

Global summit in Botswana tackles illegal wildlife trade

March 25 2015, by Christophe Beaudufe



A Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) officer stands near a burning pile of elephant ivory seized in Kenya at Nairobi National Park on March 3, 2015

Politicians, activists and conservation experts meeting in Botswana on Wednesday vowed to fight the booming illegal wildlife trade that is decimating populations of elephants, rhinos and other threatened species.

Warning that "the time to act is now", delegates from 30 countries pushed for concrete progress on pledges made at a conference in London

last year that was hailed as a turning point in the battle to protect [endangered animals](#).

Elephants, rhinos and tigers are among those targeted by poachers and illegal traffickers. But many other animals such as sea turtles and pangolins, as well as rare plants, are also badly affected.

"Today is an opportunity to maintain and build on the high level of political commitment we saw in London a year ago and to agree essential new measures to tackle the trade," British politician Lord de Mauley told the conference.

"We must seize this opportunity. Because the time to act is now."

In one graphic example of the threat, African elephant numbers dropped from 550,000 in 2006 to 470,000 in 2013.

"The international [wildlife trade](#) matters because it drives corruption and instability (and) because wildlife resources are being stolen from communities on a scale never seen before," Lord de Mauley said.

"It threatens the very existence of some of the world's most iconic and treasured species."

One key challenge that delegates face is how to raise awareness to reduce demand for products from [endangered species](#), especially in China where smuggled ivory is very popular.



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Participants also aim to improve criminal prosecution mechanisms, and seek ways to ensure local communities benefit from conservation.

Elephants as 'refugees'

The [illegal wildlife trade](#) is worth \$19 billion (17 million euros) a year, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Some of the cash is reported to fuel local conflicts and militancy.

"We are particularly concerned by the knowledge that terrorist groups are looking for new sources of funding through [ivory trade](#)," Botswanan

President Ali Bongo told the conference in Kasana, close to country's famous national parks.

Bongo said the pledge made by Botswana, Gabon, Chad, Ethiopia and Tanzania last year to impose a 10-year moratorium on ivory sales would "allow us to stabilise our elephant populations."

Some African elephants have been forced to flee unrest, according to Mike Chase, founder of Elephants Without Borders.

"In the case of Botswana, lots of our elephants are essentially political refugees, fleeing persecution in neighbouring countries," he said.

Ivory is often traded from Kenya and Tanzania, via Vietnam and Philippines, to Thailand and China, where sculptured pieces are prized as artworks or jewellery.

It is reportedly bought at \$100 (91 euros) per kilo (\$45 or 41 euros per pound) from poachers, and is sold for \$2,100 (1,900 euros) in China.

Rhino horns are highly sought after in eastern Asia for their supposed medicinal qualities.

Botswanan Minister of Environment Tshekedi Khama appealed for all African nations to commit to saving endangered species—despite financial pressures.

"I'm fully conscious that our economies are struggling to recover from the recent economic downturn, but we cannot use this as an excuse for inaction as there will be a bigger price to pay in future," he said.

A conference focused solely on elephants was also held in Kasane this week, with some experts warning that African elephants could be extinct

within decades.

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