyses of large ivory seizures (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S096098221930702X>) from 2016 to 2019 suggest that the largest elephant poaching hotspot in Africa may have shifted south, from east Africa to northern Botswana and neighbouring countries. Zambia's elephant population remains in a steep decline. Against the overall trend, the country lost more than a third of its population between 2016 and 2022, having previously recorded an 85% carcass ratio (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/160406-elephants-wiped-out-alarming-scale-Southern-Africa>) (eight dead for every one live elephant) in Sioma Ngwezi in southwestern Zambia, which borders Namibia and Angola.

Elsewhere, West and Central Africa are still recording high levels of elephant poaching. Forest elephants continue to show a sharp decline in their two strongholds in Gabon and Republic of Congo. The species' Red Data listing changed from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>) in 2019. The savannah elephant is now listed as Endangered.

And while overall number of ivory seizures are declining, the report highlights that in 2019, three of the largest-ever ivory seizures were made, totalling 25 tonnes – 7.5 tonnes in China en route from Nigeria; 8.8 tonnes in Singapore from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); and 9.1 tonnes in Vietnam also from the DRC.

The report also cautioned that periodic seizures of several tonnes of ivory in 2021 and 2022 indicates that organised criminal activity is still evident. Seizures in 2021 were made in Nigeria (4.7 tonnes), South Africa (7.5 tonnes) and the DRC (7 tonnes). There were two large seizures linked to Mozambique in 2022, one made in that country (7 tonnes) and the other later along the trade chain in Malaysia (4.2 tonnes).

Other large seizures were in the DRC in 2022 (1.5 tonnes), a seizure in Vietnam of a shipment from Angola in 2023 (7 tonnes) and most recently in March 2024, a seizure of 4.8 tonnes of ivory in Mozambique reportedly en route to the United Arab Emirates.

Guarded optimism

The decline of ivory prices in the face of declining supply suggests that it is a genuine decline in demand that, in turn, has led to an overall decline in elephant poaching in Africa. However, the continued threat to some elephant populations is a worry, as is the continued insistence of southern African countries to try to sell off their ivory stockpiles.

The report concludes that “persistent detection of large shipments of ivory highlights the continued existence of both a market and those willing to invest in it. While progress has been made on many fronts, the threat to local elephant populations has not gone away.”

In analysing the report, Tanya Sanerib, the international legal director at the Centre for Biological Diversity agrees. “The clear takeaway from this report is that we need to stay vigilant on elephants,” she said. “Closing domestic ivory markets and reducing demand have undeniably helped, but one look at northern Botswana shows the elephant-poaching epidemic is far from over. We have to keep up our efforts to combat poaching and ivory trafficking.” **DM**

(https://facilitator
u=https://facilitator
06- 06- 06- 06-
02- 02- 02- 02-
elephantelephantelephant