

To trade or not to trade...that's the question.

“We have tons of ivory sitting in vaults, gathering dust. Let us sell it. If we flood the market, prices will drop, and poachers will have no reason to kill our elephants.”

It sounds like a solution, logical, understandable, the kind of idea that fits neatly into an economics textbook: more supply, lower prices, less crime.

But the world of ivory doesn't play by those rules. It isn't a clean market driven by transparency and rational behavior. It's a shadow economy built on secrecy, speculation, and status. And every time the world tries to “flood the market,” the only thing that rises is the killing.

The Experiment

Years ago, the world tried it.

In 1999 and again in 2008, CITES approved “one-off” ivory sales from southern Africa to Japan and China.

Trucks rolled out from government warehouses, carrying tusks from elephants that had died of natural causes or culling.

For a brief moment, the plan seemed to work. Ivory was sold legally, and money flowed into conservation funds.

But beneath the surface, something else was stirring.

Criminal syndicates watched closely.

For them, the legal sale was a gift.

Suddenly, it was easy to move illegal ivory again and all they had to do was mix it with the legal batches.

Once ivory entered the market, who could tell which tusk came from an elephant that died twenty years ago and which came from one killed last week in the forest?

Within months, ivory carving factories in Asia were running overtime.

Demand skyrocketed, not because ivory was cheaper, but because people saw it being sold again and thought it was acceptable.

“Legal” ivory rekindled desire.

The Invisible Market

Economists had predicted a clean, transparent market but the ivory trade is anything but clean.

It's a foggy world of middlemen, smugglers, and coded shipments.

When prices dipped slightly, speculators rushed in to buy and hoard ivory, betting that when the next ban came, prices would soar again.

Like gold, ivory became an investment, a symbol of wealth and security.

And the elephants?

They kept dying.

In Tanzania's Selous Reserve, carcasses appeared faster than rangers could count them.

In Central Africa, entire herds vanished.

Studies later showed that after each legal sale, poaching surged, not fell.

The Human Blind Spot

What the economists had missed was this: ivory and rhino horn are not normal goods.

They're symbols of power, prestige, healing, and nostalgia.

When the world says, “We are selling it legally,” people don't hear “prices will drop.”

They hear, “It's okay to buy again.”

And the poachers hear opportunity.

Every elephant that falls adds to a river of tusks that criminals can easily pass off as “from the stockpile.”

The traders at that CITES meeting may talk about markets, but the truth is that this market is built on blood, secrecy, and status, things that don't obey simple economics.

Lessons from the Past

When researchers later analysed what happened, the data were clear.

The 2008 ivory sale, meant to reduce poaching, was followed by a surge in illegal killings across Africa.

Seizures of smuggled ivory tripled in Asia.

The so-called “market flood” became a wave of destruction.

Flooding the market didn't drown the poachers; it fed them.

It didn't make ivory worthless; it made it desirable again.

Epilogue: The Elephant's Lesson

So now, as another CITES meeting approaches, the debate returns.

Some governments say, "Let us sell, it's our right."

But in the quiet corners, conservationists whisper a warning:

"We've tried this before. Ivory is not sugar or steel. It's a luxury carved from life itself."

In normal economics, supply can tame greed.

But in the world of ivory and rhino horn, where culture, crime, and desire intertwine, the rules bend.

And every time we try to make ivory legal again, elephants pay the price.

Shouldn't we be pushing not to reopen trade, but to end it? Everywhere.

Every tusk, every carving, every polished piece of ivory once belonged to a living, breathing being.

Allowing trade to continue is not economics; it's complicity. The real measure of progress isn't how well we sell the dead, but how fiercely we protect the living. It's time for every nation and every human to stand against the ivory and rhino horn trade, not because it's profitable, but because it's right.