

# Conservationists urge treaty panel to reject ivory sale by Tanzania, Zambia

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An international convention will meet next week to decide whether to grant requests from Tanzania and Zambia to lower the protection status of their elephants, allowing them to conduct one-time sales of stockpiled ivory.

An international team of 27 [conservationists](#), writing in the March 12 edition of *Science*, says allowing the sale could lead to increased slaughter of elephants for their ivory throughout Africa. The team says there was a sharp increase in poaching even before 2007, when the Convention on International Trade in [Endangered Species](#) approved a lower protection status for elephants in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

However, uncertainty about whether that action would further escalate poaching led the convention to impose a nine-year moratorium on ivory sales, but it was modified at the last minute so the moratorium only applied to those four countries.

The conservationists say Zambia and Tanzania are major sources and [trafficking](#) corridors for Africa's illegal ivory, demonstrated by tons of contraband ivory seized in 2002, 2006 and 2009. [DNA sampling](#) on the 2002 and 2006 seizures traced the majority of that ivory back to those two nations.

"These two countries are at the center of the illegal ivory trade in Africa. It's kind of unbelievable that their requests have gotten this far," said

Samuel Wasser, a University of Washington conservation biologist and lead author of the paper published in the Policy Forum section of *Science* urging that the sale not be allowed.

In the last 30 years African elephants have declined to about 35 percent of their original numbers, and their population today stands at less than 500,000.

An international ban on ivory trade was enacted in 1989, and for four years the elephant poaching level dropped dramatically. But largely because of that success, money for enforcement dwindled. In the meantime, ivory demand from China, Japan and Thailand led to a sharp increase in poaching since 2000.

"More than 8 percent of the elephant population is being poached annually," Wasser said. "That rate of illegal take derails the laws of supply and demand, and makes it critical to maintain the moratorium until we have a better understanding of the impact of illegal trade and how it is affected by legal ivory sales."

The international convention begins meeting Saturday (March 13) in Doha, Qatar, to consider, among other things, the petitions from Zambia and Tanzania for one-time sales from their national ivory stockpiles.

The convention imposes two levels of protection for elephants. The strictest level, which currently applies to both Zambia and Tanzania, does not allow any sales of ivory. To be allowed limited trade, the countries are supposed to demonstrate that their elephant populations are secure, that law enforcement is effective in combating poaching and that the ivory sales will not be detrimental to elephants.

However, neither nation has met any of the criteria, Wasser said. In addition, China and Japan, the only nations approved to import ivory, are

among the largest consumers of illegal ivory and have done little to ensure the ivory they sell was obtained legally. That means they also have not met the convention's standards for taking part in legal [ivory](#) trade.

"We're making decisions that have a huge impact on the world's ecosystems and we're not relying on the best available science," Wasser said. "This is a problem with the convention's decisions in general, even the potential long-term impacts of those decisions is immense."

Provided by University of Washington

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